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Reading Early American Fiction

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Until recently, American literary criticism recommended *not* to read early American fiction. For a criticism that looked for a distinct American literature which would be able to hold its own against European high culture, early American fiction appeared embarrassingly bad. Reading it was thus characterized as an unpleasant, if not downright painful experience which should best be left to the experts who were willing to face the unenviable task in stoic professional self-denial. As I have pointed out at greater length in an essay on theories of the early American novel (Fluck 2000), the explanatory model that was used in dealing with this cultural embarrassment was the "infancy thesis." In following nineteenth-century notions of culture as a process of cultivation, cultural development was conceptualized in terms of slow organic growth and eventual flowering. Such a view of culture also entails a theory of reading. Reading is seen as part of a process of personality formation from infancy to mature adulthood for which uncritical identification and emotional self-indulgence pose the greatest threats. Identification is a characteristically immature mode of reading by readers who have weak egos and still need guidance; that is, above all, children and females (plus the occasional over-sensitive male).

The recent revisionism in American literary studies has changed the perception and status of early American fiction dramatically. With the revisionists' move from primarily aesthetic criteria to political criticism, a formerly much maligned body of texts, treated with condescending amusement at best, has been elevated to the level of an important ideological force. A few scattered novels, produced, in many cases, almost at random and condemned, ridiculed, or ignored at the time of their production, have become "an active agent in the process of cultural hegemony" (Watts 1994: 25). Early American fiction is no longer seen as the infant manifestation of a young nation setting out on a long, ultimately successful course of national and cultural identity formation, but as discourse of a new republic which, despite its democratic rhetoric, established a practice of disenfranchisement that has characterized American society ever since. Such a political reorientation must also change the

role of the professional reader. From being a stoic professional who takes on a task that no one else is willing to perform, she assumes the role of an alert ideological critic who looks for the roots of a history of political disenfranchisement or for first traces of a counter-hegemonial resistance.

Basically, this political criticism has taken two directions. One is best represented by Cathy Davidson's revisionist study *Revolution and the Word*, in which she argues that early American fiction should be understood as an articulation of disenfranchised, marginalized voices: "A number of novelists of the early national period turned the essentially conservative subgenre of the sentimental novel (with its fetishization of female virginity) to a subversive purpose by valorizing precisely those women whom the society had either overtly condemned (the fallen woman) or implicitly rendered invisible (woman as *femme covert*)" (Davidson 1986: 151). Davidson's argument has been submitted to increasing criticism after the move from women's studies to gender studies, in which sentimentalism is now considered as a naturalization of sexual difference, so that Burgett, for example, can say "the problem with Davidson's account of sentimental novels like *The Coquette* is that it replicates Foster's own contribution to the dimorphic logic of the modern sex-gender system." Eliza Wharton's "seduction, her withdrawal from the literary public sphere and, finally, her death narrate the future of a republican citizen who fails to act, in public *and* private, as a properly gendered subject" (Burgett 1998: 95, 107). What Davidson still celebrates as a potentially counter-hegemonic form of recognition, is now seen as interpellation of the reader as "woman," that is, as a sexed subject. (A good summary of the revised and radicalized view of sentimental culture can be found in Samuels 1992.)

A different view is provided by interpretations drawing on the Republicanism/Liberalism debate in American historical writing, which has moved away from Davidson's subversion theory and has led to two opposite readings. Early American fiction is seen either as a manifestation of Republican values, in which communal ideals are formulated and defended against an emerging individualistic ethos, or as exactly the opposite, as avant-garde medium in the establishment of a liberal ideology of individualism that paved the way for the establishment of the liberal nation-state and its capitalist economy. What is perceived as political empowerment by Davidson, presents a case of depoliticization for Steven Watts: "A potential discourse of political perception and power became depoliticized as it was translated into a literary discourse of imaginative, privatized communication" (Watts 1994: 18-19). For Michael Warner, too, the "reader of a novel might have a virtuous orientation, but his or her virtue would be experienced privately rather than in the context of civic action." If there was a subjective experience of empowerment through virtue, then this fulfilled a larger development of political disenfranchisement, for the public of which women were now said to be members was no longer "a public in the rigorous sense of republicanism, and membership in it no longer connoted civil action" (Warner 1990: 150, 173). Women may have gained symbolic access and recognition, but the sphere to which they gained access and in which they received recognition was

already a depoliticized one. Rather than articulating the dissent of the marginalized, the early American novel illustrates what happens to dissent in the American system.

Recent studies of early American fiction testify to the unabated continuity of these fundamental disagreements. In her book *The Plight of Feeling*, Julia Stern continues to argue that early American fiction gives voice to disenfranchised Americans who were otherwise invisible in the official culture of the time: "These tales envision and give voice to the otherwise imperceptible underside of republican culture in the age of reason, offering their newly constituted American audience a gothic and feminized set of counternarratives to read against the male-authored manifest accounts of national legitimation" (Stern 1997: 2). For Elizabeth Barnes, on the other hand, in her *States of Sympathy*, the "burgeoning number of novels written by, about, and ostensibly for women signals in part a growing interest in affective forms of disciplinary control. Liberal constructions of feminine sensibility play a key role in establishing both the methods and the motivations for these controls." A rhetoric of individual empowerment is a first step in a move from coercion to consent, but this move ultimately only "bolsters patriarchal claims to domestic authority" (Barnes 1997: 8, 10).

Critical discussions of early American fiction have passed through three major stages. In the age of formalism, it was considered artistically inferior and illustrates an infant stage of American culture; in feminist criticism, it articulates disenfranchised voices and thus gains a subversive political potential; in recent political criticism, it is either a manifestation of Republican values of participatory democracy or of a nascent ideology of liberal capitalism (including a particular gender politics) that subjects the reader to a hegemonial disciplinary regime. There is no need (and space) to continue the debate here. What is of interest for the purpose of this essay is how the new political criticism conceptualizes the reader of early American fiction, for it is the reader who must realize any political function by making a particular experience with the text that may have a political effect. How do political meanings actually get their politics (in)to the reader? In its almost complete focus on ideological content and function, recent criticism has rarely bothered to address this question. There is, accordingly, no theory of reading. Inevitably, however, there are tacit assumptions about how the reading process takes place and how political meaning and function get transported to, and imbued in, the reader. Davidson's theory of reading, for example, seems to be one of recognition: early American fiction was popular at its time, because the disenfranchised recognized their own plight in these novels. This could also explain why early American fiction had such a bad reputation in literary criticism: literary critics (mostly male) simply did not realize what was going on in these novels because they were not in a position to recognize its conflicts as "realistic." Such critics tend to see a sentimental seduction tale as a mere formula, while female readers, on the other hand, recognize them as "real." Following Philip Fisher, Michelle Burnham characterizes this effect of reading as "identification based on resemblance" (Burnham 1997: 5).

A model of reading as recognition or identification based on resemblance cannot be sufficient for critics who regard early American fiction as contributing to the formation of national ideologies of individualism or exceptionalism, because the point of their argument is that these texts do something to the reader that the reader herself does not realize or grasp fully. By retreating to her room and by reading a sentimental novel in privacy, the reader may think that she has gained control over her own fantasy-life and thus a new level of self-determination, but in reality she is being socialized into an ideology of liberal individualism, and, hence, into a new disciplinary regime. This reader draws on the novel in a search for self-empowerment, without, however, realizing that this subjectivation is a form of subjection. The names of Althusser and Foucault do not play any major role in the political criticism of early American fiction, but the tacit model of reading on which these political readings are based clearly follows models of interpellation or subject positioning inspired by them. The actual political effect of literature and culture consists in the creation of a subject position. Reading early American fiction means to be interpellated into such a position.

Is the history of the early American novel, then, a story of cunning ideological interpellation? One problem with this argument is that claims about what subject positions or identities are created by early American fiction remain highly contradictory in current criticism. What we get is a multiplicity of divergent, often diametrically opposed readings in which critics hardly seem to agree on anything. Such striking disagreements undermine a model of reading as a form of interpellation, however. Instead of tying the reader to only one identity or position in the text, it is much more plausible to assume that reading is a nomadic activity. As Nancy Roberts claims in her analysis of the role of sympathy, the reader constantly "changes places, assumes roles of both sexes, plays at being hero, plays at being victim" (Roberts 1997: 26). In fact, it can be considered one of the special gratifications of fictional texts that they allow us to move not only between different characters and often conflicting positions, but also to move in and out of characters, to empathize with them at one point and to get angry with them and to reject them at the next. In describing Richardson's *Clarissa* as a long-drawn trial, Roberts points out that readers

> are invited both to identify with and at the same time to judge characters within the text. We are thereby permitted to play the role of criminal, victim, and executioner even as we purportedly learn how to judge, allowing us to experience simultaneously the pleasures and pains of punishment . . . *No one* gets all the punishment and all the blame in this novel. Instead, roles are played interchangeably by one character after another. Punishment and blame, innocence and guilt: characters seem to "try on" these attributes as they might clothing, and through them the readers are able to experience the same freedom, and sometimes, the same pain. (Roberts 1997: 37–8)

Or, as Clover puts it in her analysis of the aesthetic experience of horror: "We are both Red Riding Hood *and* the Wolf; the force of the experience, the horror, comes from 'knowing' both sides of the story" (Clover 1989: 95).

In an essay on representation as a concept of literary analysis, Wolfgang Iser provides a helpful theoretical model for the reader's activity by drawing on the example of a reading of *Hamlet*. Since we have never met Hamlet and do in fact know that he never existed, we have to come up with our own mental images of him. We do this on the basis of the information provided by the text but, inevitably, this mental construct will also draw on our own associations, feelings, and bodily sensations in order to give life to a character who never existed. In the act of reading, the literary text thus comes to represent two things at once: the world of the text and imaginary elements added to it by the reader in the process of giving meaning to the words on the page. And it is exactly this "doubleness" or double reference of fiction that can be seen as an important source of aesthetic experience, because it allows us to do two things at the same time: to articulate imaginary elements and to look at them from the outside. Aesthetic experience is thus a state "in-between" in which, as a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are, in Iser's words, "both ourselves and someone else at the same time" so that, in reading, we can be inside and outside a character at once (Iser 1989: 244). The fictional text allows us to enter a character's perspective and perhaps even his or her body; on the other hand, we cannot and do not want to completely give up our own identity. In reading, we thus create other, more expressive versions of ourselves. This is achieved, however, in a much more complex way than suggested by the term identification. One may assume, for the sake of the argument, that it may be possible to "identify" with a character, but one cannot identify with a whole text. It is the text, however, that provides an aesthetic experience, not just single characters in it. Clearly, in actualizing the text in the act of reading, all characters have to be brought to life by means of a transfer, not only the good or sympathetic ones. (This is not to imply that the reader's transfer is restricted to characters. In principle, it concerns every word of the text. I am staying with Iser's example here for the sake of the argument.) The "more expressive version of ourselves" is thus not a simple case of self-aggrandizement through wish-fulfillment, but an extension of our own interiority over a whole (made-up) world.

To clarify these theoretical points, I want to have another look at the three sentimental novels that stand at the center of most discussions of early American fiction: William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791, 1794), and Mrs. Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1797). References to other novels such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Jane Talbot* (1801), Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy* (1812), and Susanna Rowson's sequel to *Charlotte Temple*, *Charlotte's Daughter; or, The Three Orphans* (1828), which has become known under the title *Lucy Temple*, can help to sharpen the argument by means of comparison. In my conclusion, I want to return to the current concern with the political meaning and function of early American fiction, for it is, after all, the question of how these politics achieve their goals in the act of reading that provides the impetus for this discussion of possible models of reading early American fiction.

In the context of our discussion, *The Power of Sympathy* is of interest because the new revisionism in American literary studies has led to a reevaluation of the novel's form.

What was long considered an artistic mess, reflecting the awkward beginnings of early American fiction, now reveals unexpected dimensions of multi-perspectivism. As critics have pointed out, the epistolary form is used to create the model of a polite society of letters in which issues of current interest are discussed and evaluated. The novel thus enables the reader to shift positions easily, but this mobility comes at a price: precisely because of its sprawling multi-perspectivism, *The Power of Sympathy* has no clear focus of sympathy, and, hence, as many critics have argued, it does not produce any strong emotional involvement in the minds of its readers.

The case is different in *Charlotte Temple*, which produced an unusually strong emotional involvement on the part of its readers. At first sight, this is surprising, because the novel is not an epistolary novel and has thus given up what was considered a key ingredient for the success of the sentimental novel, the direct access to a character's interiority. Charlotte Temple, the young heroine who elopes with a dashing officer, is seduced by him and then abandoned to a heartbreaking deathbed finale, is presented without a voice of her own and hence almost without any interiority. Throughout the novel, she remains a figure at which we look from the outside. However, the intimacy created by personal letters is not completely lost in the novel. It is provided by a narrator who addresses the reader in motherly fashion and keeps up a running commentary on the melodramatic events with the clear intent of channeling and focusing our sympathies: "A warm, motherly presence, this narrator acts as an editor, moralizer, translator, and guide for her young readers. Rowson eschewed the role of mere passive compiler of letters and, in the process, ensured that Charlotte Temple's voice was not misconstrued or erased" (Forcey 1991: 230). This poses an interesting problem for a discussion of the novel's aesthetic effect because, although the narrator's voice is certainly effective in addressing and guiding the reader, it is hard to imagine that the strong impact the novel had can be attributed exclusively to the narrative voice. The narrative itself, a straightforward tale of victimization, must also play a major part.

In this respect, the authorial decision not to give the heroine a voice of her own reveals unexpected advantages, for it is the basis for a series of intensely melodramatic tableaux. In her introduction to a recent edition of *Charlotte Temple*, Ann Douglas emphasizes the striking pictorial dimension of melodrama in the novel. In its strongly gestural dimension, melodrama reaches not only beyond the conversational structures of the epistolary novel "to those who did not yet possess the skills of literacy," but also beyond the limits of language itself to the "primal language" of the body:

> It is crucial to melodrama, which began in wordless pantomime set to music, that body and heart take up the work of articulation at the point that language fails. Increasingly, as the noose of Charlotte's fate and Rowson's story tightens, the book turns into tableaux... Charlotte repeatedly uses stock melodramatic gestures, which Rowson inserts almost as if they were stage directions. She "clasps her hands" in supplication, "lifts her eyes in prayer," kneels "in shame," and "faints" away in agony. (Douglas 1991: xii, xxxvii)

These "visual summaries of emotional situations" offer an opportunity for intense forms of aesthetic experience, because they provide new means for triggering a transfer on the reader's side. It is precisely because we see a person suffering who cannot speak for herself and therefore often uses body language to express herself that we are stimulated to supply that which is not articulated. The less the heroine herself can express her pain, the more we have to draw on our own interiority in order to understand her. Charlotte's interiority is a blank which stimulates us to invest strong feelings of our own. In this sense, an interaction between different positions within the novel is created: the sprawling, occasionally diffuse multi-perspectivism of *The Power of Sympathy* is replaced by a streamlined back-and-forth movement between the positions of motherly guardian figure and the inarticulate, childlike victim.

Of the three novels, *The Coquette* uses the multivocal potential of the epistolary novel most consistently and most effectively. The novel follows the ideal of an ongoing polite conversation about issues of virtue that constitutes its own model of a Republican public sphere. By presenting this exchange through letters, the novel manages to represent a variety of different positions without intrusive didactic hierarchization. In addition, there is a recovery of one of the major achievements of the genre of the sentimental novel. The great achievement of Richardson was his discovery that epistolarity would be ideally suited to represent the inner life of characters. In *The Power of Sympathy* the uneven, unfocused use of the epistolary structure works against that potential. In contrast, *The Coquette* links polite exchange on questions of virtue and insights into the inner life of its main characters much more successfully. In striking contrast to seducer figures like Harrington in *The Power of Sympathy*, who is hardly more than an intertextual collage, and Belcour in *Charlotte Temple*, who is uncompromisingly villainous, in *The Coquette* even the seducer Sanford eventually gains a psychological dimension of his own, just as, on the other hand, the heroine Eliza Wharton is not presented as mere victim but as a basically sympathetic, but often irresponsible, individual who overreaches. Simple moral dichotomies are avoided and this, in turn, invites the reader to shift positions frequently. Several critics have pointed out, for example, how a crucial scene of the novel, Boyer's encounter with Eliza and Sanford in the garden which leads to the withdrawal of Boyer's marriage proposal, is consecutively presented from the point of view of all three characters involved. As readers, we are thus in constant movement between different characters that are given due hearing.

The reader's involvement, however, is not simply a matter of multi-perspectivism. Before we start moving between different positions of the text, we have to have reasons to get involved at all. Involvement depends on curiosity for the fate of the characters, or, to be more precise, on an ability of the reader, the proverbial onlooker, to invest sympathy in what happens to others. As several recent discussions of the sentimental novel in the early Republic have pointed out, the idea of sympathy played a crucial role in the philosophy and social theory of the eighteenth century. The significance of the concept goes far beyond a plea for showing compassion for those who have "fallen." In a pluralistic contract society, in which society is no longer ruled

by papal or royal decree, decisions can only be reached by a process of social interaction – which, in turn, depends on the ability of individuals to imagine what others, and especially strangers, might think and feel: "As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation" (Smith 1817: 2). For Adam Smith, sympathy

> is the human faculty of compassion or fellow-feeling. By use of imagination, one individual sympathizes with another and feels what the other feels. What makes this feasible is the commonplace idea, but one particularly prominent in the Enlightenment, of the uniformity of human nature. Thus upon hearing that someone's father has died, one is able to sympathize, even if the bereaved is a complete stranger. (Berry 1990: 123)

Clearly, this is a situation that we also encounter in reading where the reader witnesses the fates and fortunes of characters whom she has not met before and does not know. Reading, in effect, is an exemplary activity for putting oneself in the place of someone else. This is why reading a novel can be conceptualized in the eighteenth century as a

> school of sympathy, a place in which emotions are coached and disciplined, marshalled and pointed in the right direction. Readers see sympathy displayed through the performance of certain key characters who show us how we, in turn, might perform it. Reading is the performance through which we get a chance to rehearse such feelings, try different roles, play out various emotional responses. (Roberts 1997: 10)

Such "instruction in feeling and subjectivity" can include "cross-gender identification" (ibid: 11). For the early American Republic, the faculty of sympathy thus held the promise of forming a political community not based on religious or political loyalties but on social contract.

If sympathy was a "building block of a democratic nation" (Barnes 1997: x), then this attitude had to be cultivated and practiced. Novels seemed ideally suited to provide instructions in sympathy and to function as training grounds for developing a sense of sympathy, because the faculty of sympathy depends on the imagination. As many critics have pointed out, this was, in effect, the "official" project of the sentimental novel in the New Republic. The question remained how this could best be achieved. For Smith, sympathy "does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it" (Smith 1817: 5). Consequently, if the novel is to be made a medium for developing sympathy, then it has to create situations which provoke and engage our sympathy. The sentimental tale of victimization is ideally suited to achieve this, because it is based on a broken promise of contract. As Jan Lewis (1987) and other critics have pointed out, marriage as a form of social organization based on affection and thus founded on mutual sympathy had become a model of society in the early Republic. In luring the heroine of the sentimental novel with a promise of marriage and then disregarding his promise, the seducer betrays one of the highest ideals of the new Republic: he violates the

nourishing utopia of mutual sympathy. However, this creation of sympathy through the violation of a moral ideal created an obvious difficulty. The problem arises from the fact that the very faculty on which the novel depends to create sympathy, the imagination, can also become the source of misperception and misconstructions. It is "by the imagination only," writes Smith, "that we can form any conception of what are his [a "brother" suffering torture] sensations" (Smith 1817: 2). The imagination, however, can easily be deceived or manipulated. How can one be sure, for example, that the reader does not sympathize with the seducer? In using seduction as an example for moral instruction, the imagination may be stimulated in entirely unforeseen ways. Early American novels are thus not merely "schools of sympathy." They also illustrate the possible dangers and pitfalls of sympathy.

This double-sidedness of the faculty of sympathy explains the strong anti-fictional rhetoric that pervades early American fiction. Defining themselves against romances which manipulate the reader's imagination and trap her in foolish daydreams, these early novels recommend themselves by their claim not to be fictions but, as in the case of *Charlotte Temple*, "a tale of truth," designed to provide instructions for female education. Novels, it was argued, could help moral education by employing special powers of illustration. As one of the characters in *The Power of Sympathy* observes: "Didactic essays are not always capable of engaging the attention of young ladies. We fly from the labored precepts of the essayist to the sprightly narrative of the novelist" (Brown 1970: 77). However, critics also agree that, as a consequence of its extended fictional elements, the sentimental novel became more than merely a piece of republican instruction. This has repeatedly given rise to the suspicion that the sentimental novel's striking popularity should perhaps not be attributed to its didactic goals but to the fact that it represented "unspeakable acts" under the guise of moral instruction. The original frontispiece of *The Power of Sympathy* provides an example of this unacknowledged stimulation effect. In words of varying size and graphic arrangement, it asserts *The Power of Sympathy* is "intended to represent the specious Causes, and to Expose the fatal Consequences of SEDUCTION." By capitalizing and foregrounding that against which the novel claims to warn the reader, namely SEDUCTION, the preface decontextualizes the key word visually and elevates it to the status of an isolated signifier of desire. A dutiful apology is thus turned into a clever advertisement. Already in his analysis of the epistolary voyeurism of the Richardsonian prototype, Ian Watt had pointed to this effect when he called *Pamela* "a work that could be praised from the pulpit and yet attacked as pornography, a work that gratified the reading public with the combined attraction of a sermon and a striptease" (Watt 1967: 173). Or: "A seductive program is condemned so that a seductive program can be pursued" (Chambers 1984: 217).

From the point of view of implied reader activities, however, a case can be made that the didactic discourse does not merely function as a cover for other goals. It serves an important function in the reader's involvement. The sentimental novel obviously needed both elements, the imaginary appeal of seduction and the containment of this appeal by a moral claim. They are, in fact, interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

Interdependent because, without seductive elements, the novel would be merely another moral tract; hence the turn to fiction with its possibilities of imaginary boundary-crossing. Where transgressive aspects are pushed too far, on the other hand, the text is in danger not only of losing its social acceptability but also of endangering the reader's self-respect. The moral and the seductive are mutually reinforcing because, as we have seen, the moral discourse draws its renewed authority from its response to a transgression, just as, on the other hand, moral claims stimulate imagining possible violations. Fiction, in fact, can be seen as a privileged place for negotiating such conflicting claims, because, as Wolfgang Iser has pointed out, "the various acts of fictionalizing carry with them whatever has been outstripped, and the resultant doubleness might therefore be defined as the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive" (Iser 1989: 239). What characterizes the sentimental novel as a form of fiction is thus not duplicity but doubleness. In a paradox that, I think, is characteristic of fiction in general, although to varying degrees, the challenge the sentimental novel has to meet is to contain exactly those imaginary elements which provide the basis for its appeal. Hence, the novel moves incessantly between the two positions of the guardian and the seducer which function as *mise en abymes* for two conflicting functions of the novel (Fluck 1990). If the novel would only be read as warning and thus function as successful containment of the imaginary, it would support the work of the book's guardian figures and would, in fact, function as a guardian itself. If, on the other hand, the novel stimulates the reader's imaginary longing so strongly that this level dominates the reception, it would join the ranks of the seducer who skillfully manipulates the reader's hunger for articulation and makes her disregard the guardian's warnings. And since the seducer "is so obviously at fault in what he is doing" (Roberts 1997: 39), the text has to protect itself from the charge of being a seducer. Its challenge thus lies in the skillful balance it manages to sustain between the two.

The Power of Sympathy, for example, can be read as a novel in search of such a balance. It starts out with a "promise" of seduction but quells it immediately in order to demonstrate the saving power of sympathy. The would-be seducer Harrington is so touched by his potential victim Harriot that he gives up his plan of seduction within a few pages. After squandering this first opportunity, the novel therefore has to move on to a new set of characters. In this second try, however, the seduction theme does not become a narrative focus either. Instead, it is employed as a passing illustration of moral failure and relegated to a footnote. In removing the transgressive impulse to the "underground" of the text and thus creating a clear split (and graphic hierarchization) between its upper and nether world, the text dramatizes the difficulties it has in establishing an effective interaction between transgressive impulse and its narrative containment. However, despite the strong dominance of conversational elements in the polite tradition, *The Power of Sympathy* returns to the seduction motif again and again. In its various trial runs, the novel seems to be continuously in search of a form of expression that would be able to articulate "seductive" imaginary elements without becoming too seductive itself. As a consequence, the motif of seduction comes up

repeatedly in scattered passages of the novel: a long footnote in letter XI on the case of Eliza Whitman; the Ophelia episode (letters XXI–XXIII and frontispiece), the story of Fidelia (letters XXVII and XXVIII), and the "History of Maria" (letter XXXIX). There are several unconvincing and unsuccessful attempts, until the novel finally settles on a representation which is sufficiently explicit, and yet, it seems, still presentable within the context of polite society: it is the mother of Harriot who was seduced in her youth and is thus the novel's actual victim of seduction. In focusing on a seduction that has happened a long time ago, the issue of seduction can be presented as achieved fact and not be dramatized as temptation. In its search for an acceptable expression of the transgressive impulse, the novel, after numerous delays and digressions, finally arrives at a version that distances the event twice. It is this strategy of removal and containment, this failure to put up a real struggle, which prevents the novel from establishing an effective interaction between the imaginary and its containment and which explains its lack of success. Since the closest Harriot comes to being the heroine of a sentimental tale of seduction is by being the offspring of an illicit act, *The Power of Sympathy* has no sentimental heroine who is torn between temptation and resistance and caught in a conflict between independence and obedience.

If *The Power of Sympathy* is too cautious, *The Coquette* impresses by being remarkably daring. This is already noticeable in the novel's opening, for the death of her fiancé is not experienced as a disastrous blow by the heroine Eliza Wharton, but as potential liberation. In striking contrast to the sentimental tradition, the death of a major guardian figure is not presented as cruel and painful separation. Rather, it sets the heroine free to pursue her own quest for independence. This independence can only be gained at a risk, however, because it leads to the attribute of a coquette. This ominously "French" attribute is not an entirely negative term at the beginning of the novel, but it is one that already reflects a tension. In the novel, it carries associations of a sympathetic hunger for life, and yet it also points to a risky gamble over which the heroine may lose her control. The conflict between potential self-empowerment and inadvertent self-destruction is thus already expressed in the unstable semantics of the key word of the book. The novel presents Eliza's struggle for independence with many remarkable insights and without any sententious condemnation of her hunger for life. In this sense, the text manages to articulate a wish for self-assertion and self-empowerment in a much more open and daring way than the other novels discussed here. In publishing Eliza's letters and thoughts, it makes such wishes public and presents them as social attitudes that deserve a hearing. This is done, however, only on the basis of an idea of the public sphere in which private wishes are open to public debate and correction. When the heroine stops to write letters and becomes increasingly secretive and inaccessible, her retreat begins to isolate her socially and leaves only the seducer Sanford as possible companion. What makes *The Coquette* such a remarkable book thus also creates a problem of narrative containment. In trying to reconceptualize self-determination not simply as sure recipe for self-destruction but also as a promise of individual independence, the novel itself has become a coquette, one that has almost gone too far and can only redeem itself by a restitution of the sentimental convention of symbolic punishment. By paying the expected price for her "hunger," Eliza finally becomes a true sentimental heroine and can be redeemed in a way the traditional coquette cannot. Obviously, a way in which her striving for independence could be seen in positive terms and no longer as coquetry cannot yet be imagined. The melodrama at the heart of the sentimental tale of seduction is governed by an either-or logic of moral choices. One of the remarkable things about *The Coquette* is that it works against this dichotomy for a large part of the narrative. But in the end, it falls back on it in order to safeguard its heroine's reputation and its own standing with the reader.

In political criticism of early American fiction, questions of "complicity," "cooptation," and "containment" are usually discussed without any consideration of the reading process. A novel without temptation and the promise of imaginary seduction would be uninteresting; a novel without moral and symbolic containment would be experienced as overpowering and threatening. The reader has to be able to get into the fiction and out of it. She wants both: the lure of boundary-crossing but also the security of distance. The role of a mere onlooker is not sufficient. The reader wants to enter the novel as imaginary participant. However, where events get too close for comfort, she also wants to be able to move back to the role of observer. The reception of fiction requires both: on the one hand, an abandonment to invented occurrences and, on the other, the evaluative attitude of the onlooker. (For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of the reading of fiction, see Appleyard 1991.) If they are successful, sentimental novels can be emotionally gripping. If they are gripping, however, they also pose the problem for the reader of how to "get out" at the right time. This, in fact, is one of the major functions of endings such as the deathbed scene in novels like *Charlotte Temple*, which provide the reader with an opportunity to move back to the position of someone who looks at the heroine from the outside and knows that she has to part from her. In *The Power of Sympathy* and *The Coquette* this same function is fulfilled by gravestones and their inscriptions which stand at the end of the two novels and offer the reader the role of the "weeping friend." The possibility of dissociation is crucial here. From the point of view of the reading experience, plot elements such as a restitution of social order, the containment of a transgressive impulse, or punishment by death should not be understood literally, but as necessary forms of reader dissociation. By means of fiction, she can enter "dangerous," conflict-laden worlds, but also stay outside and on top of them – and hence cross boundaries without loss of respectability and self-esteem.

Such considerations allow us to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the three novels discussed here from yet another perspective in order to account for the different degrees of popularity and critical appreciation they have found. One of the reasons why *The Power of Sympathy* has been the least popular and least accepted of the three can be seen in the fact that it is a novel which makes imaginary participation and "abandonment" difficult. Because the theme of seduction is constantly displaced in a supplementary chain of announcements and cancellations, there is no central focus for

the reader's imaginary participation. And because it is difficult to "get in," we remain in the role of a mere observer who eventually gets impatient or frustrated with the novel's constant distancing. In *Charlotte Temple*, on the other hand, there is a strong stimulation for imaginary involvement, but, at the same time, there are several distancing devices provided by the narrator. Paradoxically enough, however, this works to the advantage of the novel's effectiveness, as Ann Douglas points out:

> Rowson's often-noted authorial intrusions in *Charlotte Temple* (there are nine full-scale ones) at first glance read like moralizings directed against the tenor of the story. Her constant command to her readers is not to do what Charlotte did... But in fact each authorial remark is designed to clear away, not reinforce, the obstacles that lie between Rowson's readers and full identification with the story. She meets the objections of "sober matrons," men "of philosophic temperament," frowning "madams," any "sir" who "cavils" at the accuracy of the account, even her dear "young, volatile readers" who may be growing restless... Each authorial intrusion screws up reader involvement another notch, and Rowson herself suffers with her story. (Douglas 1991: xxvi)

Since Charlotte is not strongly individualized, imaginary projection is facilitated, while preventing, at the same time, the novel's "nightmare of dislocation, alienation, and abandonment" (Forcey 1991: 227) being experienced as too overwhelming. On the other hand, since the reader is not on intimate terms with Charlotte's thoughts and feelings, dissociation from her and a move back to the role of observer remain always possible.

In contrast, the epistolary form of *The Coquette* positions us closely to the heroine and her point of view, but also confronts her own views with a variety of different perspectives. As a result, our attitude toward the heroine is ambivalent from the start. We can never determine with certainty to what extent we can trust her judgment. Since we get a number of equally convincing interpretations of her behavior from others, we do not really know what attitude to take toward her. The novel leaves us guessing for a considerable time whether we should establish distance to the heroine or not, and then, when that distance has perhaps already become too strong, it has to reactivate emotional involvement in a rather forced and hurried manner. Thus, Foster has to labor hard at the end to resemanticize punishment as victimization. From what is already a nascent novel of manners, in which the individual's interaction with society is the actual drama, the novel has to move back to a traditional seduction plot. In the end, it turns the proto-individualist heroine back into a sentimental victim. As a result of this generic instability, the reader has to make several readjustments that complicate her attitude toward the novel. The fact that the novel was popular in its time and is still well-respected today, does not contradict this view, because both types of readers, the traditional and the modern one, can find "their" heroine in the text.

The shifting, unstable relations between identification and distance also explain the entirely different strategies of characterization we find in the three novels. In keeping

with its distancing strategy, *The Power of Sympathy* has no single central character, *Charlotte Temple* has a heroine taken from melodrama whom we largely see from the outside, so that the reader can identify with her and yet keep an awareness of a stage performance (commented upon by the narrator), while *The Coquette* anticipates the detailed characterization of the novel of manners in which the reader becomes participant in a series of conversational exchanges which reveal a heroine in the process of development. All three strategies of characterization redefine the reader's position toward the text, and change the relation between participation and observation. In the case of *The Power of Sympathy* a priority of observation and distance prevails, *Charlotte Temple* manages to establish an effective balance between participation and observation, and *The Coquette* is characterized by shifts in emphasis that provide an uneven reading experience. Charlotte Temple is still almost a child when we first encounter her and does not change throughout the novel, because such a change would affect her status as victim. Eliza Wharton, on the other hand, who is already 26 when we first meet her, is a young woman in search of independence. The one we can only pity: her "enormous pathos in the later portions of her story comes from our sense of her as a helpless child" (Douglas 1991: xxviii). With Eliza we can argue; but while we argue, we can also suspend our emotional and imaginary engagement more easily and reconsider our attitude toward the heroine. This makes *The Coquette* a more modern text than *Charlotte Temple* and explains the higher estimation in which it is held today. However, while *The Coquette* may be the more modern text, *Charlotte Temple* was experienced as the more forceful one for a long time.

So far, the argument, in following a transfer theory of reading (in contrast to an interpellation theory), has focused on the shifting balance between sympathetic involvement and distance in order to explain the differences in the novels' structure and appeal, but also to describe early American fiction as a still tentative attempt to develop a strategy of reader involvement; that is, to transform it into a "school of sympathy." As we have seen, the sentimental novel is more than a cautionary tale warning young women against the possibility of seduction; it also draws on the imaginary appeal of the word. However, as an imaginary object, I suggest, "seduction" should not be taken too literally in the discussion of the sentimental novel of the early Republic – nor should be the warnings against it. The fact that the "scandalous" case of Eliza Whitman served as a recurring point of reference for these novels "founded on fact" gives an indication that seduction and elopement were not exactly everyday events in the social world of the genre's readers. The status of the factual incidents is not that of "contemporary reality," but that of contemporary scandals; that is, already a fictionalized mode. The novel was not created to reflect real incidents; rather, real incidents were used to authenticate the novel.

It would also be reductionist to narrow down the imaginary temptation and appeal of the sentimental tale of seduction to the dimension of repressed desire or displaced sexual wish-fulfillment (see Rust 2003). The attraction the seducer Montraville holds for the innocent, still rather childlike Charlotte Temple does not lie in a promise of sexual adventure. The temptation Montraville presents to Charlotte is of quite

another nature. In the world of the sentimental novel, the seducer is a man of the world. Often, he is by far the most impressive and attractive man of the whole lot. What makes the offer of the seducer so tempting is that to be "chosen" by such a man for a companion presents a highly flattering distinction for the heroine. For Eliza Wharton, the attraction of Sanford lies in his appearance as "extraordinary man": "What shall I say about this extraordinary man? Shall I own to you, my friend, that he is pleasing to me? His person, his manners, his situation: all combine to charm my fancy and, to my lively imagination, strew the path of life with flowers" (Foster 1939: 148). Through this choice, the heroine receives a recognition that she has never experienced before. The crucial scene of many sentimental tales of seduction is therefore not the seduction itself but the elopement. This elopement is not an acting out of sexual desire. Its major temptation lies in the prospect that, by eloping, the heroine gains importance, because she has been asked by a man of distinction and higher standing to become his companion and, possibly, his wife.

In this sense, the seduction plot of the sentimental novel is basically a failed marriage plot, as Rachel Brownstein makes clear in her perceptive description of the imaginary appeal of the marriage plot: "The marriage plot most novels depend on is about finding validation of one's uniqueness and importance by being singled out among all other women by a man. The man's love is proof of the girl's value, and payment for it" (Brownstein 1982: xv). In this fantasy of being chosen, the sentimental novel retains a faint echo of the Cinderella tale; however, in a "realistic" version in the sense that the issue of choice – and the price one has to pay for wrong choices – moves to the center of the narrative. Eliza Wharton's letter to Lucy Sumner leaves no doubt about this: "He lives in all the magnificence of a prince; and why should I, who can doubtless share that magnificence if I please, forego the advantages and indulgences it offers, merely to gratify those friends who pretend to be better judges of my happiness than I am myself?" (Foster 1939: 201). The marriage plot fails in the sentimental tale of seduction because the heroine – often against her better judgment – violates social rules in her desire for special recognition. To marry Boyer is not sufficient, it has to be Sanford, the "extraordinary man." The punishment she receives is also a punishment for the fantasy of personal triumph which led to her concessions to the seducer.

And yet, clearly, although the heroine is severely criticized for her behavior, the reader is nevertheless on her side. The reason, I suggest, is that her act is not only one of moral but also of social boundary-crossing. It is an act of disobedience generated by a drive for individual recognition, that is, for being recognized as "unique" – which the reader shares, in effect, because it is exactly this search that has driven her to the fictional text and its promise of imaginary self-expansion in the first place. For the young female reader, the sentimental novel, probably for the first time in literary history, put her own fantasy life at the center of the literary text and thus acknowledged her as a potential "heroine." The fact that the novel can be taken to one's room and read privately must have nourished this sense of importance, because it contained a promise of control over the mental processing of the novel's imaginary elements

without interference from parents or other guardian figures. On the other hand, this increase in control seems to have been one of the major sources of irritation for critics of the new genre, so that the major source of harm caused by the reading of sentimental novels is usually attributed to its "untutored" use, that is, to the dangers and risks of independence which the young female reader cannot yet handle. The actual "temptation" the sentimental novel dramatizes thus lies in the search for recognition and imaginary self-empowerment. And the danger is also spelt out (melodramatically): individualization leads to separation, to a loss of community against which the heroines of the sentimental novel are defenseless. Hence, in order to protect the reader from this same fate, distance and the possibility of dissociation are crucial.

In its transformation of the sentimental heroine from mere victim to a character who is actively, though yet unsuccessfully, struggling for independence, *The Coquette* anticipates the transition from the sentimental tale of seduction to the novel of manners and the domestic novel, the two dominant novelistic genres of women's literature in the first half of the nineteenth century. This transition took place soon after the belated beginnings of the American novel and ended the relatively short reign of the sentimental novel. The reason, I suggest, is that these genres opened up new possibilities for the project that also lay at the center of the sentimental novel, namely the struggle for recognition by means of imaginary self-empowerment. For this search, the sentimental novel is of considerable, but ultimately limited, use. Its limitations become obvious if one asks the question how the heroine can protect herself against the fate "worse than death" that may result from her transgression. The only answer the sentimental novel seems to offer is to return to the fold of patriarchal guardianship. In this way, a vicious circle is established: the only protection against betrayal and deception is provided by complete trust in, and dependence on, the judgment of one's guardian. The sentimental heroine can only transfer her dependence from one guardian figure to another. However, it is exactly this lack of independence which puts the heroine in constant danger of falling prey to the deceptive maneuvers of the seducer, because she lacks any social experience of her own.

In the long run, this limited choice between two forms of dependencies could not provide a satisfactory model. Once the novel had been established as a privileged medium for imaginary self-empowerment in the early Republic, the sentimental tale of seduction was therefore replaced in the favor of its readers by genres that promised to be more useful and effective for that purpose. The best protection against dependency is the development of a social self which can only be acquired, however, in a long-drawn learning process. The sentimental novel is thus replaced by the novel of social apprenticeship in which a sense of self-worth is no longer gained by a victimization that cries out for sympathy, but by the strength of the individual to control her impulses and to gradually correct her own faults. A novel like Charles Brockden Brown's sentimental novel *Jane Talbot* can illustrate this point. To base recognition on the power of strong feelings, as Jane Talbot does, also means to create a state of utter dependency: "What is it, my friend, that makes thy influence over me so

absolute? No resolution of mine can stand against your remonstrances. A single word, a look, approving or condemning, transforms me into a new creature... So easily swayed am I by one that is the lord of my affections. No will, no reason have I of my own." In another letter to Colden, Jane writes: "Never was a creature so bereft of all dignity; all steadfastness. The slave of every impulse: blown about by the predominant gale; a scene of eternal fluctuation" (Brown 1986: 256, 357). Replacing such infantile longings for fusion, linked with melodramatic fears of separation, self-esteem in the novel is eventually established in a process of social interaction in which the heroine learns to overcome her emotional vulnerability. Similarly, in Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy*, published only a decade after *The Coquette*, the reason for the sorry fate of the fair, lovely, and almost perfect Emily Hammond no longer resides in the cunning designs of a seducer. There is no seducer figure far and wide in the novel. Rather, Emily's fate must be blamed on that figure who still functioned as the heroine's only unwavering source of protection in the sentimental novel, the guardian figure. As a consequence, Rush's novel establishes an entirely new version of the theme of seduction. In *Kelroy* it is no longer the illusory lure of temptations that leads to the heroine's "fall," but the people who know these illusions and can manipulate them for their own purposes. In this new world of almost imperceptible, "civilized" forms of deception and manipulation, protection for the heroine can no longer come from reliance on her guardian, who is – in striking anticipation of James – one of the master manipulators herself. It can only come from the development of a "social imagination" and social skills that would enable the heroine to imagine the possibility and the scope of such deceptions.

Surprisingly, it is Susanna Rowson who offers a solution that points to a new and stable generic convention. One of the remarkable aspects of *Lucy Temple*, Rowson's sequel to *Charlotte Temple*, is how far the novel is already removed from the sentimental formula, although it initially appears to provide yet another version of it in the intertextual echo of its title. But, contrary to expectations, the novel is unswerving in its strategy of de-melodramatization. The daughter of the unhappy Charlotte Temple is not another victim, but somebody who successfully overcomes a string of potential disasters. The strength which Lucy demonstrates comes out of her successful socialization in the family circle of the Reverend Mr. Matthews, a world full of "humdrum daily-life talk of cakes and ale, its birthday feasts of hams and pies and plum puddings" (Douglas 1991: xxxviii). This is the world of the novel of manners, in which the cultivation of sympathy is now tied to the purpose of social apprenticeship and the development of an individual identity. Douglas therefore calls *Lucy Temple* a *bildungsroman*, "a portrayal of traditional processes of development and self-assessment" (ibid: xli). While the sentimental novel reenacts a pattern of emotional agitation that, eventually, leads to exhaustion, the novel of social apprenticeship (a term I would prefer to that of the *bildungsroman* because it is broader and includes a variety of nineteenth-century genres such as the novel of manners, the domestic novel, local color fiction, and the realistic novel) follows a pattern of growing insight and, often, increasing self-control.

In the US, the domestic novel emerged as one of the dominant versions of the novel of social apprenticeship. In its drive to replace an aesthetics based on the idea of sympathy with one aiming at the development of an inner emotional economy, the domestic novel bears striking similarities to the most successful male genres at the time, the frontier romance. Such a claim may seem odd, because it links two genres that are often openly hostile towards each other. Feminist criticism has emphasized that frontier romances such as Cooper's Leatherstocking novels establish an ideal of supreme emotional control, while domestic novels favor emotional release and often indulge in outbursts of tears. Hence we find a seemingly never-ending series of sobbing, weeping, and strong emotional outbursts in a novel like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, often regarded as the exemplary domestic novel in American culture and as one of the supreme tear-jerkers of American literature. However, a closer look at the role these moments of emotional release play in the novel reveals that they are created to teach a lesson, namely that of the necessity of self-discipline. Jane Tompkins (1985) therefore describes the domestic novel as an emotional training ground in which characters as well as readers have to go through recurring patterns of strong emotional responses and the subsequent insight that such impulses have to be controlled, a process in which an unruly little child is gradually turned into a mature and widely respected young woman. This process of apprenticeship 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 in an often painful process of self-denial and psychic self-regulation. In a paradoxical structure, self-sacrifice and self-submission thus become sources of distinction and self-esteem. One would hesitate, however, to call this selfhood. In the novel, the final recognition of the heroine is deserved, because she has won a victory over herself. But her worth is measured by her readiness for self-denial; that is, by her ability to extinguish all traces of her own individuality and selfhood.

The transformation of the sentimental novel into the domestic novel seems to provide an unforeseen complication for an interpretation of early American fiction in terms of a "self-empowering" reader mobility. On the representational level, the search for recognition is now linked to an ideal of self-discipline; that is, to an attitude which revisionist criticism regards as a form of voluntary submission to power. On the formal level, this move is connected with a retreat from multi-perspectivism – and hence from a formal device which can stimulate and guide the movement of readers between different characters and positions. This raises the interesting question what reader activities the domestic novel actually implies. Obviously, it is strongly heroine centered. In contrast to the epistolary novel, the heroine and her social sphere are no longer on an equal footing. One of the recurrent

strategies of the domestic novel is to demonstrate how the heroine is misunderstood, so that we are inclined to take her side and take great interest in how she manages to deal with this injustice. Nevertheless, in terms of aesthetic effect, the main point about the domestic novel is not the creation of an intense emotional bond, but the connection of moments of release with a counter-move of control, resulting in a constant tension between a promise of recognition and its disappointment, between wish-fulfillment and rejection. The heroine and the reader are linked by the search for recognition; at the same time, they are also constantly referred back to the condition on which this recognition depends, namely the acceptance of the need for self-regulation.

In this constant move back and forth between promise and delay, the domestic novel produces something like an emotional see-saw effect, in which the imagination and the emotions of the reader are strongly stimulated and then linked with the lesson that one has to learn to control oneself in order to be able to deal with the disappointment of being misunderstood and not recognized in one's true value. The self-discipline which the heroine learns to exercise thus also becomes a model for the reading process. Both heroine and reader have to learn to be patient, both are drawn into an apprenticeship in self-regulation. The theory of effect inherent in the sentimental novel is that the reader will be driven to self-control by fear of separation, the theory of the domestic novel is that the ups and downs of the search for self-discipline will function as a kind of training ground for the formation of an inner emotional economy. The reader's "work" consists in internalizing this emotional economy. The cultivation of mutual sympathy is replaced by a lesson in internalization.

Such a reading seems to confirm revisionist interpretations that see the political function of early American fiction in a move from coercion to the skillful creation of consent by affective forms. I think, indeed, that analyses which point out that self-regulation and internalization take the role of coercion in modern societies and that culture plays a crucial role in this transition are convincing. The point of disagreement is not that such mechanisms are at work but what their function is. A view of internalization exclusively in terms of an increasing disciplinary regime disregards the sense of self-possession and self-empowerment which the individual can gain through self-regulation. In the realistic novel and American local color fiction, renunciation, as a supreme form of self-control, can become a source of self-esteem, because it finally provides immunity against the emotional manipulation of others. The individual gains independence and a sense of self because she establishes a source of self-worth that lies outside the manipulative grasp of either seducer or guardian figure. Seen this way, the domestic and the realistic novel are still responses to early American fiction. Conversely, if early American fiction is part of a historical moment in which cultural forms of individualization are ushered in, then it can also help us understand why these forms could gain such a cultural force. As long as the current political criticism does not try to understand this phenomenon, it will be helpless in the face of it.

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