

The Masculinization of American Realism

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ABSTRACT

Attempts to define realism by either a specific field of reference or a particular mode of representation obscure the fact that twentieth-century discussions of American realism are not primarily governed by epistemological or aesthetic considerations but by a basic metaphorization: the reconceptualization of realism as strength. This "masculinization" of American realism has a number of significant consequences. It leads to a generic redefinition of realism, it establishes a new vocabulary for valorizing realist texts and, most importantly, it provides the basis for a stereotypical dismissal of nineteenth-century realism as "weak" and genteel. Such an approach may reflect deeper needs: On the one hand, the gradual transformation of literary criticism into a profession created a need to liberate literary activities from the stigma of being female pursuits; on the other hand, in blaming nineteenth-century realists for their failure to enact a left liberal fantasy of resistance and empowerment, critics can find compensation for their continuing marginality in the symbolic construction of strength.

Inevitably, our rapidly changing views of realism as a literary movement must also affect the term "realism" itself. Instead of regarding realism as a mode of writing that is anchored by a stable referent from which it acquires meaning by representational accuracy, we are now more inclined to view the realist text as a rhetorical strategy designed to support a cultural claim for authenticity and authority. If the term realism is a signifier, however, whose meaning varies with a set of changing semantic relations, then a new possibility of discussing the term is opened up, namely, through the different tropes by which people try to capture its meaning. In what is, so far, the most thoughtful response to the poststructuralist challenge to realism, Christopher Prendergast, in his book *The Order of Mimesis*, begins his discussion by pointing out three of the most influential metaphorizations the term realism has undergone: realism as poison, as nausea, and as health. For Plato, there are representations which are poisonous, "such as mimetic representations, for these not only disturb the ideal hierarchy of things, but also, in so far as they are recognisable as 'imitations', they draw attention to the capacity of the human mind for making, inventing, *fabricating* . . . the systems under which men live."¹ For Roland Barthes, Plato's poison has become nausea; for him the mimetic text is sickening and exhibits 'une sorte de vertu vomitive', "not because it troubles an order in which everything is in its proper place, but, on the contrary, because it *confirms* that order."² In contrast, Paul Ricœur, in keeping with critical approaches in which realism's concern with matters of successful growth and integration is emphasized, "promotes

¹ Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 12.

² Prendergast 12.

mimesis as a model of epistemological and psychological health, as a necessary condition of human growth and maturation."³ What I want to do in the following remarks is to sketch out the history and characteristics of yet another trope. It is a trope that has decisively influenced, in fact, almost exclusively dominated the discussion of American realism in the last hundred years or so: the conceptualization of realism as strength.

I want to illustrate what I mean by pointing to an example which first drew my attention to the phenomenon to be discussed here. While writing a history of American realism, I did research on John William De Forest's novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867), which is treated, in an interpretation by my German colleague Jürgen Peper, as a supreme manifestation of an emerging realist epistemology.⁴ In contrast, De Forest's novel has not fared too well in American discussions. There are, however, two notable exceptions: Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore. Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*, and, following the same tradition and clearly influenced by Wilson's lead, Daniel Aaron's book *The Unwritten War. American Writers and the Civil War*.⁵ Aaron's book is of interest here, because it provides a case study for the transformation of the realist novel of the Gilded Age in twentieth-century criticism. Taking De Forest's non-fictional reports on the war, published posthumously as *A Volunteer's Adventures*, as model and pre-text through which *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* is to be read and focusing on those chapters in the text in which De Forest deals with the sordid realities of war at close range, the novel is interpreted primarily through the generic expectations of a war reportage and is thus rescued for a realist tradition defined as a candid look at the tough realities of life. This critical move, typical for a large group of discussions of nineteenth-century American realism, has two basic consequences. It provides a generic redefinition of the realist novel of the Gilded Age which has marked and marred almost all discussions of American realism in the twentieth century until recently; and in doing so, it suggests a specific vocabulary and set of criteria for dealing with realist texts and valorizing them.

Let me begin with the latter. If realism is responsible for telling it like it really is, then the question whether a text can be considered truly realistic or not is no longer a matter of the possibilities and problems of mimesis, but of sufficient good will and courage to grasp the reality lying out there. Consciously or unconsciously, realism is thus primarily defined as a moral problem which, in turn, suggests to look for a certain fortitude and uprightness as a crucial criterion for genuine realism. If reality is equated with the hard facts of life such as war or life in the ghetto, then, what one needs most of all in facing it is strength. (And *vice versa*: If realism is characterized by a tough, hard look at life as it really is, then it has to deal with, in fact, can be measured by the extent to which it deals with sufficiently tough realities.) Very fittingly, the semantic word clusters used to describe realism's achievements reflect this redefinition. While in nineteenth-century discussions the realist novel is habitually tied to mimetic claims so that words like

³ Prendergast 19.

⁴ Jürgen Peper, *Bewußtseinslagen des Erzählens und erzählte Wirklichkeiten* (Leiden: Brill, 1966).

⁵ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford UP, 1962) and Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975).

accurate, life-like, objective, typical, or representative are the crucial terms of praise, the masculine redefinition favors words like tough, hard, and hard-hitting for praising realistic achievements. This brings me to the second consequence, one that has had far-reaching effects: I am referring to the fact of a generic redefinition which is really the phenomenon I want to draw attention to by talking about the masculinization of American realism. To go back to our example: What is striking about Aaron's approach to *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* is the extent to which he misreads the novel in terms of genre. Obviously, this has something to do with an epistemologically naive view, widely typical for the liberalism of the Thirties and after, in which realism is that kind of literature which does away with all literary distortions and reflects reality itself. As a result, it cannot belong to a literary genre, or, to put it differently, the only fitting genre is the hard-hitting report or reportage which tries to provide a direct, unmediated encounter with reality. Thus, in reading De Forest's novel in terms of a war reportage, Aaron must not only dismiss large parts, in fact, most of the book as regrettable digression from the path of realist virtue. He obviously also never realizes that the novel is clearly written in the mode of the historical novel which treats the history of individual characters and that of the nation as complementary (and not, as Aaron does, as antagonistic) and thus uses the courtship and marriage pattern, for example, as a national metaphor. For Aaron, these elements have no function. Seen from the genre expectation of a war reportage, they only distract from a tough and unsentimental look at the brutal realities of war. What is more, not only do they distract, but they also endanger the strength of the book. In following a pattern Nina Baym has described in her essay on "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," they are seen as intrusions into a tough male world which are best met by strong, unswerving resistance.⁶ Categorically, Aaron dismisses the whole plot line around *Miss Ravenel*, from which the novel takes its title, as merely a "sop to romantic readers."⁷

The point here is not to single out a critic or interpretation in order to report them to a feminist media watch, but, in drawing on a case study, to describe a representative critical act, which, in my opinion, has had a crucial impact on our understanding of American literary history. In fact, I want to claim that this generic redefinition of realism is not restricted to a single group of critics, and certainly not to a liberal tradition in American literature and American literary criticism, but has also dominated the reception of the realist tradition of the nineteenth century until the recent poststructuralist critique of realism as surveillance and the repression of desire. The vocabulary and critical pose may not always have been as undisguised as in the example from which I took my cue, but the general phenomenon is nevertheless strikingly similar. It consists of a broad generic redefinition of nineteenth-century realism in which a variety of factors, ranging from the growing status of photography and newspaper reporting, to the appropriation of the idea of strength as moral strength by the Left, have coalesced to conceive of realism as the masculine discourse par excellence, a discourse not of the drawing room and the festive dinner, but of the battle-field and the boxing-ring, not of ongoing

⁶ Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," *American Quarterly* 33.2 (1981): 123-139.

⁷ Aaron 173.

processes of communication and interaction, but of the school of hard knocks, in short, as the Mike Tyson of literary history.

The comparison is not entirely flippant. For it is the sorry fate of the strong, as the case of Mike Tyson has demonstrated again, that they have to fall eventually. This danger, in fact, constitutes what Nina Baym very aptly calls the melodrama of manhood. Similarly, American realism has never been able to live up to the fantasy of strength by which it was appropriated and this has had damaging consequences for the perception of major parts of nineteenth-century American realism. This literature is to a large degree, with the possible exception of Twain, a literature of relations and exploration of the possibilities of communication in which certain motifs, such as the courtship pattern of the novel of manners and the domestic novel, are refunctionalized as a test case for questions of perception and growth. In reducing realism to a fantasy of strength, most interpretations must see such interests as signalling the danger of weakness; instead of placing the characters in the text in a position which would allow them to face a tough reality manfully, the courtship pattern ties the hero or heroine down in private concerns which distract them from what really counts in life. A fantasy of assertive independence and emotional self-sufficiency thus clashes with nineteenth-century realism's declaration of (inter)dependence, and the fact that the realistic novel of the Gilded Age does not convincingly and consistently support a left liberal fantasy of resistance and empowerment leads to a considerable amount of aggression. Time and again, and almost ritually, from George Santayana to Henry Nash Smith, from Van Wyck Brooks to Alan Trachtenberg, discussions of American realism of the Gilded Age end up blaming the realist for regrettable concessions to a female reading public.⁸ If realism is defined by strength, then nineteenth-century realism is failed realism. As a consequence, the story of American realism becomes the history of its failure—a failure that is retrospectively produced by applying criteria which were never those of the realists themselves. Such an approach I find highly unproductive. It would seem more interesting and informative to explore why the writers of a period wrote the way they did, instead of blaming them for failing to stage a fantasy that was not their own.

In the male fantasy underlying the masculinization of realism in the twentieth century, compromise or mediation, not to speak of negotiation, are seen as signs of weakness, because they water down a strong counterstance of resistance and diminish the radical promise of the realistic claim. This may in turn provide one explanation for the generic redefinition with which I am concerned. There is not enough space here to patiently pursue all the various factors and influences that added up to the redefinition of realism as strength. Undoubtedly, one important source was provided by the philosopher George Santayana, who already in 1911 argued that the "American will inhabits the sky-scraper; the American intellect inhabits the colonial mansion. The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The

⁸ George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," *Winds of Doctrine* (New York: Scribner's, 1937) 127–150, vol. 7 of *The Works of George Santayana*; Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (London: Heinemann, 1922); Alan Trachtenberg, "Introduction," *Democratic Vistas 1860–1880*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New York: Braziller, 1970) 1–32; Henry Nash Smith, *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978).

one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition."⁹ This description, made almost off-hand in an essay on American philosophy, has become the dominant model of explanation for the approach discussed here, so much so in fact that it may be called the Santayana-paradigm. Santayana, in turn, seems to reflect the changing social and cultural climate of the 1890s as it has been described by John Higham and others in which new cultural activities such as outdoor life, sportsmanship, and other elements express a wish for a new vitality which would be able to escape Victorianism. These changing attitudes also found their expression in the literary culture of the Progressive Era as Christopher Wilson has recently pointed out.¹⁰ The emergence of writing as a profession in the modern sense obviously created a psychic need to liberate literary and other intellectual activities from the stigma of being female pursuits, as many other areas of professionalization confirm. Holding the promise of a new look at reality, professionalization implied a cold, unemotional approach to life, while Victorianism had tied ideal womanhood to strong emotionality. There may be yet another important point though. Not accidentally, professionalism and Americanism appeared to be almost synonymous for some time. There was additional promise in the linkage of literature with strength, then, namely that of providing a stance of cultural independence that was considered as specifically American. In this view, 'masculine' writing suggests a specific American energy; it is seen as a mode of writing that convinces by its power, not its structural control, which, in other words, is free from female 'handiwork.' Thus, during the heyday of the paradigm from the 1930s to the 1960s, strength also became one of the major tropes for the valorization of American literature, as is indicated, for example, in book titles such as Fiedler's *No! In Thunder* or in Ann Douglas' polemic against *The Feminization of American Culture*.

The masculinization of American realism would thus be part of a broader cultural development which still has to be explored in more detail. In this story, the generic redefinition of nineteenth-century realism could provide a telling chapter. But let me end by emphasizing a particular aspect of that story, which may also help to explain its amazing success, namely, the usefulness of this redefinition for radical gestures (albeit unpolitical and spontaneous ones, based more, it seems, on psychic needs than ideological loyalties). In this sense, the changing fortune of realism also provides a chapter in the sociology of the literary intellectual. This story is, as we all know, characterized by a growing independence, but also marginality. The further the distance from the center of power, however, the less incentive there is for compromise and mediation and the greater the temptation to compensate for this marginality by the symbolic construction of strength. By harshly criticizing Howellsian or Jamesian compromises, one can also assert one's own immunity to similar corruptions. Literary criticism, I suspect, is thus inevitably, or, if you will, always already, a kind of role-taking, and it is certainly a supreme irony of literary and cultural history that this suspicion is, among other things, confirmed by a movement, literary realism, which promised to escape such fantasies by its proximity to reality itself. Instead, things may have worked the other way

⁹ Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine*, 128 f.

¹⁰ Christopher Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985).

round: the tough realities, whether of war or capitalism, have been used—misused may be an even better word—to give authenticity and authority to a gratifying fantasy of moral superiority and resistance.

