

“Money Is God”: Materialism, Economic Individualism, and Expressive Individualism

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What is the chief end of man? – to get rich. In what way? – dishonestly if we can; honestly if we must. Who is God, the one only and true? Money is God. Gold and greenbacks and stock – father, son, and the ghost of the same – three persons in one; these are the true and only God, mighty and supreme; and William Tweed is his prophet. (Mark Twain, *Revised Catechism*)

In the following essay, the question of materialism, so central to discussions of American life, is of interest not as an economic or social fact but as a problem of cultural meaning and self-definition. For American self-definitions, materialism – as an attitude toward life focusing primarily, if not exclusively, on material rather than on spiritual values – became a major issue in the wake of an ever accelerating industrialization after the Civil War.¹ Up to that point, it seems, the possibility of economic success and social rise had been considered very much an integral part of the special promise and potential of American society. In the social character of the successful self-made man, articulated most powerfully by Franklin, virtue and material riches are still linked by a moral law or agency which hands out just rewards in acknowledgment of a person’s moral self-discipline. As one character in *The Gilded Age* puts it (now, however, already with unmistakable irony): “The world is a moral world, which it would not be if virtue and

¹ Already in Mark Twain’s and Charles Dudley Warner’s novel *The Gilded Age*, published in 1873, the epochal change brought about by the Civil War and its aftermath is perceived with amazing lucidity: “The eight years in America from 1860 to 1868 uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of the people, transformed the social life of half the country and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations” (125).

vice received the same rewards." Because moral self-discipline and material rewards are causally linked in this world, success and successful individualization still go hand in hand and reinforce each other. In contrast, the (melo)drama of the "inverted success story" in which economic success leads to moral failure (and vice versa) is based on the assumption that the individual has to make an existential choice between riches and moral integrity. Hence, the narrative does not focus on the proud description of the rise itself, but dramatizes the corrupting consequences of an ill-advised choice in a long drawn-out sequence of moral failure, belated insight, subsequent identity crisis and final renunciation.² In this context, successful individualization becomes possible only at the moment in which the individual withdraws from the misguided pursuit of material riches.

This causal link between virtue and material rewards is increasingly problematized in the period after the Civil War, the so-called Gilded Age, which takes its name from one of the most scathing satires of the new materialism. What informs the increasingly shrill complaints about the growing materialism of American society is, at least initially, not so much the injustice of unequal income distribution per se, but the claim that the new fortunes are morally undeserved. They are undeserved because they are not the fruits of hard work and moral discipline but, as a rule, the result of a clever short cut, either by ruthless exploitation, by bribery, shrewd manipulation of the political process, or by speculation (which is, by definition, not "real" labor). The fact that such methods not only go unpunished, but are handsomely rewarded, must have posed a dramatic challenge to fundamental Victorian beliefs in an ultimately "just" world governed by moral laws that provide reliable orientation about how to live. It is fitting, therefore, that debates about the threat of a "materialist" turn of American society moved to the center of American culture in the Gilded Age.

Already in his programmatically "national" novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, published in 1867 as an attempt to describe the Civil War as a historical breakthrough which would finally liberate the full potential of American society and usher in a new and higher stage of American civilization, the gentry-author John William DeForest had drawn attention to the irritating fact that some corrupt politicians exploited the war for their own economic gains while others gave their life or health in

² In addition to Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, which provides the classical realist version of this genre, Henry B. Fuller contributed two impressive, sadly underestimated novels in the 1890s, *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893) and *With the Procession* (1895).

the struggle for union. For the badly battered veteran Colburne, the fact of political corruption constitutes an especially galling experience after a return home which brings no social or economic rewards for his heroic efforts, only disappointments and the need for new sacrifices.³ Anticipating a string of political novels in the 1870s, the new materialism is thus encoded as a supreme form of unprincipled selfishness (as against the unselfishness of those who subordinate their own interests to a larger and noble cause). However, since his novel is to affirm the potential of the newly established union, DeForest, in the end, opts for a vision of national reconciliation which will overcome temporary distortions of the political process. In his next novels *Honest John Vane* (1875) and *Playing the Mischief* (1875), however, DeForest has lost all of his illusions about a possible moral regeneration of the reunited nation. He moves from the genre of historical novel, which served the gentry as a welcome authorization of the legitimacy and superiority of its own claim for national guardianship, to that of political satire which establishes a highly critical distance from the current state of American democracy and registers a profound disillusionment not only with its present course but also with the loss of standards provided by the gentry.

Largely in response to the Grant administration and the Crédit Mobilier railroad scandal, the genre of the political novel played an important role in the emergence of American realism in the 1870s, although the impact has to be sought more on the level of content than form, where allegory, satire and the authorial irony of the novel of manners dominate. This did not detain post-World War II liberals from paying special attention to these novels because they seemed to provide confirmation that politics and literature do not necessarily exclude each other and thus contained a special promise of "relevance."⁴ However, a closer look at most of these novels is disap-

³ In Edward Bellamy's historical novel *The Duke of Stockbridge* (1879), a similar constellation is described, although the novel deals with a different time and historical event: Shay's Rebellion. See Wilfred McClay's summary: "In Bellamy's telling, many such men had returned home after fighting for liberty in the revolutionary war, only to find that a corrupt and undemocratic wealthy elite had in the meantime taken control of their lives and were only too willing to throw the returning patriots into debtors' prison. The tyranny of the British king, it seemed, had merely been replaced by a tyranny of the American moneyed class" (88).

⁴ In his preface to the 1967 edition of his classic study of the political novel, *Politics and the Novel*, Irving Howe states that the book was written against the then dominant formalism in literary criticism. Howe's preface presents an exemplary liberal move in insisting on the importance of politics and yet preserving the integrity of literature as defined by post-war literary studies.

pointing, because neither in their politics, nor in their form are they very convincing. Henry Adams' *Democracy* (1880), for example, which Irving Howe includes in his list of political novels "which deal with revolutionary crises and apocalypse" and, in doing so, offer a "test of extreme situations,"⁵ is surprisingly weak not only in its analysis of political processes and forms of political corruption but also in its elaboration of a "moral vision" which could provide an antidote to materialism and the growing corruption of the political process it has brought about.⁶ For Adams, the new forms of materialism and corruption have their source in a lack of cultivated standards, of "genuine civilization," so that the aping of European forms can be seen as a more condemning piece of evidence for the deterioration of American democracy than any incident of political corruption. By and large, this is a literature of moral indignation: the major complaint about the newly rich and their politicians is that they are vulgar in manners and morally undisciplined in the pursuit of their own desires. "The gross symbols of the new commercial world" offend the cultivated sensibilities of the established social and cultural elites (Howe 20).⁷ Clearly, this criticism is driven by a growing anxiety and anger about the loss of one's own influence in public life. In this, novels like *Democracy* reflect a struggle for cultural authority and influence on the part of gentry-intellectuals, in which the issues of corruption and materialism function as discursive constructs to strengthen the gentry's claim for political and cultural authority.

This discursive construct is based on what is still an eighteenth-century view of character. What distinguishes the successful self-made man in the Franklin mold is "character" in the sense of a set of successfully internalized and thus stable, unwavering personality traits that shield him against temptation. This "principled" self stands in opposition to an unprincipled self that lacks the inner resilience to put up an effective defense against the lure of power or money. The reason for such a breakdown of character lies in a lack of education and discipline (which the novel is out to correct by reminding us of the need for firm principles). The testing-ground for manners in the

⁵ Cf. Howe's preface to the 1967 edition of his *Politics and the Novel*.

⁶ Cf. Howe: "The criteria for evaluating a political novel must finally be the same as those for any other novel: how much of our life does it illuminate? how ample a moral vision does it suggest?" (25).

⁷ Howe's description of the typical hero of the political novels he is most interested in fits *Democracy's* Mrs. Lee perfectly: ". . . the typical hero of the nineteenth century novel was profoundly involved in testing himself, and thereby his values, against both the remnants of aristocratic resistance and the gross symbols of the new commercial world that offend his sensibility."

sense of civilized self-control is the public sphere which, in *Democracy*, is constituted by Mrs. Lee's drawing-room in which the individual has to prove herself as somebody who is able to balance private wishes and public needs. Privacy furthers secrecy in which the individual can nourish his or her own selfish designs. In contrast, the public sphere is the realm of (often involuntary) self-revelation and exposure. Thus, many of the political novels of the 1870s have their dramatic climax at the moment in which corruption is finally made public.

Although the best-known of the political novels of the 1870s – *Honest John Vane*, *Playing the Mischief*, *Democracy*, Rebecca Harding Davis' *John Andross* and, of course, Mark Twain's and Charles Dudley Warner's collaborative effort *The Gilded Age* (1873) – are usually lumped together as rather similar in form and perspective, *The Gilded Age* presents quite a different case, in contrast, for example, to *Democracy*. To start with, *The Gilded Age* describes the new kind of materialism and its impact on the political process in much greater detail and with many striking examples. What is even more important (and makes *The Gilded Age*, in my opinion, a vastly superior book) is that Twain had a far better understanding of the nature of the materialist lure and of the reasons for its infectious spread than Adams, because he realized the crucial role and function of speculation and credit for the new materialism and its impact on economic, political, and social life. As a consequence, there are two kinds of "materialists" in *The Gilded Age*, the "perfectly horrid" men that one might also meet in Adams' drawing room, and the more or less innocent dreamers who fall prey to their own overheated imagination. In view of his own fascination with the prospect of "sudden riches," these characters are the ones that Twain is interested in.⁸ For Adams, materialism and corruption are the deplorable results of a lack of principles that is to be corrected in, and through, the public sphere. For Twain,⁹ the unbridled materialism of the post-Civil War period is generated by new, unheard of possibilities of speculation which

⁸ Twain returned to the lure of money and sudden rise again and again in, for example, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg," "The Stolen White Elephant," "The £ 1,000,000 Bank-Note," "The \$ 30,000 Bequest," and *The Mysterious Stranger*. *The Prince and the Pauper* and *Pudd'n'head Wilson* tell stories of a sudden rise in status and fortune made possible by the prototypically "fictitious" device of changed identities.

⁹ Since the parts of the book that concern me here were written by Twain, it seems justified to contrast Adams and Twain and to bracket Warner for the purpose of this argument.

reinforce a quasi-anthropological tendency of human beings to indulge in fantasies of self-aggrandizement. In this, speculation bears striking similarities to fiction. In fact, the dangers that Twain attributes to certain types of fiction – to be trapped in illusions of such a pleasant, powerfully self-indulgent nature that one ignores the reality-check of experience – links the two modes of imaginary activity in one and the same paradigm of a “romance of the self.” This explains why the plot lines of Col. Sellers and his fellow speculators and that of the avid reader Laura Hawkins are intertwined in the novel. In terms of Twain’s analysis of what threatens American democracy, they clearly belong together.¹⁰

Time and again, *The Gilded Age* draws attention to the crucial part the imagination plays in the self-definition and self-fashioning of people, as, for example, when Squire Hawkins envisages the future of his children: “They’ll live like princes of the earth; they’ll be courted and worshipped; their names will be known from ocean to ocean!” (8). Col. Sellers begins to tell Washington Hawkins about “an enormous speculation” and “soon he was building glittering pyramids of coin” (53). The Colonel’s tongue is “a magician’s wand” that can turn “present poverty into imminent future riches” (55). Gradually, and especially after he has established a close relation with the President, his imaginary self-aggrandizement reaches absurd proportions: “If he respected himself before, he almost worshipped Beriah Sellers now, as a superior being” (271). Although Sellers’s case is extreme, he only perfects something (almost) everybody else does as well. When Washington Hawkins goes home to see his sick father, “he nursed his woe and exalted it” all the way home (65). Instead of a loss of principle, speculation is a human condition, so to speak. As the narrative voice of the novel notes at one point: “One never ceases to make a hero of one’s self (in private), during life, but only alters the style of his heroism from time to time as the drifting years belittle certain gods of his admiration and raise up others in their stead that seem greater” (72). The same kind of constant adaptation can be seen at work in Sellers’s ever new “gigantic schemes” to get rich. Both Laura and Sellers are driven by exaggerated notions of influence, wealth, and importance. However, as the example of such shrewd speculators as Bigler or

¹⁰ The familiar complaint that the Laura Hawkins subplot “waters down” the political analysis of the book ignores this connection, partly because of masculine prejudices (which characterize almost all criticism of American realism up to the late 1970s) that a “tough” analysis of society can only emerge from “manly” concerns such as war or the struggle for existence and not from “romantic” themes such as love.

Small shows, this kind of self-dramatization is necessary for “reinventing” oneself as a successful speculator and thus for obtaining credit:

Beautiful credit! The foundation of modern society. Who shall say that this is not the golden age of mutual trust, of unlimited reliance upon human promises? That is a peculiar condition of society which enables a whole nation to instantly recognize point and meaning in the familiar newspaper anecdote, which puts into the mouth of a distinguished speculator in lands and mines this remark: – “I wasn’t worth a cent two years ago, and now I owe two million dollars.” (183)

When Philip Sterling thinks that he has found coal, Bolton’s credit standing is saved: “Mr. Bolton was ten years younger the next morning. He went into the city, and showed his letter on change. It was the sort of news his friends were quite willing to listen to. They took a new interest in him” (345). However, the “great find” turns out to be an error and Bolton’s situation changes again from one moment to the next. In order to save himself from complete ruin, he sells off his country home. But this “prudent step,” worthy of a self-made man of the old school, only makes things worse, because it is regarded as evidence of how desperate his situation must be and thus severely damages his credit-rating. In this way, his “worth” is subject to sudden changes and wild vacillations that are played out in a public sphere dominated by signs of success and their skillful management and manipulation. On the one hand, the promise of the “beautiful enchanter” money secures Bolton’s position. Speculation creates value. But there is a price to be paid for this, namely the instability and precariousness of a position that is based more on the appearance of worth than on the fact itself and therefore has to be “managed” carefully. That Twain understands with amazing clarity this new way of creating value is demonstrated by his description of Laura’s trial which ties “justice” to successful public impression-management,¹¹ by his poignant satire of Senator Dilsworthy’s election campaign, or by his shrewd analyses of the paradoxical emotional logic caused by newspaper attacks on political corruption. In all of these cases, the public sphere has assumed a dimension that is entirely different from its conceptualization in the other political novels of the period.

¹¹ When Laura is declared “not guilty” (of murdering Selby) because of “temporary insanity,” she immediately gets a contract offer for a lecture tour. In contrast to Adams, Twain understood the working of a public sphere based on “speculation” (in the sense of a priority of imaginary activities) perfectly.

In the morally dichotomous world of Adams, there are principled and unprincipled characters. In Twain's view, this constellation is more complicated. There is the "worm" stage of human existence, characterized not so much by a lack of morals but by a lack of imagination. These are people who will always remain stuck in their miserable living conditions because they lack the power to imagine something else. In addition, there is the "speculation" stage of human existence, characterized by fantasies of personal grandeur that may be illusory but can provide, as for example in the case of Philip, a strong motivation for improving one's lot. Almost all of society resides in this second stage and this, in turn, is the reason why, in contrast to the vision and hope of Adams, the public sphere can have no corrective powers for Twain. Quite on the contrary, it is largely based on speculation itself and thus constantly fuels and rekindles the imagination – so that only humor which evokes the illusion in order to undermine it by laughter is in a position to provide a corrective.¹² For Adams, the public sphere is the realm of manners (in the broad sense of the word), in Twain's version, it is the realm of a wildly agitated amorphous imaginary. To solve the dilemma between unimaginative worm-existence and the potentially self-defeating speculative stage, Twain, in the story of Philip, creates a third, ideal possibility in which speculation is followed up by hard work and thus leads to just rewards.¹³ But the book's main emphasis lies on the bittersweet dilemma and dangers of the second stage. Twain's understanding of the source and cultural consequences of "materialism" is remarkable and far exceeds that of the gentry-authors of the period. For them, democracy has gone off the track because of a shameful loss of principle and moral discipline; for Twain, it has taken a new and dangerous course because it has created entirely new possibilities for the imagination and its constant search for self-fashioning and self-aggrandizement. As Twain realized, "speculation" and "credit," as new cultural forms of determining and establishing value, do offer entirely new chances for the individual to enhance his or her sense of self-importance and self-worth. At the same time, they also offer

¹² A wonderful example for this baiting and subsequent humorous subversion of imaginary longings is given at the very end of the novel in which fiction is again revealed to be yet another unfounded speculation: "Perhaps some apology to the reader is necessary in view of our failure to find Laura's father. We supposed, from the ease with which lost persons are found in novels, that it would not be difficult. But it was; indeed, it was impossible" (441).

¹³ As Marvin Felheim points out in his introduction to the Meridian-Edition of *The Gilded Age*, the only land which turns out to have value is that for which its owner has literally and physically struggled.

entirely new possibilities of self-deception. Ultimately, Twain's attitude remains ambivalent: we need fictions but we also have to be on guard against them constantly.

While the post-Civil War political novels written by gentry-authors respond to the newly emerging materialism with hardly more than moral indignation and, accordingly, construct it as mere unprincipled "selfishness," *The Gilded Age*, reflecting Twain's own ambivalent attitude toward the promise of sudden riches, provides a much clearer grasp of the reasons for its widespread lure, which he locates in the possibilities of speculation (as a form of imaginary self-aggrandizement) and the redefinition of value through "credit" (in the sense of successfully creating an image of one's own worth through skillful impression-management). The analogy he establishes between economic speculation and reading fiction is also pursued by W.D. Howells in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) which maintains the perspective of a moral condemnation of "materialism" but signals a gradual "modernization" of the gentry-attitude: in novels of classic American realists such as *The American* or *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the strategy clearly is to treat the newly rich businessman not as a threat to American values but as a still crude representative of American possibilities who is, however, in need of being civilized in order to make full use of his potential as an American. Consequently, the goal is not to reject materialism but to tame it.¹⁴ The businessman is not told indignantly how to behave himself. He has to undergo his own painful and humiliating experiences through which he gradually learns to distinguish between real and "imaginary" value. Although such insight must lead to a life of reduced expectations, resignation and retreat, it brings with it the satisfaction of having done the right thing.¹⁵ In

¹⁴ As Walter Benn Michaels points out, the "goal of realism, literary and moral, is thus to minimize excess" (378) and to contain desire. What links the love story and the failed success story in the book is that both signal a loss of proportion that has to be regained.

¹⁵ It is one of the least understood aspects of American realism that it continues to stand firmly in a gentry-tradition of cultural guardianship but, in contrast to the "Genteel Tradition" in American cultural life, pursues a new strategy in which moral instruction is replaced by the idea of an innate civilizing potential of experience. This strategy implied a calculated, but risky gamble – inspired, above all, by the realists' own claims that what was still wrong with America could be attributed to the pernicious influence of the romance and its willful misrepresentation of reality – which is based on the hope that a character (and, by implication, the reader) who is set free to have his or her own experiences will participate in an ongoing communicative process and, as a result, will ultimately follow realism's lead voluntarily. However, as a book like *A Modern Instance*

contrast, Twain, in his inverted utopian novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), sets out to employ the power of speculation as a motor for democratization and modernization. However, in the process of doing so, the self-appointed "promoter" of democracy increasingly becomes a promoter of himself (and thus a legitimate heir to Beriah Sellers) who rises to the level of "boss" on the basis of the public "credit" he has successfully established through his own superior knowledge in technological matters and his own clever manipulation of the ignorant masses.

Twain's surprisingly uninhibited reenactment of his own fantasies of grandeur subvert the firm moral opposition on which critical debates of materialism were based up to then: as an attitude which is by definition "selfish" and in which the individual sets his or her own wishes for money or power above social responsibilities, materialism was opposed to "civilized," "mannered" forms of social existence in which the individual acknowledges the superior claims of society and morality. What *A Connecticut Yankee* reveals, on the other hand, is to what extent even the radical reformer is guided by "speculation" and selfish interests.¹⁶ Since human activities such as political reform, economic rise, or cultural performance are built on the lure of the imagination to empower the self and are thus, in a way, only different forms of self-fashioning, they are, in principle, all equally "selfish." The argument against materialism complicates itself, because an economic individualism is replaced by an expressive individualism which may pursue different values, but ultimately for the same purpose of self-empowerment.

To describe this mode of self-empowerment and self-fashioning by means of imaginary and cultural activities, Robert Bellah and his collaborators have introduced the concept of expressive individualism which they set in contrast to an earlier form of economic or utilitarian individualism (cf. Bellah). The difference between these two modes and manifestations of individualism lies in the changing sources of self-definition and self-esteem on which they draw. In the form of individualism prevalent during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as it has been analyzed by Tocqueville,

shows, Howells began to have doubts even in the act of trying to realize this strategy in writing. On *A Modern Instance* as a book which is decisively shaped by this (melo)drama of dehierarchization, both on the level of representation and that of reception, see the discussion in my book *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit*.

¹⁶ This is a suspicion that only a "redskin"-lowbrow like Twain could articulate, or, if you want, act out through his spontaneous mode of composition (which always brought his books to unexpected and unplanned endings). Howells's *The Landlord at Lion's Head* provides a good example, on the other hand, of how this suspicion can paralyze the representative artist and spokesman of civilization.

Max Weber, and numerous others since then, self-esteem is derived primarily from economic success and social respectability on which the individual's place in the social hierarchy depends. The most important quality required for realizing this goal is the capacity for self-discipline and self-restraint. Hence, training in self-discipline and successful psychic self-regulation is one of the major cultural projects of the nineteenth century. Such self-discipline and the respectability that comes with it have to be earned the hard way. It requires constant control of one's impulses and the inner strength to defer the temptation of instant gratification. Analogous to the act of saving, the individual has to go through a long period of self-denial in order to accumulate a stock of capital, in both economic and social terms, which finally yields its profits in the form of increasing social approval and a rise in the social hierarchy. The typical literary genres of this economic individualism, the autobiographical success story, but also the *Bildungsroman* or the story of female education, are therefore teleological in conception. Their basic narrative pattern is that of a rise or fall, and their recurring emotional dramas are those of traumatic injustice and the withholding of just rewards, but also, possibly, a final experience of triumphant retribution; their ideal is the formation of a character that is strong and self-disciplined enough to survive this long ordeal of social apprenticeship. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* can be considered an exemplary story of economic individualism in its sustained drama of character formation and its narrative sequence of hybris, moral fall, and moral redemption.

In contrast, the culture of expressive individualism is not primarily concerned with a social rise to respectability but with the possibility of self-realization. Its major value is no longer an experience of economic success and social recognition but an experience 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 the cultural formation of economic individualism, difference is the key term of the new type of expressive individualism. For the purpose of identifying oneself as different, however, the economic realm can no longer offer the major model, because this realm requires predictability and consistency of behavior. It is therefore culture which takes the place of the economy as the paradigmatic sphere of self-definition and self-fashioning. In order to be able to take advantage of this rich supply, however, the self has to be flexible and fluid. It must be flexible enough not to remain tied to any single role or identity. Instead, it must be free to use the wide spectrum of cultural options for the purpose of staging alternative possibilities of the self in an eclectic way. While literary

genres like the historical novel, the adventure story, the domestic romance, or the realistic novel introduce the reader to cultural practices of self-restraint and self-regulation, the typical texts of expressive individualism are therefore potentially interminable, the stories they tell remain ambiguous or open-ended, their narrative mode is one of self-irony, self-reflection or self-disclosure, and their explicit or implicit ideal is that of a fluid, protean self which is able to recreate and refashion itself in response to new needs and possibilities. This, in fact, explains two of the most striking features of the *Connecticut Yankee*: (1) the gradual transformation of the Yankee from reformer to businessman, "boss" of the country, and, finally, to star performer; (2) the general fluidity of the Yankee's self that seems to be able to switch roles at will and almost from one moment to the other.

While in Bellah's analysis, exemplified by a contrast between Franklin and Whitman, economic and expressive individualism stand miles apart, *A Connecticut Yankee* is a book in which they first coexist and then collide: as Henry N. Smith and others have shown, the novel, on the one hand, tells the typical Franklinesque success story of a self-made man who rises from "rags to riches." However, as Chadwick Hansen, Judith Fetterly and others have argued, he is, at the same time, also a supreme performer and entertainer who plays a variety of roles, ranging from Western hero to master magician, in his search for stardom. During these moments, his initial reform goals are repeatedly subordinated to the search for "powerful effects" that could strengthen his public recognition. This gradual transformation of the businessman and "materialist" into cultural hero is developed further by Dreiser and reaches a new level of aestheticization in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* in which the businessman has become an "unknowable," shadowy figure who invites our imaginary projections not by his exemplary self-discipline but by his outlandish, excessive forms of self-stylization through which "materialism" becomes fetishistic desire. These figures may have based their lives on "illusions," but these illusions, like desire in *Sister Carrie*, have carried them far and have made them imposing figures whose wish to be "grand" has become a legitimate, though tragically "impossible" goal. Still, the courage to "speculate," to invent and refashion oneself, is now presented as source of an individuality that fascinates. In contrast, to be "principled" means to remain in the sorry mass of losers.

In the post-Civil War political novels of the gentry, materialism is discussed from the outside, as a loss of principle and proportion. Authors such as Twain, Dreiser, and Fitzgerald approach materialism "from within," that is, not only as moral temptation but as an inevitable, if not indispensable,

element of the individual's search for self-enhancement and self-empowerment. As a result, the issue of materialism complicates itself, because the successful businessman is only the winner in a race for recognition and self-respect in which everybody is involved. The cultural emergence of expressive individualism puts the moral criticism of materialism into question, because both, although with different means, pursue similar goals of speculation in the service of the self. If "materialism" can no longer be criticized on moral grounds, however, what other grounds remain? The most powerful, it seems, is that of social justice. Clearly, the narrow-minded pursuit of economic interests creates dramatic forms of social inequality. After the realistic transformation of the political novel of the 1870s into a program for unobtrusive cultural guardianship through experience had not stood the test of providing convincing alternatives to a growing tide of materialism, the realistic novel thus radicalized itself in the late 1880s and turned into the social or utopian novel with its program of establishing justice through a radically egalitarian organization of society. Of these novels, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) was by far the most successful and influential, so that it is still praised today for representing a cooperative and decidedly "anti-materialist" social vision most convincingly. In addition, its unwavering criticism of "excessive individualism" seems to preclude all dangers that this reformist vision could be infected, as was Twain's, by the lure of expressive individualism. To be sure, some features of the book, such as its definition of social order through the metaphor of the army or the primarily consumerist activities of the inhabitants of Bellamy's utopia, have recently drawn skeptical comments, but this has hardly led critics to question the book's strictly anti-individualistic message.

It is indeed a fair description of the novel to say that it propagates the need to overcome competitive individualism. And yet, it is interesting to consider for a moment in what way this liberation from competitive individualism is achieved and to what form of existence it leads. The book's "consumerism," I want to claim, is not just a misstep in an otherwise impeccably progressive vision of cooperative equality, but is a consistent and integral part of a perspective that pervades the whole book, including the presentation of its radical economic and social reforms. The utopia Bellamy presents does not simply have unfortunate consumerist episodes but is defined by a consumerist attitude in a much more comprehensive and profound sense. Although, in terms of narrative structure, the novel is one of extreme redundancy and follows a monotonously repeated pattern of explanation by Dr. Leete and a salvo of incredulous questions by Julian

West, it fascinated readers from the start. The reason, I think, lies in the mode of exhibition which the novel pursues, in its proud presentation of incredible wonders that stagger the imagination. Clearly, Dr. Leete is out to convince the new arrival Julian West (as Bellamy is out to convince the reader) by the imaginary power of his examples. In a way, he resembles a magician who pulls one stunning trick after another out of his hat. And as with any magician's trick, Julian often does not know whether he can trust his senses or not. The epochal transformation of the economic system through an evolutionary logic of the system is such a performative trick. Instead of becoming engaged in a mental and emotional struggle for progress, the reader can settle in the "safe" role of a spectator who watches how history unfolds as non-threatening spectacle. Similarly, justice is not the result of any kind of revolutionary struggle, but – as in the mass culture emerging at about the same time – the astounding effect of a well-engineered performance: the light goes out, Julian falls into a hypnotic trance, the drama begins, and justice prevails.

While the success story is one of painful struggle, *Looking Backward* is a story of happy arrival. While the hero of the success story searches for individuality, the inhabitants of Bellamy's utopia are relieved from the strains and anxieties of individual self-assertion. Because they do not have to overcome hardships and are not exposed to unexpected experiences, they can always remain the same. This flight from the conflicts and tensions of individualization finds its strongest expression not in the act of shopping but in regressive spaces such as the "acoustically prepared chamber" or the music room which provide openly what West had to seek behind locked doors in the nineteenth century. Consequently, the substance of his life in utopia bears striking similarities to that of the spectator of the emerging mass media at the turn of the century, with its emphasis on stances of passive surveillance, carefree consumption, and technologically enhanced possibilities of imaginary indulgence. What Bellamy's book promises to do is to establish a model of justice through complete social equality, but what it actually demonstrates are forms of individual existence which find their true happiness in private retreat and imaginary regression: instead of fighting for success, as the economic individualist does, Bellamy's individual can now use a non-threatening, technologically controlled world for imaginary activities of his own. *Looking Backward's* radical solution to the problem of competitive individualism consists, in the final analysis, in the retreat to a spectacle which allows the individual – not so differently from *The Gilded Age* – to enact fantasies of self-empowerment. There is one major difference, however: West's dreams can no longer do him any harm, because, like the

spectator in the movies, he will not have to test them and will not have to pay a price for them. In Bellamy's world, the individual is "safe." It is no longer "selfish," but it does not have to be because it gets its imaginary nourishment from society itself. Banish the greedy pursuit of private wealth and you will have equality; provide imposing spectacles and you will satisfy the imagination.

Like any other concept of cultural analysis, "materialism" is a discursive construct which changes its meaning with each strategic use: from lack of principle and proportion, to tempting speculation, to easy credit, conspicuous consumption and an ensuing economy of desire to, finally, in *Looking Backward*, a denial of imaginary freedom. In this sense, materialism for Bellamy is part of a system of waste, because it can serve the imaginary needs of the individual far less efficiently than Bellamy's utopia. What I have tried to trace in this paper is the gradual appropriation and eventual displacement of materialism (and its cultural base, economic individualism) by a new cultural force and attitude called, here, expressive individualism. *Looking Backward*, to be sure, is by no means a manifesto of expressive individualism, but in its own curious way, it does not oppose this development as much as it furthers some of its tendencies. In this context, it is of interest that places like the acoustically prepared chamber are very private places and that the major social body of the book is a very small, close-knit family. In contrast even to the drawingroom realism of Howells and James in the early 1880s, communicative interaction is extremely limited and reduced in the novel.

The public sphere in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is "a shared public world, wherein contending social groups could negotiate their disagreement" (Pease 13). In the cultural system of economic individualism, people still struggle with each other over values and norms. In contrast, the public sphere in the *Connecticut Yankee* is a playing field for successful impression-management; in the cultural system of expressive individualism, authorization is won by powerful performance and the skillful manipulation of semiotic credit. In *Looking Backward*, in turn, the public sphere – as for example in the opening glance at the new order ("At my feet lay a great city") – is not at all what one would expect from a utopia of cooperative socialism. It manifests itself mainly as an imposing spectacle; consequently, people do not have to argue or communicate with each other but have only to inspect and enjoy the sights and sounds of the new world. Since this spectacle serves as one of the authorizations of the system as a whole, it has to convince by its efficiency, cleanliness and lack of waste. But exactly because there is no waste, this spectacle reconstitutes the individual as mere

spectator. This spectator is far from being a "materialist" in the old selfish or speculative sense of the word, but he has his own "selfish" relation to the world which provides him with a refuge in which to indulge in his own daydreams. As a cultural habit, however, "spectorial consumption" is not much better for democracy than speculation as a mode of imaginary self-aggrandizement. In the final analysis, both are different forms of imaginary self-empowerment and the discussion of materialism in American life has suffered from the fact that the mutual reinforcement of the two habits has been largely ignored.

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