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The Humanities, the Individual and the "System"[1]

I

"Hence Watergate was only a trap set by the system to catch its adversaries . . ." (246). This is a quotation taken from Jean Baudrillard's essay "The Precession of Simulacra." It is also a way of describing Western societies that has become quite common among intellectuals and scholars in the humanities. As early as 1959, in his seminal essay on "The White Negro," Norman Mailer wrote:

> It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist - the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as *l'univers concentrationnaire*, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled (at what damage to the mind and the heart and the liver and the nerves no research foundation for cancer will discover in a hurry), if the fate of twentieth-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self. In short, whether the life is criminal or not, the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself . . . . (339)[2]

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[1] This paper brings together arguments that I have developed at greater length in the following essays: "Literature, Liberalism, and the Current Cultural Radicalism," "The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism," and "'The American Romance' and the Changing Functions of the Imaginary."

[2] In the subsequent passage, Mailer speaks of "a partially totalitarian society" (339). In *The Minimal Self,* Christopher Lasch lists "some of the more prominent examples of the left's equation of capitalism, racism, and almost any use of political power with 'totalitarianism'" and includes Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man,* "Norman Mailer's frequent allusions to the totalitarian character of American society, as in *Armies of the Night,*" "James Baldwin's standard reference to the United States as the 'Fourth Reich'; and H. Rap Brown's reference to Lyndon Johnson as 'Hitler's Illegitimate Child'" (275n). More generally, a view of American society as a "System" in the sense of a quasi-totalitarian "institution" is the starting point of almost all canonized fiction of the 1960s and beyond. One consequence is the inversion of "madness" and "sanity," which Barbara Tepa Lupack traces in the fiction of the 60s: "Underscoring the struggle of the individual against the repressive, impersonal, technological, dehumanizing forces of contemporary society, these novels suggest that insanity may be one of the few sane alternatives available in a mad world. The restoration of a real

This was written in 1959, before Foucault and others radically dismantled the existentialist myth of the outsider by describing madness, criminality, or marginality as categorizations through which society ascribes identities and thereby produces outsider positions that can then be "disciplined" and controlled. Poststructuralism, used here in the broad sense of approaches in various disciplines of the humanities made possible by the linguistic turn, has radicalized both the counter-culture's and postmodernism's ideas of the system. In fact, I want to claim, in one significant way all poststructuralist thought is based on, and generated by, the idea of an invisible systemic effect, for which the most appropriate German translation is that of "strukturelle Gewalt."

This new form of radicalism is significantly different from earlier forms of radicalism. I have therefore suggested in another context to call it cultural radicalism in order to distinguish it from earlier forms of political radicalism. The dominant approaches of the last fifteen years, ranging from poststructuralism and deconstruction, new historicism and cultural materialism, to the various versions of race, class, and gender studies, may be widely different in many of their arguments, premises, and procedures. What unites them is a new form of radicalism which I would like to call, in contrast to older forms of political radicalism, cultural radicalism, because the central source of political domination is no longer attributed to the level of political institutions and economic structures, but to culture.[3] The origin of this paradigm shift in the definition of power lies in the student movement of the late 1960s which had to come to terms with the puzzling and irritating fact that the "oppressed" did not form coalitions with the students, although, ostensibly, there was no force trying to prevent them from entering such coalitions. One typical response of the time was to redefine institutions such as the law, or the police, or the press - in Berlin, at one point, even the census - as agents of repression.[4] But the more common and theoretically ambitious response was to follow the lead of Herbert Marcuse who defined the liberal state as an "omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives" (xiv-xv) and who played a key role in the transition from political to cultural radicalism by introducing the concept of "repressive tolerance."

order in modern society, they imply, will occur not by blind obedience to totalitarian systems, but as result of challenges to the bureaucratic institution - in other words, by inmates running the asylum" (5).

[3] For a more detailed analysis, see my essay on "Literature, Liberalism, and the Current Cultural Radicalism." In the following analysis, my purpose is not to discredit this new form of radicalism which has opened up important new perspectives but to understand the logic of its choices.

[4] In some instances this even included the universities, as Christopher Lasch points out: "During the student uprisings of the sixties, radical critics of the university repeatedly compared it to a detention camp or prison" (70).

With Marcuse's wonderfully paradoxical formulation, the repression thesis was replaced by the idea of a "structural" or "systemic" power that can be much more effective (and hence much more "dominant"), because the sources of its domination can no longer be recognized as such.[5] This is the founding move of cultural radicalism which is based on the redefinition of power as exerted not by agents or institutions of the state but by the system's cunning ways of constituting "subjects" or ascribing "identities" through cultural forms. Thus, recent critical theories, different as they may be in many respects, nevertheless have one basic premise in common (and are amazingly predictable in this one respect): they all take their point of departure from the assumption of an all-pervasive, underlying systemic feature that constitutes the system's power in an "invisible," but highly effective way. The names for this systemic effect change, from the prison-house of language, ideology redefined as semiotic system, realistic representation, the reality effect, the ideological state apparatus, the cinematic apparatus, the symbolic order, épistème, discursive regime, logocentrism, patriarchy, "whiteness," or "Western" thought. But the basic claim is always the same: the "invisible" power effect of the systemic structure derives from the fact that it determines meaning and the perception of the world before the individual is even aware of it, by constituting the linguistic and cultural patterns through which we make sense of the world.[6]

Marcuse's analysis was not entirely bleak. Arne Delfs has recently described his position in the following way:

> Within such a system of complete ideological hegemony, Marcuse believed, only a radical aesthetics would be able to offer an alternative point of view. In his 1969 *Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse envisioned a utopian society in which all structures of oppression and alienation would be overcome by purely aesthetic means. Radical aesthetics would open up a new dimension of experience and

[5] The concept used by the German student movement for this systemic effect was "strukturelle Gewalt." The term does not only express the central idea of a form of power that manifests itself not through an agent or somebody's action (= the usefulness of the idea of structure), but also describes this "invisible" exertion of power through structure as a form of coercion or violence (*Gewalt*).

[6] One of the unforeseen consequences of this shift in emphasis is the new importance of the concept of culture. While culture was once seen as a kind of secondary phenomenon, a mirror of, or response to, social, political, and economic structures that were considered prior, this hierarchy is leveled or even inverted, because political, economic, and social choices are now seen to be founded on systems of cultural values (and, at the same time, constrained by them).While the concept of culture was almost a dirty word, at least in the academic world of the 70s, where it was considered, if not as a special, precious elitist world, then certainly as a secondary phenomenon, a mere *Widerspiegelung* of the "real" world, it is now realized to what extent our perceptions and interpretations of that real world are shaped by cultural patterns of which we may not even be aware but which determine not only our understanding *of* this world but also our actions *in* it.

> hence create a new type of man: 'men who would speak a different language, have different gestures, follow different impulses.' (34)

Impulses also played an increasingly important role for Mailer. It is one of the paradoxical consequences of this retreat to a seemingly authentic, uncorrupted sphere of life, that the ever radicalized search for an authentic dimension that would not yet be compromised by social forces revealed ever new layers of linguistic and cultural convention, until the idea of authenticity itself was effectively undermined. As a consequence, not only the concepts of art and self are now considered cultural constructs that imprison and "discipline" the individual, but also seemingly private dimensions such as sexuality, the emotions and the body. In its relentless search for systemic power effects, cultural radicalism has taken away the last hopes of the radical self envisioned by Marcuse and Mailer. Instead, it has drawn a major intellectual impetus from the challenge to unmask even the last remnants and residues of existential authenticity as sites into which the system has "always already" inscribed itself.

Cultural radicalism's redefinition of power as systemic effect has led to a constant pressure to outradicalize others.[7] If power resides in hitherto unacknowledged aspects of language, discourse or the symbolic order, then there is literally no limit to ever new and ever more radical discoveries of power effects. And if it is power that determines cultural meaning, then the major question must be that of the possibility or impossibility of opposition. "Opposition," however, changes its nature. In view of the

[7] Again, my goal here is to describe the inner logic of a development and the problems it creates. The redefinition of power as all-pervasive systemic effect provides valuable insights into the manifestation of power effects in seemingly "natural" or "innocent" aspects of social life. But it also creates the problem of where to locate power and how to specify its effects. On this point, see the excellent analysis by Wolfram Schmidgen in "The Principle of Negative Identity and the Crisis of Relationality in Contemporary Literary Criticism" : " . . . since no synthesis can reduce the complexity of these relations (that would be to hypostatize a determinate level), one could say that the principle of determination in such a structure is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It is everywhere because every element in the structure is defined by the totality of relations that surround it, and it is nowhere because it is nowhere empirically present, can be nowhere concretized or mapped: the complexity of all the relations precisely exceeds the possibility of such spatialization. This is why Jameson called this type of structure an 'absent cause.' What I want to argue in regard to topics such as race, imperialism, or nationalism, is that one branch of recent criticism - not strictly confined to literary criticism - pushes the case for these topics by constructing them as absent causes. As such, race, imperialism, or nationalism permeate the entire network of social relations and affect all literature, even those canonical texts more conservative critics consider exempt from such 'contamination.' Yet to the extent that the everywhere-but-nowhere structure of the absent cause penetrates the totality of social relations and thus makes the argument for race in Henry James or imperialism in Jane Austen possible, the relations between literature and its social reality lose specificity and depth" (391).

shrewd containment of all resistance by discursive regimes, the only way out lies in the radical difference of otherness. Thus, the development of cultural radicalism has taken a characteristic course from neo-Marxism, with its critique of the market (which still allows for the possibility of withdrawal or resistance), to deconstruction (which still thinks "subversion" possible, but attributes it to the unforeseen effects of writing, not the writer), to Foucauldian neo-historicism (which unmasks resistance as really a hidden form of complicity), to race, class and gender studies (which revive the possibility of resistance by locating it in radical "difference"). Actually, the current umbrella concept "race, class, and gender" is a misnomer, because the category of "class" cannot constitute radical difference. Consequently, class analysis no longer constitutes a genuine theoretical option for the new cultural radicalism, while, sexual preference, on the other hand, constitutes elementary, unbridgeable difference and has therefore moved to the center of revisionist approaches.

However, by putting all hopes for resistance on the category of difference, another theoretical problem arises, because a term for denoting unbridgeable otherness is used as the basis for a broadly defined group identity which does not account for the possibility of difference within this group. Hence, a constant movement or "sliding" in the use of the category difference can be observed: in order to make the concept politically meaningful, it must be used as a comprehensive category of distinction and must be equated with a particular gender, ethnic or racial group, or form of sexual preference. Such redefinition of difference as, for example, racial or engendered identity runs the danger, however, of re-essentializing identity, and works against the very idea of difference. The problem arises from the fact that a category taken from linguistic and semiotic analysis, where it describes an uncontrollable dissemination of meaning, is employed to justify claims for social recognition. In the first context, it is an anti-representational term, used to deconstruct a belief in the possibility of representation; in the second, the idea of representation is not only revived but becomes the central criterion for judging and classifying cultural texts.[8] Arguments within race, class and gender studies constantly oscillate between the two options of the term and arrest them almost at will wherever there is a need. In accordance with the new critical culture of performance, difference is used as a means of self-definition and of self-empowerment. This, in fact, is the thrust and net result of the current cultural radicalism in the humanities. Since power is redefined as an effect of systemic structures

[8] In his book *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory speaks of "a confusion between representation in the political sense - the relation of a representative to a constituency - and representation in the rather different sense of the relation between an image and what the image represents" (viii). I think it is more appropriate, however, to speak not of a confusion but of a conflation. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993).

that are virtually everywhere, the term is no longer a category of political analysis, but a word for all possible barriers to the self. And since the subject is, in principle, constituted by systemic effects or is seen, at best, as the site of conflicting systemic effects, it can only be defined through difference, so that the claim or assertion of difference becomes the supreme form of self-empowerment.[9]

The far-reaching radicalization of the humanities in the U.S. has been an entirely unforeseen and highly surprising development from a European point of view. More specifically, there were two surprises. For once, radicalism re-emerged in the U.S. after it had turned dogmatic in Europe and had thereby discredited itself completely. One of the recurring arguments of conservatives during the heyday of the student movement in France, Germany and other European countries was the charge of ideologization which was considered as a typically European illness and regularly contrasted with Anglo-Saxon "common sense." As it turned out, however, "common sense" was no match for the radicalization of literary and cultural studies in the U.S.. Why? And why was there no consideration of the negative experiences in Europe? The explanation, I think, lies in the fact that this new-wave American radicalization is not what it appears (and often claims) to be, namely a critical theory with political goals and a political theory. Although it is constantly pointed out that not only the private but literally every aspect of social life is political, there is no systematic reflection on the structures or procedures through which the claims of difference or "the other" could become political reality.[10] One reason surely is that the realization of one claim inevitably runs the danger of violating the claims of somebody else. Such "violations" can only be justified on the basis of a set of normative ideas, but normative ideas violate difference, as the various forms of poststructuralist and neopragmatist antifoundationalism point out again and again. There was nothing to be learned, then, from European political radicalism because the new form of cultural radicalism has entirely different goals. It pursues a politics of self-empowerment, and, thus, its analyses need no longer be based on Marxist or other social theories which attempt to describe the relation between various groups and

[9] This cultural self-empowerment is not to be equated with "real" social or political empowerment (although it may have such consequences - witness, for example, the impact of feminism in American Studies). The term is understood here as imaginary construct and refers to the possibility of imagining and fashioning oneself as different - stronger, weaker, non-white etc. - and thereby as distinct and not subject to an all-pervasive systemic effect.

[10] On this point, see Hans Bertens' discussion of the politics of the postmodern left: "There is virtually no sense of real, concrete politics in these discussions. One finds no theories of the (postmodern) state, no theories of power, no discussion of, say, the legitimate use of violence, no theories of the macropolitics that highly complex late twentieth-century societies obviously cannot do without" (112).

members of the political system as a whole. Instead, radicalism can focus on the systemic barriers to self-empowerment while, politically speaking, it remains a form of interest group politics or, in extreme cases, an untheorized form of Maoism or anarchism. The problem, then, is not that literary and cultural studies or other disciplines in the humanities have been instrumentalized by politics, as conservatives would have it. As cultural radicalism rightly claims, there is no way around politics. The interesting theoretical problem is that literary and cultural studies have been appropriated by what, in following the lead of Robert Bellah, but without subscribing to his communitarian ideals, I would like to call the politics of expressive individualism.[11]

The important point to grasp here is that expressive individualism is not a narcissist deformation but a successful end-product of a central project of the humanities. It does not reflect the humanities' crisis but its success. Imaginary self-empowerment through cultural difference is not a pathological distortion of the true goals and function of the humanities but a modern manifestation of a promise of self-empowerment in which the humanities have played a crucial role since their inception. The intellectual justification and support of individual self-development is a major element of what we call modernity (in the sense of "Neuzeit"). Crucial "breakthroughs" in Western intellectual development which stand at the center of the humanities such as the philosophical "discovery" of the subject, the idea of the enlightenment, the doctrine of individual rights, the modern understanding of the aesthetic as a non-mimetic mode of experience, or the institutionalization of literature as a fictive realm to transgress the boundaries of existing worlds have all contributed to this process of individualization and provided it with intellectual tools as well as moral justification. My claim is that, contrary to its self-perception, the current cultural radicalism does not stand in opposition to this process but merely represents a new, radicalized stage of it.

The process of individualization in Western societies can be divided into two major stages, as suggested by Bellah and his co-authors in their study *Habits of the Heart*, where a distinction is made between economic or utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. Disregarding the nostalgic communitarian context of their argument, I find these terms heuristically useful in drawing attention to two different manifestations of modern individualism which, in going beyond Bellah, can best be distinguished by reference to two different sources of self-definition and self-esteem. In the traditional form of economic individualism, as it has been analyzed by Tocqueville, Max Weber and numerous others since then, self-esteem is derived primarily from economic success and social recog-

[11] Since it seems highly unfashionable, if not improper, in American radical circles to draw on a liberal like Bellah for an analysis of American society, one should perhaps consider "frenchifying" him and changing his name to Robert Bellà.

nition. In order to obtain these, the individual has to go through an often long and painful act of deferred gratification and self-denial. Analogous to the act of saving, the goal is to accumulate a stock of capital, in both economic and social terms, which will eventually yield its profits in the form of increased social approval and a rise in the social hierarchy. The prototypical literary genres of this economic individualism are the autobiographical success-story, but also the *Bildungsroman* or the story of female education, as, for example, the domestic novel. They are teleological in conception; their basic narrative pattern is that of a rise or fall; their recurring emotional dramas are the experience of injustice and the withholding of just rewards, but also, possibly, a final moment of triumphant retribution; their ideal is the formation of a character that is strong enough to survive this long ordeal of social apprenticeship.

In contrast, the culture of expressive individualism is not primarily concerned with a rise of the individual to social respectability or his or her (tragic or melodramatic) failure but with the search for self-realization. Its major issues are no longer economic success or the promise of social recognition but the assertion of cultural difference, that is, the ability of the individual to assert his or her own uniqueness and otherness against the powers of cultural convention and encroaching disciplinary regimes. If development and growth are key terms of economic individualism, difference is the key term of expressive individualism. In comparison with the long-drawn narrative of self-development characteristic of economic individualism, the assertion of difference provides a short-cut for the individual who is not only liberated from the labor of self-discipline but also gains a much higher degree of self-control over his or her self-definition. This change in the sources of self-esteem is the logical outcome of an ever-intensified process of individualization and, coming along with it, increasingly radical forms of cultural dehierarchization. In this process, the individual has to assert his or her self-worth in opposition to those forces that stand in their way. Initially, these were obvious sources of inequality such as caste, class, or patriarchy. With the increasing democratization of Western societies - in itself a result of individualization - these sources of inequality have been undermined in authority, and have, in fact, often been dissolved or weakened decisively. Inequality remains, but it can no longer be as easily attributed to social structures. Hence the search for new "systemic effects" of inequality, and an increased importance of self-fashioning by means of cultural difference.

If the source of power is cultural, however, then culture must also serve as the source of counterdefinition, and the search for self-realization must become the search for alternative cultural options. It is therefore culture which takes the place of the economy as the major model for self-definition, because the realm of culture provides something like an archive or store-house of different models of self-fashioning. In contrast to the realm

of the economy, where self-discipline and a strong "identity" are the most desirable qualities, culture offers an almost inexhaustible supply of options for role-taking and imaginary self-empowerment. Ironically, it is thus not a ritual of consent that absorbs "the radical energies of history" (90), as Sacvan Bercovitch has it, but new possibilities of individual self-empowerment, articulated most forcefully by cultural radicalism, that redefine political engagement as a cultural option of self-realization and thus as one possible role among others.

As a form of expressive individualism, radicalism changes its function. Instead of providing an ideological basis for political analysis, it becomes an intellectual tool in the radical pursuit of difference. This explains its most striking feature: its focus on, if not obsession with, the question of oppositionalism. Literary criticism today is therefore no longer interested in the description of aesthetic experience. Instead, it has become almost entirely an "easy" form of cultural criticism. The striking fact that cultural radicalism's interest in literature seems almost entirely absorbed by the problem of whether literary texts are truly oppositional or not is closely linked with the question of cultural difference: "Opposition is the best way to assert cultural difference, for it is opposition that allows difference to emerge most clearly and pointedly" (Fluck 1995, 222-23). Thus, cultural radicalism can nowadays be regarded as one of the supreme manifestations of expressive individualism in the realm of the humanities. Although it sees itself as a political turn in literary studies, it really represents, at a closer look, another turn of the screw in the cultural history of individualization. This individualism needs radical cultural dehierarchization to eliminate cultural restrictions on self-empowerment, but it also needs the cultural construction of difference to escape from the consequences of radical equality. In this sense, cultural radicalism does not provide an alternative to individualism, but a more radicalized version of individualism, not a critique of individualism by "politics" but a critique based on the radicalized politics of expressive individualism.

Let us return to Norman Mailer for a moment, because his essay on the "white negro" illustrates all the major characteristics of the culture of expressive individualism in exemplary fashion. Mailer's starting point is the characterization of society as an all-pervasive system ("the State as *l'univers concentrationnaire*") which threatens to trap the individual in conformity and suffocate "every creative and rebellious instinct." This redefinition of liberal society as quasi-totalitarian is made possible by a shift to cultural terms of analysis. To make the claim of totalitarianism on the basis of a political analysis would hardly be convincing. However, if the pressure the system exerts is described in cultural terms, for example as a pervasive system of categorization or as a suffocating conformity, then the system can be characterized not only as potentially oppressive but as all-embracing in its grasp. Conformity, however, is not a force that takes away

political or social rights. Rather, it is an irritating barrier to self-realization. This, in turn, prefigures the forms of opposition. Since the power effect of the system manifests itself through culture, the source of opposition has to be cultural as well. Mailer's essay offers, in fact, an interesting inspection of the cultural options that were available for this purpose at a particular moment of cultural history.

In Mailer's search for alternatives, imaginary role-taking plays a crucial role. Mailer runs through a series of possible choices in unfolding his argument: "In short, whether the life is criminal or not, the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself," or when he claims that "one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society . . . ." Mailer then toys with the idea of a "ménage-a-trois" between bohemian, juvenile delinquent and African American, defined here as jazz musician. Jazz, in turn, connotes the possibility of orgiastic release for which D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Wilhelm Reich become intellectual antecedents. In this imaginary collage of outsider positions, the "Negro," as Mailer calls him, takes center stage, however. This is a highly interesting aspect of his essay, because it draws attention to the special usefulness of ethnicity for current manifestations of expressive individualism.

Of course, not all forms of ethnicity are useful for imaginary self-fashioning. To put it bluntly: Scandinavians don't sing the Blues! Even middle-class African Americans do not sing the Blues. As Mailer makes all too clear, what expressive individualism wants is not ethnicity per se, but what I would call expressive ethnicity which holds the promise of an especially forceful self-expression:

> But the presence of Hip as a working philosophy in the sub-worlds of American life is probably due to jazz, and its knifelike entrance into culture . . . . Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. (340-41)

Mailer leaves no doubt here about the act of imaginary role-taking and "masquerading" as black: "So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro" (341).

Mailer's position may be extreme, but it is nevertheless exemplary.[12] Clearly, African Americans are assigned a role here in an imaginary scenario that is governed by Mailer's own need for self-definition and self-expression.[13] By projecting his own needs for release from conformity onto the "Negro," he uses the "radical" otherness of African Americans for his own imaginary self-empowerment. Or, to be more precise: his own need for imaginary self-empowerment, produces an imaginary "Negro." This draws our attention to the crucial role of the imaginary for the process of individualization and, more specifically, for expressive individualism. I want to use the term of the imaginary here not in its psychoanalytic sense in which it has become another key concept of cultural radicalism, but in the phenomenological sense, revived by Castoriadis and adopted for literary studies by Wolfgang Iser, of a diffuse, decontextualized stream of associations, images, and feelings that strive for articulation but need conventions of the real in order to become representable.[14] In this sense, the imaginary is the source of a constant struggle for articulation.

For the process of individualization in Western societies, the emergence and institutionalization of fiction in the modern sense of a non-mimetic, de-pragmatized and hence experimental form of expression has been crucial, because fiction holds several promises as a mode of communication: 1) Because it is considered "unreal," it provides a culturally sanctioned space for the articulation of thoughts, associations, fantasies, moods, or desires that cannot be expressed (or cannot be expressed yet) in any other way. However, one should add that the articulation or liberation of the imaginary is not the whole story as far as fiction is concerned; what is equally important is the negotiation of these needs with the claims of the real. 2) Because of this "articulation effect," fiction provides an ideal realm for the individual to stage him- or herself as "other," or, to put it less hyperbolically, as different. 3) This symbolic realm for refashioning draws one of its major attractions from the promise of a reinvention of oneself - and, as a result, of a rise in self-esteem (for example, by giving the tale of a

[12] At the end of the 1970s, Bufithis called "The White Negro" "probably the most frequently anthologized essay written by a contemporary American" (57-58).

[13] An excellent analysis of "the white male's need to feel and act 'black,'" is provided in Todd Boyd's article "A Nod to Cool or a New Blaxploitation?"

[14] Cf. Wolfgang Iser's definition: "It is the diffuseness of the imaginary that enables it to be transformed into so many different gestalts, and this transformation is necessary whenever this potential is tapped for utilization. Indeed fiction, in the broadest sense of the term, is the pragmatically conditioned gestalt of the imaginary. . . . Fiction reveals itself as a product of the imaginary insofar as it lays bare its fictionality and yet it appears to be a halfway house between the imaginary and the real. It shares with the real the determinateness of its form, and with the imaginary its nature of an 'As If.' Thus, features of the real and the imaginary become intertwined, and their linkup is such that it both demands and conditions a continuing process of interpretation" (*The Fictive and the Imaginary* 232).

common young woman a certain measure of cultural importance in a genre like the sentimental novel). 4) Fiction thus not only encourages the imaginary to strive for expression, it also produces and circulates an ever-growing inventory of signs, images, and narratives through which it stimulates the imaginary in ever new ways. The emergence of the modern mass media has contributed to this development and accelerated it significantly; it has also provided non-verbal forms of expression that are especially effective in triggering imaginary activities. For these reasons, Western cultural history since the eighteenth century has been the story of an increasing liberation of the imaginary which has found more and more powerful means of expression with the advent, first of the novel, and then of movies, radio, television, and popular music.

However, the imaginary itself can never be fully grasped. As soon as it is represented, it is no longer identical with the imaginary that strove for expression. This, in turn, must trigger another attempt to articulate it. As the source of a struggle for expression, the imaginary thus constantly rekindles and refuels its own hunger for articulation. A similar logic is at work in the process of individualization. The more individual freedom we have, the greater the uncertainty about who we really are and whether we can really ever be and know ourselves, which, in turn, renews and identifies the need for individual self-assertion through difference. As in the humanities, the process of individualization is thus driven by the urge of the individual to assert him- or herself through the symbolic construction of difference. However, it is part of the paradoxical nature of this process that in this search for genuine difference there is a constant retreat to ever more elementary levels beyond or beneath social, cultural and linguistic conventions. In American literary history, for example, 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 gothic and historical fiction to the narrative function of a mere blank or empty signifier. Hawthorne's characteristic mode of ambiguity, even James's "unspeakable suggestions," although they may only function as hermeneutical baits, still hold a promise of meaning. In contrast, Kate Chopin's evocation of sensuous experience, and Fitzgerald's green light on the other side of the bay gain a central role in *The Awakening* and *The Great Gatsby,* respectively, 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.[15]

This story of retreat is closely bound up with the rejection of those (real or imagined) authorities which seem to impede individual difference. Initially, these are the restraints of reason, the concept of civilization, or the historical authority of moral and social traditions which become "manners" in the work of James. In Chopin's post-nineteenth century, the self-evident authority of patriarchal family arrangements stands in the way of individual self-realization, in modernism it is society and its social and artistic conventions, in postmodernism it is, among other things, the authority of modernist views of art itself. In this cultural history of forces that stand in the way of the self - and this is the important point here - there is 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 a special social group such as the gentry or the Puritans, or to specific philosophical concepts or positions such as the enlightenment, Calvinism, perhaps even transcendentalism. Generally, however, beginning with the late James and the work of Chopin, the definition broadens to that of the market or society in general, and, in the case of Mailer and others, to conformity (which is basically a modernist word for mass society), while in postmodernism it is the ubiquitous presence of narrative patterns or language in all processes of sense-making that threatens to engulf the individual. What is still a source of potential insight in James - the fact that single impressions cohere - consequently becomes a sign of possible paranoia in a writer like Pynchon.

These varying conceptualizations of authority must in turn shape the conceptualization of the counter-force on which the individual can draw in his or her search for self-empowerment. In fact, the two conceptualizations are interdependent. Where eighteenth-century rationalism and the idea of civilization anchor social authority, a challenge will most likely emerge from the irrational and the savage. Where this semantic opposition is replaced, in the Jacksonian period, by the conflict between individual and society, this newly discovered individual must begin to explore the options he or she has for realizing their own potential. While, at first, the painful search for individual identity seems to provide a sufficient form of self-assertion, in time the coercive dimension of all social identities, and, ultimately, of language and other discursive regimes, are gradually detected and radically criticized. In the process of this discovery, the significance of an "unnameable" imaginary must increase, because it alone 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 its status as an inaccessible and uncontrollable force. An intricate 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;

[15] For a much more detailed presentation of this argument, see my essay on "The American Romance' and the Changing Functions of the Imaginary."

the greater the retreat, the broader the redefinition of society as anonymous system in the sense of a "total institution."

The narratives of a quasi-totalitarian liberal state and an all-pervasive system of discursive control that govern our fin-de-siècle cultural imaginary are thus, I would claim, the paradoxical result of an ongoing process of individualization. Such a thesis seems to contradict radical claims about the growing power of disciplinary regimes. In the currently dominant cultural history of cultural radicalism, Western society has become increasingly subtle and far-reaching in its exertion of power. My claim is, on the other hand, that the possibilities of the individual have been continually broadened. Actually, however, the two narratives do not have to contradict each other. One may argue, on the contrary, that they are inextricably linked. For, ironically, there exists a mutual interdependence between a growing refinement of disciplinary regimes and a steady increase in the possibilities of individual self-empowerment: on the one hand, it is because of individualization that the exertion of power has to become ever more subtle and far-reaching; on the other hand, increasing possibilities of individual self-realization also create a new sensitivity to the power-effects that stand in the way of these possibilities and were hidden before. The more liberated the individual wants to be, the more likely he or she will see manifestations of power in aspects that looked "natural" before.[16] This interdependence between individualization and discursive regimentation escapes the current cultural radicalism. 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.

Fiction's - and thus also culture's - 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 new demands for self-expression and imaginary 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 these two possibilities, subversion or "unwitting complicity." But the real challenge

[16] 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.

is to grasp their interaction, that is, the way in which they depend on one another and constantly reinforce each other in that extremely unstable semiotic system called literature.

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