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The Practice and Promotion of American Literary Realism
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Realist fiction is so familiar that it has been naturalized for many readers. We enter into it easily and willingly. Indeed, one of the signs that a work of fiction is realist is that we can ignore its technical crafting and become absorbed in the story. In the service of this absorption, the narrator of a realist work is generally either a plausible character or an unobtrusive stage manager; its symbolism is artfully worked into the fabric of its plot; and its characters give the impression of having minds of their own. A realist novel presents a social world that we can recognize (even if it isn't precisely our own), peopled by characters with whom we can identify (even though they give the impression of being unique), and, perhaps most importantly, the characters' thoughts and actions seem worthy of our attention. We do not mistake a realist novel for a work of history or journalism or sociology, but the very name "realism" makes a claim about the potential for fiction to capture something real about social life and perhaps even about the structure of our inner lives.

The more we take seriously the cultural value and social influence of realism's understanding of what is "real," the more we may be inclined to believe that realism (as a platform for literature and a set of novels) marked and perhaps helped bring about important historical transformations in how certain readers understood themselves and their worlds. Whereas American realism has often been treated as exclusively a development within American literary history (thereby reinforcing the tendency for American studies to consider the United States "exceptional" in relation to the rest of the world), this account will position American literary realism as an important episode within a larger history of the Anglophone novel. The development of the novel, in turn, was intertwined historically with a transnational set of historical changes known as modernity: changes by which people reorganized their lives around capitalism, democracy, and secular individualism rather than monarchy and feudalism. In their new roles as modern individuals, people have faced many challenging and contradictory experiences, including new forms of isolation and crowding, scarcity and consumeristic longing, responsibility and powerlessness.

These experiences have been registered and to some extent even shaped *as* experiences by the promoters and practitioners of literary realism.

The Onset of Realism

The earliest known usage of the word "realism" to designate a new kind of fiction occurred in 1853, in Britain's *Westminster Review* (Becker 1963: 7). However, the term "realism" provides only one index of the onset of literary realism in Europe and North America. For example, the strategy of contrasting a particular novel's verisimilitude with the artifice and conventionality of other kinds of fiction, dating back at least as far as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), signals a tendency toward realism, even though it is a strategy that can pave the way for a variety of fictional practices. Ian Watt argued in 1957 that realism had implicitly been the fundamental tendency of the English novel since the eighteenth century. He identified a beginning for novelistic realism in eighteenth-century works that depicted psychologically complex individual characters in plausible social worlds. In Watt's view, Henry Fielding's novels depicting characters who traveled through geographic and social expanses (*Tom Jones*, 1749) and Samuel Richardson's novels exploring the depths of individual experience and reflection (*Pamela*, 1740–1; *Clarissa*, 1747–8) were examples of two complementary tendencies in the novel, merged most successfully in the works of Jane Austen (Watt 1957: 297). Austen's novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), featured complex, morally self-conscious characters who had to navigate densely meaningful familial and social relationships. Like Watt, most critics have drawn their models of fully developed realism from nineteenth-century European fiction. In addition to Austen's novels, mid- to late-century French and English novels – by Honoré de Balzac, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Stendhal, the Goncourt brothers, and Anthony Trollope – provide the bulk of examples for Anglophone critics, although realist works from many other European literatures also circulated in Great Britain and the United States.

Because many of the novelistic techniques associated with realism predate realism's official recognition and can be found across a range of fictional works, it is impossible to identify a date – or even a decade – when realism was invented. Nevertheless, the mid-nineteenth century was the era when realism began to be noticed and promoted (or discouraged) as not only a specific way of writing fiction but also a specific understanding of fiction's social role and responsibilities. In the United States, realist fiction was most commonly defined in contrast with an earlier type of novel, the romance, which was loosely associated with the Romantic literary movement; William Dean Howells, one of the foremost promoters and practitioners of American realism, significantly distanced realism from "the mania of romanticism" which he saw afflicting even Eliot and Balzac (Howells 1967: 74). But Romanticism, which for Anglophone readers was primarily a British invention, had actually laid groundwork for literary realism. For example, William Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*

(1800) anticipated – or inspired – realist ambitions, insofar as the object of that volume (co-authored by Samuel Taylor Coleridge) was "to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men . . . " (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1967: 321). Realist fiction, too, would specialize in commonplace scenarios and characters and idiomatic speech.

The rest of Wordsworth's sentence marks an important difference between Romanticism and realism, though. He reports that he and Coleridge wished "at the same time, to throw over [these "incidents and situations from common life"] . . . a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1967: 321). Although American realists often insisted that their activity was artistic, not journalistic, because it relied on subtle forms of selection and transformation, public discussions of realism endowed it with the social mission of capturing something about Americans' shared reality. As this mission was construed, it was not compatible with the idea of imaginative coloring, nor with a penchant for the "unusual": the common, the typical, the everyday, and the ordinary were all bywords of realism. In this way, the writers and critics who promoted realism claimed an authority very close to that of empirical science, which was premised on the reproducibility – or typicality? – of experimental results. The artistic operations involved in realism were supposed to be harnessed to a project of representation, not fabrication. Accordingly, early nineteenth-century romance writers were deprecated by realists either for distorting reality (for which Mark Twain criticized both James Fenimore Cooper, in "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences" [1895], and Sir Walter Scott, in *Life on the Mississippi* [1883]), or for failing to try to capture it (in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was admired but often relegated to quaint social irrelevance [Brodhead 1986: 82] – unless he was reclassified as a realist [Howells 1967: 115]). In Scott's case, Twain faulted mainly the white American Southerners who willfully misperceived their own reality through Scott's historical fiction – a reminder that the promoters of realism were prescriptive about fiction because they believed that fiction-reading could have important social and political consequences (Brodhead 1986: 101).

It would have surprised realism's nineteenth-century supporters to learn that some twentieth-century critics came to admire romances precisely because they explored extraordinary scenarios and somewhat abstract philosophical issues. Indeed, in 1957 Richard Chase inaugurated a critical tradition that understood romances to comprise the main tradition of American literature, distinct from the realist tradition dominating British literature. Chase characterized romances as works in which abstract or symbolic modes of representation predominated. Nineteenth-century promoters of realism wanted literature to capture the possibilities and challenges of social integration; twentieth-century critics who followed Chase valued romances for highlighting the failures and costs of social integration. In the twentieth century, Hester Prynne's and Captain Ahab's metaphysical speculations (in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* [1850] and Melville's *Moby-Dick* [1851]), and the lavish symbolic possibilities of

Hester's embroidered "A" and Ahab's white whale and doubloon, came to seem like the very stuff of literature. The power of either Hester or Ahab to remake self or reality, far from being irrelevant and fantastic, could be linked to the power of the imagination or of language itself to make and unmake worlds. In keeping with the mid-twentieth century's new zeal for romance, any canonical works previously associated with realism came to be credited with incorporating certain qualities of romance. For example, Chase argued that James's Isabel Archer, the protagonist of *The Portrait of a Lady*, "sees things as a romancer does" (1957: 119), thereby counterpointing the more realist perspective of the narrator, and he proposed that Mark Twain's "real fictional province is . . . the borderland between novel and romance" (1957: 156).

Chase was only one of many critics to point out that realism and romance need not be incompatible. Moreover, outcroppings of not only romance but also sentimentalism, sensationalism, regionalism, naturalism, and non-literary genres such as ethnography run through works that have been associated with realism. Realism does not today seem like an exclusive generic label, and literary genres themselves seem less like blueprints for authors to follow than traces of how texts were positioned among an array of literary and extra-literary possibilities for narrative. Within the politics of literary history, however, it is important to recognize that realism was first promoted at the expense of romance as a more modern and more properly American literary form. As early as the 1850s, it is possible to trace the effects of this promotion on both authors and readers. For instance, each of Nathaniel Hawthorne's four major novels is prefaced with some discussion of the author's half-apologetic choice to pursue dreamy, moonlit romance. In his "Preface" to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) he claims that romance offers "a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material," in contrast to the Novel, which aims "at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience" (Hawthorne 1983: 351). An American reviewer writing in *Putnam's New Monthly Magazine* in 1857 epitomized the reaction against romance that prompted Hawthorne's defensiveness:

> I have passed the period of romance. Only children wait for adventures. I do not look for sudden wealth or poverty. I do not expect to fall in love with a princess, a beggar, or an opera-dancer. I can earn my bread, and am not exposed to great misery in any turn of the wheel of fortune. Is life, then, for me no longer worth living? . . . The right novel . . . will show the manhood, not the childhood, of the race. It will not need to elaborate a black background of misfortune to serve as a foil for doubtful happiness, but will exhibit an activity so splendid that it must shine in relief upon the dingy gray of ordinary circumstances, duties, and relations. (Anon. 1857: 96)

The version of romance presented here does not sound much like Hawthorne's, Scott's, or Cooper's novels, but the polemic exemplifies several of the ways in which realism came to be differentiated from romance. Indeed, the review is an early, especially clear example of the process by which respected US magazines helped to

cultivate realist expectations in readers (Glazener 1997: 23–50). Romance is here linked to the old world and to old-fashioned or obsolete materials (princesses and beggars, presented as material for love plots). The presence of the opera-dancer associates romance with popular entertainments (opera not having yet been monopolized by elite urbanites, as Lawrence Levine has explained) and with the dime novels or story papers that might feature such a character. In short, the romance is associated with the immature, escapist pleasures of people who do not have serious middle-class responsibilities. The alternative to romance seems to be fiction that would help readers who are "not exposed to any great misery in any turn of the wheel of fortune" – readers who are at least comfortable and perhaps quite privileged – to see the importance and value of their daily routines and decisions.

The general mission of nineteenth-century realism was, then, to represent faithfully contemporary life and ordinary people (with "ordinary" taken to designate those who are neither very wealthy nor very poor); to depict characters with well-developed inner lives and situate them in thickly described social environments; and to simulate the language and interweavings of circumstance in the social worlds presented, avoiding conventionalized language and plot developments (or at least the conventions associated with the romance and other prior literary forms). Looking back at works associated with realism, we can connect this mission to some specific writerly practices, even though none of these practices is exclusive to realism. For explanatory convenience, I will combine nineteenth-century ideas about realism – found in prefaces, book reviews, and other essays – with the perceptions of some later literary critics. By "realism" I refer to the platform of the nineteenth-century literary movement that promoted realist fiction; by "realist fiction" I mean fictional works that have been associated with realism, even though I am suggesting that all fictional works cross genres.

Realist Fictional Practice

Realism has often been characterized by its avoidance of allegory and other forms of conspicuous symbolism, especially in contrast to the romance. (See e.g. Howells 1967: 23.) In keeping with the understanding that genres interweave and blend together in practice, this distinction is not airtight: most fiction offers symbolic possibilities, of course, and the symbols in both *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick* could be read as furthering the realist project of characterization as well as embodying epistemological and semiotic problems. Hester's "A" accumulates meanings for the Puritans who see it, over time and in particular circumstances; Ahab's doubloon takes on a special meaning for several characters who mull over what it might bring to them, if they were lucky enough to win it by spotting Moby-Dick first. However, both Ahab and Hester question divine laws and prerogatives, and the textual signals that link them as metaphysical rebels to the charismatic Lucifer of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) are very different from the sociological codings that distinguish realist characters.

Symbols are more self-effacing in realist works, which offer discerning readers the opportunity to pick out the symbolic potentials of details that are seamlessly incorporated into a believable fictional fabric. By way of contrast, consider a much earlier text: it is impossible to read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, 1684) without recognizing that the Bible as a text and Christianity as a moral and metaphysical scheme are lovingly invoked and elaborated through the story of Christian's journey to the Celestial City. Bunyan's interrelated symbolic characters and landscapes constitute an allegory that operated – probably in Bunyan's time, perhaps in later times for certain communities of Christian readers – as a somewhat public understanding of a specific religion's model of faith. The fact that Bunyan's text was read by individuals, in other words, was either incidental to its communal purpose or slightly at odds with it. Conversely, a number of critics have suggested that the fact that realist novels are read by individuals is fundamental to their aesthetics. A reader's private pleasure of knowing that she might easily have missed a pattern of symbolism or a symbolic doubling or contrasting of characters – but that she didn't – makes a realist reader a connoisseur, manifesting her individual education or discernment rather than her participation in an interpretive community. Once discerned, even a biblical allusion functions very differently in a realist text from how it functions in Bunyan's work, because the cultural authority of the Bible is diminished in realism's secular textual milieu, regardless of an author's or reader's religious convictions. A devout reader of Bunyan may conclude that the Celestial City stands for heaven, in the sense that the only representational function of the Celestial City is to invoke the idea of heaven and give it a concrete form. However, the garden in which Isabel Archer spends happy time with Ralph Touchett and his father in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) may evoke Eden but is not devoted solely to that reference.

It is important to recognize that realist fiction does not exclude symbolism: realism reframes symbolism for the purposes of a secular, privatized readership. The discreet symbolism of realist fiction is one indication that realism is suspended between two kinds of authority: first, literary authority based on the text's appropriate citation and use of previous texts and literary traditions, and second, social authority based on the text's reliability as an account of contemporary life. The use of allusive symbolism is a bid for literary authority, whereas, as Roland Barthes has noted, the comparative resistance of certain realist details to familiar forms of thematic or symbolic interpretation creates the impression of empirical truth, validating the text's claim to represent a social reality (Barthes 1986). Literary authority indirectly carries social authority, but literary authority usually presumes a less direct routing of literature to society: not via representation of a social world or injunctions inculcating certain forms of behavior, but via the development of certain internal capacities of readers (imagination, judgment, and intellect, for example).

Literary historians have noted that in both Great Britain and the United States, by slightly different means, literature came to be sharply distanced from politics during the nineteenth century (Armstrong 1987; Brodhead 1986; Arac 1986, 1993). In contrast to literary works of previous centuries that were offered to a wealthy patron or

ruler and shaped, for better and worse, by their authors' awareness of these recipients' political roles and policies, from the eighteenth century on literary works were produced for the public: in other words, for the markets constituted by those who would pay for works of literature as consumer goods. The British domestic novel evolved, famously, in tandem with conduct books aimed at middle-class citizens who were developing tastes and forms of authority very different from those of the aristocracy. Nancy Armstrong has detailed the process by which mainstream British novels came to focus on the psychological development and well-being of individuals rather than the political well-being of social groups, partly as a result of the powerful Enlightenment belief that the most valuable kind of knowledge would have "no particular political location" (1987: 35). The newly powerful position of the middle class underlay this belief, since only those who are seldom publicly challenged have the privilege of believing that their point of view can serve as the general reality. American fiction of the early nineteenth century was more openly political than the fiction Armstrong examines, but Jonathan Arac has suggested that from the 1850s, in the face of the national crisis presented by slavery, American literature, too, began to be valued for transcending political controversies rather than for entering into them (Arac 1986).

Viewed from this perspective, there was a tension between realism's simultaneous efforts to secure literary and social authority. On the one hand, realism's mission of informing middle-class readers about important issues and marginal populations, the source of its social authority, sent it careening into political minefields. On the other hand, realist fiction's development as a specifically literary form was incompatible with its endorsing any particular political position or analysis. The result was that realist novels took as their terrain the expanding domain of "society": a dimension of collective life separate from public political life, characterized instead by ongoing negotiation over behavioral norms (Arendt 1958: 38–49). Individual characters in realist novels might hold definite political views, but because reality itself did not conform to any system or program, realism ought not to rely on any either.

The height of nineteenth-century realism's claims to both social and literary authority might well have been reached in 1885, when the tony *Century Magazine* published excerpts from Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at the same time as it was serializing Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and James's *The Bostonians* (Arac 1997: 137). Howells, who was influential as editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and as a literary reviewer and columnist for other prominent American magazines, was the foremost exponent of American realism, and he had explicitly endorsed Twain and James as model practitioners of realism. Therefore, the *Century* in 1885 brought together three authors whose works effectively defined the public's understanding of American realism at the time. All three novels took up easily identifiable social controversies. Twain's novel displaced contemporary racial tensions onto an antebellum plot in which white Huck Finn, son of the town drunk, befriends Jim, an escaped slave. Howells's novel, in which a provincial entrepreneur's financial success is ringed with thorny moral problems, turned its attention to business ethics and to the gap between

true justice and the legal code. And *The Bostonians* rolled together spiritualism, women's rights, and Northern ambivalence about the post-Reconstruction South into a tense love triangle, one element of which was an erotically charged commitment between two women. Reading any of these novels, an American of 1885 might well have felt she had sampled a contemporary milieu in which certain divisive issues arose and operated. However, true to realism's charge, none of the three novels featured in the *Century* in 1885 took a clear political stand. Twain's novel might appear to espouse a reform, since Huck, the narrator, decides to aid and protect an escaped slave. As Jonathan Arac has pointed out, though, *Huckleberry Finn* is an antislavery novel written twenty years after slavery was abolished (Arac 1997). As a novel that might be read as commenting on the social integration or political inclusion of African Americans in 1885, *Huckleberry Finn* is much more slippery to interpret.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of realism is its devotion to complex – or "round" – characterization, which encourages readers to identify with characters and organize their interpretations around the moral and psychological qualities of significant individuals in the narrative. The novelistic emphasis on character has often been connected with the emergence of the peculiarly modern idea and experience of individualism. In historical scholarship, "modernity" designates the countless social and cultural transformations involved in the historical movement from primarily feudal economies, status-based societies, and centralized religious authorities – all characteristic of the Middle Ages – to primarily capitalist economies, class-based societies, the political authority of public opinion, and the dominance of secular, scientific knowledge. These transformations were gradually and unevenly underway during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in both western Europe and the United States.

The crucial integer of modernity is the modern individual, characterized by limitless potential (rather than a fixed place in society), endowed with independent economic interests, and committed to emancipating herself and others from whatever would prevent them from exercising their human rights and furthering their interests. Modern individuals tend to seek self-knowledge in the service of self-transformation, be the transformation moral improvement, social climbing, or the acquisition of more flattering consumer goods. And in the service of self-knowledge and self-transformation, the modern individual is willing to take on certain forms of self-monitoring and self-discipline that her society recommends, many of them oriented around the paradoxical task of determining whether she is, though different from anyone else who ever lived, "normal."

Realist characterization advanced both modern individualism and the equally modern project of producing knowledge about various demographic groupings. As individuals, leading characters in realist fiction tended to be capable of reflecting on their own private motives, interests, and moral capacities. They obligingly monitored (and sometimes disciplined) the inner lives that distinguished them as modern individuals. Deidre Lynch has suggested that nineteenth-century British fiction's attention to characterization resulted as much from readers' having been taught a

new way to respond to literary characters as from writers' having found new ways to write them (1998: 126). "An ordinary-looking heroine, possessing an extraordinary, indescribable soul," presided over nineteenth-century British fiction, Lynch explains, and readers who were taught to value her over heroines devoted to external display were by the same process led to develop and value their own inwardness (p. 129). Huck Finn, Silas Lapham, and Verena Tarrant (a leading character in *The Bostonians*) do not much resemble Charlotte Brontë's title character Jane Eyre (1847), one of Lynch's key examples, but they all secure our interest by proving to be inwardly more complex than a lesser reader might expect. This development of literature around an aesthetic of seemingly innate personal value resulted in part, Lynch suggests, from writers' and readers' anxieties about the penetration of market relations and market-driven standards of value into social and cultural life (p. 128).

Moreover, realist characterization also produced social knowledge insofar as characters were connected to others as "types," even though writers such as Howells were careful to reject the most extreme forms of stereotyping (Howells 1967: 11). The sense of typicality – a floating cloud of social generalization in many realist works – was indispensable to the notion that realism presented plausible characters in plausible scenarios. "Mrs. March was one of those wives who exact a more rigid adherence to their ideals from their husbands than from themselves," remarks Howells's narrator in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and a reader's understanding that this generalization is intended humorously doesn't keep it from evoking a world of knowable social types and familiar scenarios. As types, fictional characters embodied truths about certain groups of people, but these collective dimensions of characterization were not supposed to reinforce any recognizably political analysis of society. The perfect realist character, in other words, would be socially legible without tendentiously representing the interests of any politically significant social group. Reform novels, however admirable their political commitments, were commonly judged to be less literary than more purely realist novels because they sacrificed more enduring – therefore more literary – truths in order to expose and combat contemporary injustices.

Mediating between the psychology of individual characters and the fictional presentation of a social reality that exceeds them is free indirect discourse, a narrative technique widely used in novels but specially relevant to realism. Free indirect discourse results from the use of third-person narration that moves fluidly between directly representing characters' thoughts or words and commenting on them, perhaps through an interpretive summary. Between the quotation of a character's words or thoughts and the description of them by an observing narrator, free indirect discourse blurs the character's perspective and the narrator's (Bal 1997: 50). As an example of free indirect discourse at work in realism, consider Howells's early description of Bartley Hubbard in *A Modern Instance* (1882), whose title proclaims a realist commitment to probing contemporary social issues. A remarkably complex mode of narration is used to announce that Bartley, the editor of a newspaper in the Midwestern town of Equity,

managed the office very economically, and by having the work done by girl-apprentices, with the help of one boy, he made it self-supporting. He modeled the newspaper upon the modern conception, through which the country press must cease to have any influence in public affairs, and each paper become little more than an open letter of neighborhood gossip. But while he filled his sheet with minute chronicles of the goings and comings of unimportant persons, and with all attainable particulars of the ordinary life of the different localities, he continued to make spicy hits at the enemies of Equity in the late struggle, and kept the public spirit of the town alive. (Howells 1984: 29)

In keeping with the difficulty of locating free indirect discourse in either narrator or character, it is virtually impossible to be sure whether the passage is loyally recounting Bartley's self-understanding, passing on a third-person view of Bartley that might surprise him, or moving between the two positions. A reader may have an opinion about whether Bartley, as presented in the novel as a whole, was capable of recognizing his own share in an innovation that resulted in watering down journal-ism, or about whether the narrator, as presented in the novel as a whole, was more likely to have observed this phenomenon independently. Nevertheless, the narrative instability of free indirect narration makes the narrator seem more authoritative – harder to locate and second-guess – and makes the character seem more complex and deep. Indeed, in the service of delineating a character capable of the development that is a hallmark of realism, free indirect discourse makes it hard to tell, at any given textual moment, what exactly the character understands and intends. The result is a remarkable linguistic structure, intricately weighted and balanced so that it permits movement but no stable resting-place.

Realist fiction is often pervaded by the sense that reality is messy, and its narrative authority depends on its ability to tackle this messiness. Michael Davitt Bell has argued that Howells and some later male realists – most notably, Ernest Heming-way – understood the capacity to tolerate and represent this messiness as a particularly masculine feat (1993: 37). Phillip Barrish further characterizes Bell's "realist mascu-linity" as requiring a "repeated turn towards, even taste for, insoluble social and personal difficulties" (2001: 47). Amy Kaplan has suggested that realist narratives often register indirectly the presence of the populations and problems that threaten their coherence (1988: 11–12); indeed, her analysis serves as a useful reminder that realism's allegiance to certain forms of social dominance was never completely stable. But Bell and Barrish accurately target the implicit sexism of the critical rhetoric that asserted realism's masculine control of unruly materials, rhetoric that often disparaged realism's competitors as feminine. Two of these competitors were sentimental fiction and reform novels, overlapping fictional forms which persistently took up "social and personal difficulties" but did not consider them insoluble. The foremost American example of their combination is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which yoked together a Christian version of anti-slavery activism with politically double-edged support of African Americans' emigration to Liberia. As both Jane Tompkins and Kenneth W. Warren have emphasized, many of the sentimental novels

that were derided by realists for their simplified characters and implausible plots nonetheless envisioned avenues of political action and concrete possibilities for historical change much bolder than anything to emerge from a mainstream realist novel (Tompkins 1985: 133; Warren 1993: 90).

Because novels end, but reality goes on forever, endings pose special compositional challenges in novels aspiring to realism (Kaplan 1988: 5). Many of the canonical novels associated with realism resist marriage plots or render them troubling, in spite of the fact that domestic fiction was an important crucible in which many realist techniques were fused – not only in Austen's novels, but in American works such as Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* (1839), Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855), and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) (Warren 2000). A striking example of a marriage plot's undermining is the last sentence of Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886), whose previously independent Northern heroine has been "wrenched . . . away" from a speaking engagement by her Southern lover's "muscular force" (p. 1218). The novel's ominous and unsettling concluding sentence is: "It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these [tears] were not the last she was destined to shed" (p. 1218).

Readers are forcibly reminded at the end of many realist works that the story that has engaged them is a simulation, often by tactics like James's that invoke but withhold a conventional form of closure. For example, both Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) end with the deaths of their central characters; but the deaths do not resolve the questions the novels have set in motion. In both cases, the deaths are suspended among several interpretive possibilities: a sentimental beatification of those who die innocent; a reformist indictment of any social world in which admirable characters cannot find a place; a social Darwinist account of evolutionary dead ends; or a tragic commemoration of noble persons brought down by the side-effects of their admirable ambitions. To pick out any one of these readings and privilege it would be to miss the ways in which these generic alternatives are cross-cut to produce the effect of realism. In this way, an overloading of interpretive possibilities can produce the effect of messy reality. In both Wharton's and Chopin's novels, as in *The Bostonians*, we are left with a profound sense of the eventfulness of human action, which might underline the significance of human agency. However, the complexity of the scenarios – in which choice is indistinguishable from accident and individual actions are amplified or neutralized unpredictably by circumstance – also points to the inadequacy of conventional understandings of individualized agency and accountability, both at the turn of the twentieth century and now.

Challenges to Realism

Widening the gap between individual actions and experiences and their social causes and consequences, naturalist fiction emerges at the turn of the century as both a

development of realism and a dissenting literary movement. Indeed, perhaps because of the naturalists' tendency to privilege events that are too vast to be attributed to the operations of any individual, Frank Norris associated naturalism with a resurgence of the romance (Norris 1967). In the work of Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, naturalism focused on characters subject to precisely the sudden failures (as well as occasional successes) that the *Putnam's* reviewer had dismissed: California farmers are ruined in a battle against the railroad's high transportation costs in Norris's *The Octopus* (1901); the protagonist of Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) is forced to become a prostitute; and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) juxtaposes the fall of a Chicago businessman with the rise of a young actress. Further diminishing the scope of human action, naturalist works tend to present economic and biological processes as forces completely independent of human control. As June Howard has insightfully formulated, naturalist novels often distinguish the characters capable of social knowledge quite starkly from the characters capable of social action, with the result that naturalist fiction forecloses the optimistic possibility that fiction will equip its readers to participate more intelligently in social life (1985: 104–1).

Naturalism paved the way for the depiction of characters who did not understand themselves or their worlds, and frequently these were characters who were excluded from class privilege and its cultural competencies. Following the lead of Émile Zola, whose version of French realism made room for oppressed and marginal characters and catastrophic experience, Frank Norris lashed out at the gentility of nineteenth-century realism, especially as it was promoted and practiced by Howells:

> Romance, I take it, is the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life. Realism is the kind of fiction that confines itself to the type of normal life. . . . Realism . . . need not be in the remotest sense or degree offensive, but on the other hand respectable as a church and proper as a deacon – as, for instance, the novels of Mr. Howells. (Norris 1967: 280)

For reasons like Norris's, some readers would date the emergence of a more genuine literary realism from the era of this reaction against Howells: from *Sister Carrie* or *Maggie*. Although naturalism's penchant for invoking untamable social and economic forces made it peculiarly apolitical in spite of its sympathies with the have-nots, its broader social repertoire laid groundwork for the politically attuned realism of John Dos Passos's USA Trilogy (1930, 1932, 1936) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). And great as the distance might seem to be between Dreiser's world of tacky middling people and Edith Wharton's novels about the urban American upper crust, Wharton's work often conveys a naturalist sense that individuals are circumscribed by plots far too vast for them to resist effectively. Wharton's interest in anthropology led her to cast these plots as dense and intricate cultural webs rather than transhistorical forces, leaving room for human activity to be not utterly futile, merely incalculably slight in its effects.

Naturalist fiction often gives the impression that the social world – and characters' self-experience – is merely an illusion produced by forces that are not themselves social. A superb example of this decentering of social explanation is the narrator's sublime pronouncement, at the end of *The Octopus*, that the wheat itself has a destiny in relation to which farmers are incidental:

> *But the* WHEAT *remained*. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves. Through the welter of blood at the irrigation ditch, through the sham charity and shallow philanthropy of famine relief committees, the great harvest of Los Muertos rolled like a flood from the Sierras to the Himalayas to feed thousands of starving scarecrows on the barren plains of India. (Norris 1987: 651)

Such possibilities flicker in earlier more-or-less realist works, just as the possible madness of the governess-narrator flickers in James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and just as a divine plan which will somehow improve the lot of millworkers flickers in the "promise of the dawn" at the end of Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861). The possibility that reasonable-sounding social descriptions and explanations might not be trustworthy or adequate is often raised in mainstream realist works, but not with the kind of ringing confidence emitted in *The Octopus*.

Another important offshoot of realism in the late nineteenth century was regionalist or local color fiction. To the extent that it was narrowly devoted to the social mission of representing particular subcultures of the United States, its literary authority was somewhat reduced. It thrived in literary magazines, though, perhaps because it served as an upscale version of the human interest story. Works such as Charles Egbert Craddock's *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1885) and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) examined the linguistic, geographic, and social distinctiveness of the residents of a particular region. Most regionalist narrative was driven by the need to catalogue a set of typical events and rituals; moreover, although some regionalist characters were quite memorable, they did not receive the heavily individualizing characterization common in realist fiction about white urbanites (sometimes depicted traveling or living abroad) and the white, mainly middle-class inhabitants of Midwestern towns. As Stephanie Foote has pointed out, "[T]he representation of regional characters allows us to look at how genres negotiated which persons would be granted character, personhood, status, and individuality" (2001: 36). In spite of the fact that the same word might be pronounced quite differently by a white native of Boston and a white native of Dayton, only rural characters, Southerners, immigrants, and African Americans were likely to have their speech rendered as dialect (marked especially by the nonstandard spelling of individual words). The imaginative centrality of cities in modernity and the social centrality of white Northern urbanites and townspeople are joined in the logic by which realism

was distinguished from regionalism, and characters who spoke standard English were differentiated from characters whose speech had to be rendered as dialect.

Realism in Recent Literary History

It can be difficult to bear in mind both the generative potential of a genre and its constraints, especially since we late moderns are still struggling to imagine how frameworks such as literary genres might condition and discipline our creative actions without effacing them altogether. American literary realism promised authors a liberation from artifice and convention and the chance to present their personal visions of the life they saw around them and experienced within themselves. No doubt this promise was taken up gladly by many writers. It is equally true that realism bounded and constrained what authors could write about and how, and realism may even have shaped how writers and readers experienced the outside world and their inner lives.

To demystify realism is not to debunk it, but to take seriously its specific functioning in the social world in which it operated. The fact that regionalist writers were often not considered fully realist tells us something about the exclusivity of realism, even though we might not object that Thomas Nelson Page's nostalgic writings about the old plantation days were not as influential as more securely realist fiction. Another important index of realism's specificity was its relative inhospitality to African American writers. Charles Waddell Chesnutt, an African American fiction writer, complained revealingly in 1890 about criticisms he had received from Richard Watson Gilder, the editor of the *Century* who had published novels by Howells, James, and Twain concurrently in 1885:

> Mr. Gilder finds that I either lack humor or that my characters have a "brutality, a lack of mellowness, lack of spontaneous imaginative life, lack of outlook that makes them uninteresting." I fear, alas, that those are exactly the things that might have been expected to characterize people of that kind, the only qualities which the government and society had for 300 years labored faithfully, zealously, and successfully to produce, the only qualities which would have rendered their life at all endurable in the 19th century. I suppose I shall have to drop the attempt at realism and try to make them like other folks. (Farnsworth 1979: v)

Chesnutt's sardonic letter effectively claims that in pursuing genuine "realism" – truthful representation of African Americans in the wake of slavery and the throes of Jim Crow – he has run afoul of Gilder's notion of realistic characterization, which presumably worked better for the more privileged characters that realism made standard. Pauline E. Hopkins's preface to *Contending Forces* (1900), which repeatedly calls her novel a "romance" in spite of her use of the realist formulation that it is a "simple, homely tale, unassumingly told," might be another index of the ways in

which realism offered African American writers a form of authority, but at a cost (Hopkins 1988: 13).

When Lionel Trilling railed in 1940 against the literary overvaluation of Theodore Dreiser's work, not because it was worthless but because "Dreiser's literary faults" were taken automatically to be "social and political virtues" (1950: 12), marking Dreiser's authenticity as a literary outsider, he identified a shift in the early twentieth-century construction of literary authority that opened fiction to new populations and their political projects. Many works of both modernism and postmodernism, the most prominent movements in twentieth-century literary fiction, have tried to demystify or unravel the kind of realism promoted in the late nineteenth century – signifying that literature is still bound up with realism, but not with its loyal practice. From the mid-twentieth century on, realism has thrived conspicuously (though by no means exclusively) as a commercial form, and realist works have not usually been granted the highest forms of literary authority.

Very likely Chesnutt's career was hindered by the fact that his reputation had been formed during the era of literary realism's dominance. Chesnutt himself may have identified the public value of his work with its legibility and acceptability to the realist literary establishment. Howells had praised Chesnutt's early, more convention-ally regionalist work, affirming that in literature "there is happily no color line" (Farnsworth 1979: vii), but he was clearly disappointed by Chesnutt's ambitious novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), which depicted a white-instigated race riot. Calling the book "bitter," Howells argued that "There is no reason in history why it should not be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it was not so bitter" (Farnsworth 1979: xv). Howells was sympathetic to Chesnutt, yet his stance implied that realist fiction precluded not only strong political convictions but also the exploration of certain politically charged realities. Chesnutt gave up writing fiction not long after *Marrow*'s publication, and when he claimed, in 1928, that his books had been written "a generation too soon," he gestured indirectly toward the possibility that African American writers who entered literature under later literary dispensations found greater opportunities (Farnsworth 1979: xvi). It is probably significant in this regard that the first more-or-less realist novel making use of an African American narrator and therefore inviting identification with a complex African American subjectivity was not written until 1912: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (Boeckmann 2000: 175).

The academic canon of late nineteenth-century novels developed first as a canon of realism, even though these works were later reinterpreted through the lens of romance (and in some cases then repositioned in relation to new understandings of realism). A wave of late twentieth-century scholars who wished to open literary history and criticism to works that were never canonized, or that were fleetingly canonized, therefore brought to light a number of literary works that made use of realist subject matters, techniques, and forms of authority. Instead of letting Howells, James, and Twain monopolize realism – and, indeed, monopolize literary study after literary study that generalized grandiosely about the American novel, usually relying on a

canon of realism far more restrictive than Howells's – critics of the 1970s and after made the case that Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* might well count as the first American example of realism, or that Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow?*, Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*, and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (which I cite, following Joyce W. Warren, as examples of domestic novels that deployed realist techniques) might be even earlier realist novels. As these examples suggest, many critics have found it important to acknowledge that women writers and African American writers of either sex offered their own treatments of the Woman Question and the Negro Question (as the political and social problems associated with gender and race were named in the nineteenth century). Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1877), which detailed the obstacles encountered by a woman artist, ought not to take second place in authority and interest to James's account of female ambitions in *The Bostonians*, after all, nor should Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) be missed as a novel of passing at least as intelligent and valuable as Howells's *An Imperative Duty* (1891).

If realism is not understood as a genre or literary movement that any work could be securely "inside," though, or as a reliable index of current value, then there is no need to identify a text as realist in order to argue that it is worth reading and studying. Indeed, sentimental fiction, protest fiction, utopian fiction, and other significant nineteenth-century genres deserve study as much as realism does – if not more, given the inordinate attention the traditional realist canon has received. It may be more instructive to consider why Rebecca Harding Davis was the object of Henry James's realist boundary-patrolling, in an unsigned review that accused her of senti-mentalism, and to reflect on the interplay between sentimentalism and realism in her work, than to privilege realism in Davis's work (Glazener 1997: 126–7). Similarly, it is important to question why Mark Twain was accorded a privileged relationship to realism in spite of the dense interweaving of melodrama and satire in his novels. In other words, rather than retroactively correcting the inflexibility of literary realism's arbiters, we may learn more from examining and understanding the many historical traces of the variable access and uneven opportunities it presented to authors (Brod-head 1993).

In the broadest of historical frames, as I have suggested, American realism can usefully be understood as playing a part in modernity's restructuring of life around capitalism. Homing in on the ways in which the crises in value precipitated by capitalism were manifested in the late nineteenth-century United States, a number of critics have taken up what Eric Sundquist calls "the romance of money" as an animating preoccupation of much realist fiction (1982: 19). This approach illumin-ates not only the prevalence of economic plots but also a host of ways in which late nineteenth-century Americans' fascination with money entered into fiction and structured literary meaning. Money itself was absorbing: for instance, Walter Benn Michaels has linked the late nineteenth-century debate over whether and how cur-rency represented the nation's stockpile of gold to fiction's concern with the problem of what, if anything, words represent. The longings that realist characters have for

things and for commodified versions of each other also registers the impact of the rapidly escalating commodity capitalism of the later nineteenth century: Henry James's fiction famously relies on economic metaphors to signal complex relationships of power and knowledge among the characters. The economic depressions of the time, along with well-publicized efforts to expand the use and power of corporations, the unexpectedly drastic gap between the poorest and richest Americans that loomed by the end of the century, and the sinister influences of monopolies and oligopolies, all presented new problems – and new ideas – to fiction writers, especially writers with a social mission. In this way the realists, like the critics who have studied them, were participating at once in the contemporary life they saw around them and in global historical transformations they had trouble grasping fully (Peyser 1998).

Modernity's reliance on scientific models of knowledge meant that the development of academic disciplines in the nineteenth century proceeded along strikingly scientific principles. During this period, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and a number of related humanistic disciplines were extricated from each other and installed in separate university departments whose disciplinary authority depended on their political disinterestedness. The joint constructions of society and the individual as objects of study that could be insulated from specifically political processes, actions, and convictions was taking place in tandem in the academic humanities and in realist fiction. Numerous critics have identified links between realist fiction, disciplinary professions, and academic disciplines. One can find striking thematic and linguistic continuities between more-or-less realist texts and anthropology (Elliott 2002), sociology (Mizruchi 1998), history (Hughson 1988; White 1973), law (Dimock 1996; Kearns 1996; Thomas 1997), and medicine (Rothfield 1992). The model of medical authority was especially congenial to many realists (and, indeed, many social scientists), who took up the role of sympathetic diagnosticians and could identify "diseases" of social life and gesture toward the desirability of cure without prescribing any specific course of treatment (Rothfield 1992). A character in *Life in the Iron Mills* who refers to a "world-cancer" (Davis 1985: 49) makes use of this trope. It makes sense that if realism was supposed to provide reliable social knowledge, it would share forms of authority and representational norms with the academic and professional disciplines that were granted authority to anatomize society and its component individuals.

It might seem paradoxical that a grand historical frame such as "modernity" or "capitalism" could lead critics to attend to the micro-level of texts, but the belief that these large formations took on distinctive and surprising local forms has led many critics to value realist texts for their detailed staging and exploration of the small-scale assumptions and transactions that made large-scale world-views and events imaginable. In this regard, it has been possible to learn a great deal from realist fiction about the barely perceptible movements of thought and language that create the preconditions for racial identities, gender identities, and sexualities. Precisely by *not* believing in the seamlessness of realist representation, but by presuming that textual renderings of social identities are riddled with linguistic tensions and

paradoxes, critics have found more-or-less realist novels to be invaluable guides to the ways in which familiar social identities are invented. A case in point would be the burgeoning of criticism around Henry James – the mainstream realist most invested with literary authority rather than social authority – that has discovered traces in his novels of the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality were constructed in the social worlds he traversed (for example, studies by Sara Blair [1996] and Michael Moon [1998]). In the best of these studies, though, neither literature nor society – invisible institutions that were both invented in the nineteenth century and passed down to us – can have the last word about realism. The tension between literary authority and social authority that structures literary realism is part of the modern experience of literature and part of what serious readers need literature to help them understand.

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