JUTTA ERNST
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KLAUS H. SCHMIDT (Eds.)

Revisionist Approaches to American Realism and Naturalism

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Edward J. Steichen, *The Flatiron* (1904/1909; Gum bichromate over platinum print, 47.8 x 38.4 cm, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1933, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, © 2018 Artists Rights Society)

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Contents

Introduction

The present collection has evolved from a symposium hosted by the American Studies division of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germersheim campus. The symposium was meant to be a reaction to a paradoxical phenomenon in American literary studies: on the one hand, academic conferences and special journal issues on this subject are few and far between[1]—a strange absence emphasized in Winfried Fluck's opening statement that "[r]ealism can be called a stepchild of American literary history," alluding to the fact that realist modes of representation have frequently been out of sync with dominant schools of criticism. On the other hand, specialists in the field have generated an enormous body of innovative publications, with new book series such as "Studies in American Literary Realism and Naturalism" (2000–),[2] or long-standing editing projects such as "The Dreiser Edition" (1981–),[3] spawning more than 50 volumes in the past four decades. That the core period of U.S. realism and naturalism has made a comeback in Americanist research appears to echo a widespread obsession with 'authenticity' and 'the real'

[1] For the last special issues published in *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, see Ickstadt and Hornung, guest eds., *Strained Relations: American Realism and the Domestic Novel* (1991); as well as Claviez and Moss, guest eds., *Neorealism—Between Innovation and Continuation* (2004).

[2] For most recent titles in the "Studies in American Literary Realism and Naturalism" series (ed. Scharnhorst), see N. Williams, *Gears and God* (2018); Bergman, ed., *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (2017); Elbert and Ryden, eds., *Haunting Realities* (2017); Polley, *Echoes of Emerson* (2017); Wonham and Howe, eds., *Mark Twain and Money* (2017); Bush, *Continuing Bonds with the Dead* (2016); and Kiskis, *Mark Twain at Home* (2016).

[3] To date, "The Dreiser Edition" has brought forth 18 volumes under the roof of three publishers (see Works Cited). Neda M. Westlake, Thomas P. Riggio (since 1986), and Jude Davies (since 2012) have served as general editors. For the development of the project's editorial policies, see Davies (2016).

in "an age when experience has become so radically precarious, when no cultural or moral consensus seems available"—"in times in which experiences might not only be duped by simulacra, but might prove simulated themselves" (Claviez 13).[4] This comeback may also have to do with the renaissance[5] of realist and naturalist strains in recent American fiction—from "storytelling neorealists" such as Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Lethem, Claire Messud, or Joseph O'Neill, and "affective neorealists" such as Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, or Ben Marcus,[6] to "neonaturalists" such as Cormac McCarthy—, a renaissance possibly connected to the ever-growing amount of autobiographies, memoirs, biographies, and other forms of life writing.

Apart from a great number of essay collections and monographs, not to mention hundreds of articles—some finding their way into the leading journals *American Literary Realism* and *Studies in American Naturalism*—, the last twenty-five years have also seen the publication of prestigious companions, introductions, and handbooks, including *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* (ed. Donald Pizer, 1995), *A Companion to American Fiction, 1865–1914* (ed. Robert Paul Lamb and G. R. Thompson, 2005), *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* (ed. Phillip J. Barrish, 2011), *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (ed. Keith Newlin, 2011), and *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Realism* (ed. Newlin, 2019 [forthcoming]). The proliferation of such compendiums epitomizes the increasing importance of realism and naturalism as literary traditions, not only in the academic marketplace but also in the global class-

[4] For a seminal study on authenticity and fakery in U.S. realism and early modernism, see Balkun, *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture* (2006). For a recent conference, organized by Dustin Breitenwischer and Tobias Keiling at the University of Freiburg, see "Truth or Post-Truth? Reality, Factivity, and Current Perspectives in Pragmatism and Hermeneutics" (January 12–13, 2018).

[5] One of the by-products of this renaissance was the rediscovery of forgotten authors and their texts—John Williams's *Butcher's Crossing* (1960/2007) being a prime example.

[6] For the differentiation between "storytelling" and "affective" neorealists and their roles as representatives of competing tendencies *within* neorealism, see Lee Konstantinou, "Neorealist Fiction" (2018).

room,[7] where realist and naturalist texts have long been used to teach the social tensions and ideological conflicts underlying the formation of American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For much of what is new in recent publications on the subject, we are indebted to interventions from the perspectives of race,[8] class,[9] and gender.[10] Equally productive have been readings focusing on money and economics (including critiques of capitalism and discursive regimes of business and finance);[11] globalization (including transnational dynamics);[12] nature and the environment (including ecocriticism and food studies);[13] visual culture (including investigations into film and photogra-

[7] For the role of U.S. realism and naturalism in German university education, see Schmidt, "Teaching American Realism in Germany" (forthcoming).

[8] See, e.g., Boeckmann, *A Question of Character* (2000); Rohrbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction* (2002); Wonham, *Playing the Races* (2004); Barrish, *White Liberal Identity* (2005); Belluscio, *To Be Suddenly White* (2006); Jarrett, *Deans and Truants* (2007); Winter, *American Narratives* (2007); Mizruchi, *The Rise of Multicultural America* (2008); Dudley, guest ed., *Naturalism and African American Culture* (2012); and Banerjee, *Color Me White* (2013). For a single-author study, see Simmons, *Chesnutt and Realism* (2006). Cf. also Pizer, *American Naturalism and the Jews* (2008).

[9] See, e.g., Orr, *Transforming American Realism* (2007); and Lawson, *Downwardly Mobile* (2012).

[10] See, e.g., Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism* (1997); Dudley, *A Man's Game* (2004); Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (2004); Zimmermann, *Dialog, Dialogizität, Interdiskursivität* (2006); and Campbell, *Bitter Tastes* (2016). For a recent monograph in which emancipatory discourses by nineteenth-century U.S. women writers are traced more generally, see Matter-Seibel, *Contending Forces* (2013).

[11] See, e.g., Zayani, *Reading the Symptom* (1999); Boesenberg, *Money and Gender in the American Novel* (2010); Cadle, *The Mediating Nation* (2014); Shonkwiler and La Berge, eds., *Reading Capitalist Realism* (2014); and Shonkwiler, *The Financial Imaginary* (2017). For a highly informative review essay, see Wonham, "Following the Money" (2015). Cf. also Wonham and Howe, eds., *Mark Twain and Money* (2017).

[12] See, e.g., Peyser, *Utopia and Cosmopolis* (1998); and Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose* (2006).

[13] See, e.g., Witschi, *Traces of Gold* (2001); and Erdheim, "The Greening of American Naturalism" (Diss., Fordham U, 2010).

phy);[14] as well as engagements in the sociology of literature (including studies in the history of the book and periodical cultures).[15] Not infrequently, the respective authors combine different analytical categories or highlight more specific phenomena such as emotion, the body, genre, music, frontier humor, the city, or rhetorical polemics.[16]

In keeping with the collection's title, the contributors to the present volume both react and add to this revisionist endeavor vis-à-vis American realism and naturalism. Modes of inquiry include meta-analyses (see Fluck and Newlin); readings of little-known texts (see Metz, Loranger, and Newlin); revaluations of canonical authors (see Brandt, Dorson, Boesenberg, Leypoldt, Kilgallen, and Newlin); alternative takes on naturalism's relationship to genre (see Metz and Loranger); and transdisciplinary perspectives (see Sielke and Hurm).

In the volume's opening piece, Winfried Fluck (FU Berlin) offers a comprehensive survey of realism's precarious status in American literary criticism and a radical critique of three decades of revisionist readings related to the realist tradition. The four approaches identified as major paradigms in recent revisionism, if one puts aside transnationalism, are "misrecognition" (proceeding from the poststructuralist assumption that interpretations of reality are necessarily based on "a fundamental misrecognition of reality"); "symptomatic realism" (holding that the surface of realist texts is structurally determined by "a deeper

[14] See, e.g., Corkin, *Realism and the Birth of the Modern United States* (1996); Sonstegard, *Artistic Liberties* (2014); Clayton, *Literature and Photography in Transition* (2015); and Campbell, *Bitter Tastes* (2016). A relevant single-author study is Orlando, *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* (2007).

[15] See, e.g., Glazener, *Reading for Realism* (1997); Hochman, *Getting at the Author* (2001); Rohrbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction* (2002); Landers, *The Improbable First Century of* Cosmopolitan Magazine (2010); and Noonan, *Reading* The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine (2010).

[16] See, e.g., Thrailkill, *Affecting Fictions* (2007); Cohen and Prendergast, eds., *Spectacles of Realism* (1995); Elbert and Ryden, eds., *Haunting Realities* (2017); Ruotolo, *Sounding Real* (2013); Martin, *The Frontier Roots* (2007); Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime* (1998); and Wells, *Fighting Words* (2013). An up-and-coming field of inquiry, as yet limited to single-author studies, is interested in realism's relationship to material culture; for recent examples, see Stout, ed., *Willa Cather and Material Culture* (2005); and Totten, *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors* (2007).

absent cause"); "multicultural realism" (starting as a "critique of exclusion" and culminating in the view that multicultural writing per se is a form of realist literature); and "cultural capital realism" (claiming that leading practitioners of realism were mainly motivated by a struggle for distinction, prestige, and the "consolidation of class privilege"). In Fluck's opinion, these approaches are all lacking in that they "give up any idea of a specific potential and function of literature," in addition to ignoring the reader and arguing ahistorically.

The broad canvas of Fluck's introductory essay is followed by more or less chronological case studies, in which the respective contributors shed new light on the work of individual authors. In "'Riddles of the Painful Earth': Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and the Aesthetics of the Commonplace," Stefan Brandt (U of Graz) uses a revisionist comparative reading of Twain's "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" (1865) and Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) to demonstrate that what connects these writers, despite their differences, is a belief in the power of the vernacular and "a method of utilizing visual and symbolic patterns that negotiat[e] the common man, commonplace events, and the ideal of democracy." Taking his cue from the semantic ambivalence of the term "common," with its simultaneous connotations of social egalitarianism and exclusion, and of "commonplace," as its concretization in terms of personal experience and belonging, Brandt suggests that two overlapping tendencies in the authors' social criticism and aesthetic program—the "mystification of the average" and the "proclamation of democratic values"—may be understood as a combination of ideas inherent in transcendentalist and realist epistemology.

"Sour Apples: Lost Girls, Gothic Naturalism, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman" by Stephanie Metz (U of Tennessee, Knoxville) ties in with a new field of research in realism and naturalism studies that aims at the deconstruction of traditional genre boundaries.[17] Inspired by Wai Chee Dimock (2011), Tanya Horeck (2010), and Joanne B. Karpinski (1993), as well as by the fact that "both the Gothic and naturalism frequently question free will and the limitations placed on women who attempt to act on their own behalf," Metz reads Freeman's "Old Woman Magoun" (1905) as an example of a hybrid genre, a story concerned with the apo-

[17] Cf. Elbert and Ryden, *Haunting Realities: Naturalist Gothic and American Realism* (2017).

ria of female agency, set in a "Gothic landscape best portrayed through the lens of naturalism."

James Dorson's (FU Berlin) "Industrial Transcendence: Jack London and the Spirits of Capitalism" reads *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *Martin Eden* (1909) against the backdrop of contemporary management discourse. Arguing against "a reduction of naturalist fiction to a single overarching value system" (e.g., the 'regime of the machine'), Dorson shows that naturalist writers were negotiating conflicting ideologies "that coincide with the transition from market to managed capitalism," with Buck's "trajectory over mechanical efficiency to self-actualization as pure spirit" and Martin Eden's "transcendence of his industrial self" epitomizing a split, and dynamic interplay, in the author's oeuvre, not only between the industrial and the inspirational worlds but also between a social and an artistic critique of the capitalist system.[18]

In "Gold and Genocide: Rethinking Money and Gender in Naturalism through Settler Colonialism," Eva Boesenberg (HU Berlin) combines indigenous and whiteness studies perspectives, intersectional analyses as well as New Americanist approaches to U.S. economics and politics to read Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) as settler colonial narratives. Contextualizing her readings in terms of a "white (upper-)middle class Christian hetero cis ablebodied settler masculinity crisis" around 1900, Boesenberg juxtaposes the erasure of indigenous culture and the fetishization of gold and hegemonic masculinity in *McTeague* with "Nativist presences," which foreground, echoing Toni Morrison, the text's obsession with whiteness and a haunting colonial past; the "imagined subjugation of Chicago" and complete "discursive obliteration of indigenous presences" in the opening scene of *Sister Carrie*, by contrast, are seen in relation to Amy Kaplan's concept of "manifest domesticity," where "domesticity […] becomes the engine of national expansion" ("Manifest" 116).

Günter Leypoldt (U Heidelberg) continues the project of recontextualizing *Sister Carrie*—not from the perspective of a current methodology, but by reminding us of a late nineteenth-century taste formation which came to be obscured in the course of post-World War II literary criticism. In "1890s Middlebrow: *Sister Carrie* as an Artist Novel," Ley-

[18] For a helpful new resource on diverse aspects of the author's life and works, see *The Oxford Handbook of Jack London* (2017), edited by Jay Williams.

poldt illustrates that much of what critics found problematic within frameworks of reading such as "realism–naturalism" or "commodity fetishism"—e.g., Carrie's sentimentality and endless "longing"—makes perfect sense if resituated in the period of the novel's genesis. This presupposes, however, that we take late-century middlebrow culture seriously: in "a decade that saw a Balzac revival, the cult of George du Maurier's *Trilby*, Wagnerism, and various higher and lower kinds of aestheticism that revolved around a mid-cult of genius and the mystique of 'bohemia,'" and re-embedded in contemporary discursive paradigms such as romantic *Sehnsucht*, transcendentalist ontological desire, the spiritual bildungsroman, or the artist novel (for which Dreiser's *The "Genius"* [1911/15] serves as a pertinent example), Carrie should rather be read as an embodiment of spiritual upward mobility.

The fact that "The Pull toward Naturalism in Robert Frost's *North of Boston*" by Carol S. Loranger (Wright State U) is one of the few essays on naturalism in U.S. poetry, and the first extended reading of Frost as a naturalist,[19] reveals a blind spot in modern literary scholarship—when *North of Boston* was published in England in 1914 (with an American edition following in 1915), reviewers had no second thoughts about associating it with the naturalist tradition. In her analysis of this "slim book of seventeen poems," "notable for its number of long dialogue poems […] offering the reader just that kind of microscopic examination of the impact of impersonal forces […] that is characteristic of the naturalist short story," Loranger focuses "on three documentary topics […]: the vacated landscape of post-industrial northern New England; men, labor, and self-worth; and women and the burden of sex," with the third part arguably containing the most impressive interpretations. In the context of the poet's unsparing portrayal of economic hardship and existential loneliness in rural New England, the much-anthologized "After Apple-Picking" comes across as an "anomaly," in which Frost seems to "resis[t] the pull toward naturalism generated by the empirical or documentary exteriority of the dramatic poems."

[19] A combined search for "Robert Frost" and "naturalism" in the *MLA International Bibliography* (12/2/2017) has produced no results. Among the rare examples of more recent work on naturalism in U.S. poetry are Beyers, "Naturalism and Poetry" (2011); Hoffman, "Political Poets and Naturalism" (2015); and Loranger, "The Outcast Poetics of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Edwin Arlington Robinson" (2015).

With her "ecocritical analysis of culinary culture" in the oeuvre of Richard Wright and her inclusion of the earliest hand-written manuscript for *Black Boy*, "Black Confession," Cara Erdheim Kilgallen (Sacred Heart U) provides the reader with two other 'firsts.' While earlier critics have tended to discuss "hunger" as an "abstraction" and "appetites" as "impulsive and animalistic" in the author's writings, Kilgallen's "Transforming Naturalist Hunger through African American Artistry" draws on insights from intercultural food studies[20] to show that Wright's autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)* "functions as a transitional text in which Wright transforms hunger from a shameful racial mark," and a "purely physical numbing of the senses through impulsive eating and drinking, into an appetite for literacy, stories, and songs about African American ancestry, community, and identity."

These case studies are followed by two transdisciplinary ventures. Playing on the double meaning of "re-cognition" by exploring both "the ways in which [Henry] James's literary practice may or may not be illuminated by insights evolving from the cognitive sciences" and the question "how James is multiply re-encountered [… and] re-mediated […]" in recent film and fiction, Sabine Sielke's (U Bonn) "Re-Cognizing Henry James" "intervene[s] into current debates of a 'new realism' that, unlike the cognitive sciences, remember that all representation depends on mediation." As part of a larger project which "focuses on crossroads between cultural studies and the cognitive sciences and interrogates the potential of such transdisciplinary contact,"[21] and proceeding from the hypothesis that "[p]ortraiture, close-up, and face recognition constitute one such contact point," Sielke's comparative reading of the

[20] For a topical introduction to this rapidly developing field, see Tigner and Carruth, *Literature and Food Studies* (2018).

[21] A recent collection designed to start a conversation between literary studies and the cognitive sciences is Michael Burke and Emily T. Troscianko, eds., *Cognitive Literary Science: Dialogues between Literature and Cognition* (2017). That a pre-eminent journal like *Studies in American Naturalism* has devoted a special issue (12.1 [2017]) to the nexus between technology, the sciences, and naturalist writing, collating the craze for big data in the twenty-first century with the reliance on quantification in U.S. naturalism, underscores the relevance of transdisciplinarity for innovation in the field: see James Dorson and Regina Schober, guest eds., *Data Fiction: Naturalism, Narrative, and Numbers* (2017).

latter's importance in Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882), Jane Campion's 1996 film adaptation, Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series (1977–80), and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2014) highlights the challenges of studying 'the real' in times when our experience of reality is "increasingly hypermediated."

In "Faking and the F.S.A.: Edward Steichen's Forgotten Contribution to the Debate about Realism, Naturalism, and Photography," Gerd Hurm (U Trier) quotes the artist's frequently overlooked statement that "every photograph is a fake from start to finish" ("Ye Fakers" [1903]) to prove that Steichen, throughout his career as a photographer, editor, and curator, and despite allegations of being "a naïve, unreflected realist," always took a skeptical stance about photography's "inherent realism" (Miles Orvell)—unlike many of his contemporaries, who believed in the documentary mode as an "impersonal presentation of 'actuality untouched'" (Walker Evans), exemplified by the 1936 "Fargo Fakery" or "skull controversy." Neither was Steichen a "functionary of conservative cultural forces," as some of his detractors claimed, but a "socialist sympathizer" with a "democratic approach" to art whose progressive fusion of documentary pictures by little-known F.S.A. photographers with anonymous visitor comments in the prestigious *U.S. Camera Annual 1939* decidedly contributed to the iconic status of New Deal masterpieces such as Dorothea Lange's *Plantation Owner* or *Migrant Mother* (both 1936).

In the volume's last contribution, Keith Newlin (U of North Carolina Wilmington) opts for a periodical studies approach, combining a statistical analysis, a review of recent scholarship, and a case study to identify "Recent Trends in American Literary Realism and Naturalism." By showing which contents, presented between 2009 and 2015 in the field's leading U.S. journals, have been downloaded by which readers; introducing monographs which shed light on the vicissitudes of the contemporary marketplace; and zooming in on the serial publication of Jack London's lesser-known South Seas travelogue *The Cruise of the Snark* (1906–10; 1911) and the author's double dealing with magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's Home Companion*, Newlin demonstrates to what extent our readings of canonical realists and naturalists can profit from paying more attention to the concrete circumstances of literary production and academic reception. His analysis also suggests that in times when readers "encounter scholarship primarily through searches in

the *MLA Bibliography*, *Project Muse*, *JSTOR*, *ProQuest*, and other online venues," we are well advised to reconsider the ways in which we think and write about Americanist subjects.

In conclusion, we have the very pleasant task of acknowledging the support of several people and institutions. For sponsoring the two-day symposium from which this collection has emerged, we wish to thank the Freundeskreis FTSK Germersheim e. V. (Friends of the Faculty of Translation Studies, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies). We are also very grateful to Universitätsverlag Winter, Heidelberg, and its notoriously helpful staff, especially to its director, Andreas Barth, who enthusiastically endorsed the idea of transforming the above-mentioned symposium into a publication. We are equally indebted to Alfred Hornung, Anke Ortlepp, and Heike Paul for approving the volume's inclusion in *American Studies – A Monograph Series*, in particular to Alfred Hornung for suggesting that we extend the scope of the original conference proceedings by encouraging further contributions. We would also like to thank Philipp Alpermann for preformatting the submitted chapters and Don Kiraly for reading selected parts of the final manuscript. For their kind permission to reproduce Edward J. Steichen's art photo *The Flatiron* (1904/1909; Gum bichromate over platinum print, 47.8 x 38.4 cm, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1933, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) on the collection's front cover, we owe gratitude to the Artists Rights Society in New York and the VG Bild-Kunst in Bonn. Credit is also due to the Library of Congress, for putting public domain F.S.A. photographs on its web site (see illustrations in Gerd Hurm's essay), and to DIGITAL IMAGE, for making available Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #54* (1980; Gelatin Silver Print, 17.3 x 24 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence), which serves as an illustration in Sabine Sielke's article. Our deepest thanks go to the volume's eleven contributors, who have succeeded in both expanding our knowledge of American realism and naturalism and reminding us of how much still remains to be further explored.

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WINFRIED FLUCK

Misrecognition, Symptomatic Realism, Multicultural Realism, Cultural Capital Realism: Revisionist Narratives about the American Realist Tradition

Part I

Realism can be called a stepchild of American literary history. It has not always been that way. In the Gilded Age and then again in the 1930s, critics claimed that realism had finally replaced an outdated romanticism as the major literary form in American culture. However, realism's 30s dominance turned out to be short-lived because the post-World War II shift from a radical to a "[l]iberal [i]magination" (L. Trilling) revived a different agenda: the project to clarify what made American literature unique—and that happened to be the romance again. Realism simply did not fit the foundational myth of American studies, the idea of American exceptionalism and uniqueness.[1] In response, critics tried to reconceptualize realism as a social novel of manners, as Lionel Trilling did with a

[1] In 1988, Amy Kaplan could still claim—correctly—that "the assumptions underlying the romance thesis have determined the study of American realism from the forties to the present, and have limited the range of critical inquiry. The association of the romance with a uniquely American culture has displaced realism to an anomalous and distinctly un-American margin of literary criticism, which has necessarily viewed its literary mode as a failure" (3). Post-war critics had framed "an American canon which equates the romance with the exceptional nature of American culture and which makes realism an anomaly in American fiction; as an inherently flawed imitation of a European convention, realism is, in effect, un-American" (4).

programmatic move from Theodore Dreiser to Henry James in his landmark essay "Reality in America," which was first published in 1940. But what looked like a way out created another dilemma because classical American realism did not quite fit that model either and was therefore constantly criticized for not living up to the genre's potential. The standard narrative about American realism in the post-War years remained that of realism's lingering, embarrassing indebtedness to a genteel Victorianism. Instead of establishing a countertradition to the romance, critics argued, American realists had weakly perpetuated its cultural dominance.[2]

One of the main motivations for starting research on American literary realism that would eventually lead to my study *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit* was a profound dissatisfaction with the state of American literary criticism on realism. At the time, American studies scholarship had started to move away from the myth and symbol school and had begun to argue that the study of American myths should be replaced by a focus on "the realities of America," as Robert Sklar had put it in the title of a programmatic contribution to the American studies debate. To me and other scholars motivated by the student movement of the 1960s, realism looked like the ideal candidate to do this. But it soon became apparent that the explanatory frame that had dominated discussions of realism up to this point, the definition of realism as a truthful, 'objective' reflection of reality, was not sufficient to explain realism, let alone American realism.

A crucial turning-point in discussions of realism was reached when long-dominant key concepts of the realism debate like 'reflection,' 'mirroring,' or a narrow understanding of the concept of 'mimesis' were replaced by the term 'representation.' The term 'reflection' implies to measure literature by how faithfully it describes social reality, whereas the term 'representation' draws attention to the fact that the world in a realist text is, after all, merely a construct. This is true of all fictional

[2] There have been a number of excellent studies on American realism in the post-War years, including Everett Carter's *Howells and the Age of Realism* (1954), Robert Falk's *The Victorian Mode in American Fiction, 1865–1885* (1965), Harold Kolb's *The Illusion of Life: American Realism as a Literary Form* (1969), and Edwin Cady's *The Light of Common Day: Realism in American Fiction* (1971). But none of these studies succeeded in reestablishing realism as a major tradition in American literary history.

texts, in fact of all textual representations, and thus it must also apply to literary realism. The only difference is that realist texts manage to construct imaginary worlds that, to use the apt terminology of Roland Barthes, produce a "reality effect," that is, an impression—or, more precisely, an illusion—of gaining a direct, undistorted look at reality itself. In American studies, first indications of an awareness of the construct-character of realist texts are provided by titles like "Fictions of the Real," the chapter on realism in Alan Trachtenberg's comprehensive study of the Gilded Age, *The Incorporation of America* (1982), and in the title of the major U.S.-based study of American realism in the 1980s, Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988). Along similar lines, my essay "Fiction and Fictionality in American Realism" (1986), written at about the same time, linked terms in its title that analyses of realism had long considered either-or opposites.

Part II

What are the consequences if one looks at literary realism no longer as a reflection of reality but as a representation, that is, as a discursive construct of reality? There are several routes to take from that starting point, and the various revisionist challenges to scholarship on realism which have emerged since the 1980s cover a range of possibilities. The route I took was inspired by the work of Heinz Ickstadt (see "Concepts"). As long as realism was considered a form of reflection, it remained normatively tied to a prior analysis of society that it could either faithfully reflect (like bourgeois realism did for Lukács) or fail to reflect (as modernism did in his view). If, on the other hand, realism is considered another discursive construct, then the challenge must be, not to either affirm or reject the truthfulness of the text's representation of reality, but to first understand the logic of its construction of reality, the reasons for it, and the forms used to create a reality effect.

Traditionally, the starting point in discussions of realism has been realism's programmatic claim to represent "life as it is." Thus Tom Quirk can say: "American realism was a call for men and women to attend to the actualities of life as it is lived, not as it is dreamed or feared" (viii). But what looks like an easy step to take turns out to be not so easy after all because one person's reality may be another person's distorted

view of reality. Realism cannot simply be defined by its truthfulness to reality because people hold different views of what constitutes reality.[3] Thus, if realism defines itself by the promise to represent reality truthfully, then different versions of realism, including those critics find wanting, can best be explained by the fact that they take their point of departure from different concepts of reality. As Rachel Bowlby puts it, realism "is always presenting a particular theory of what will count as a picture of reality" (xv). Trying to understand realism therefore has to start with an analysis of the epistemological premises on which realist texts and their representations of reality are based: what constitutes reality, how do we gain knowledge of that reality, and what are the reasons for possible misperceptions? The answers will determine how reality is represented in the text, what social and cultural functions are attributed to the realist text, and how they can be realized through the reading experience.

Seen from this perspective, the key constituent of 'classical' American realism,[4] on which all of its subsequent choices are based, is an epistemological one, a change in the assumption of how we gain knowledge and make sense of the world that establishes new ways of comprehending and interpreting human activities. If I no longer regard religion, metaphysics, intuition, or the imagination as reliable sources of knowledge, then other possibilities have to be identified. For nineteenth-century American realism, the key source of knowledge is social experience. Experience is the best and most reliable way of gaining knowledge because it moves access to knowledge away from cultural authorities to the individual who can see with his or her 'own eyes' what is really go-

[3] As Northrop Frye already stated in his *Anatomy of Criticism*: "The words 'romantic' and 'realistic' […] as ordinarily used, are relative or comparative terms: they illustrate tendencies in fiction, and cannot be used as simply descriptive adjectives with any sort of exactness. If we take the sequence *De Raptu Proserpinae, The Man of Law's Tale, Much Ado About Nothing, Pride and Prejudice, An American Tragedy*, it is clear that each work is 'romantic' compared to its successors and 'realistic' compared to its predecessors" (49).

[4] I am using the term 'classical' here to set up a conceptual contrast between traditional mainstream views of realism and revisionist views. For an overview of American realism and naturalism, not only in literature, but also in painting, see my essay on "Realism in Art and Literature."

ing on. For realists, illusions about the world are self-destructive, for individuals as well as for nations. Their grip can only be broken by experience. Experience can validate or falsify claims by others, reconnect the individual with social reality and thereby correct self-centered fantasies.[5] It is experience that eventually tells characters like Silas Lapham, Huck Finn, or Isabel Archer what is true or false, right or wrong. However, impressions gained by experience may also be deceptive. In order to gain knowledge from experience, one therefore has to learn how to process and interpret observations. Making observations and receiving impressions is not enough—one also has to learn how to connect them meaningfully in order to draw the right conclusions. The central story of classical American realism is therefore that of social apprenticeship. It tells stories about characters who go through often painful learning processes to finally master how to understand what has happened—this explains, for example, why American realism continues to focus on courtship narratives and often remains within the tradition of the novel of manners. Misreading the other in an intimate relation can be an especially painful experience and may have lifelong consequences.[6]

[5] This epistemological premise explains why 'classical' realism distrusts sentimental and domestic fiction. Although domestic and sentimental novels may strive for verisimilitude in their descriptions of characters and settings, they are based on an emotional epistemology, sometimes linked to religion, that, in the view of realists, prevents characters from seeing 'with their own eyes.' In contrast, realism is a literature that tries to establish sufficient distance to allow the reader to gain a sense of proportion. In this context, Phillip Barrish draws attention to the role of free indirect discourse, "a style that allows a text's narrative voice to maintain third-person objectivity while also, often in the same paragraph, speaking from the point of view and in the tone of a specific character. Free indirect discourse encourages a reader to feel both inside of a character and, at the same time, distant enough to evaluate that character's emotions and thoughts" (Barrish, *Cambridge Introduction* 4). As Elsie Miller points out in her essay on "The Feminization of American Realist Theory," loss of distance was associated with feminization by the realists who shaped realist theory.

[6] Another recurring source of misperception in American realism is money. Twain returned to the topic repeatedly, most prominently in the novel *The Gilded Age* and stories like "The £1 000 000 Bank-Note" (1893) and "The $ 30 000 Bequest" (1904), both stories about false appearances. In a world trusting first-hand experiences, money can be used for creating false impres-

Realism's themes and formal choices have to be seen in the context of a particular view of American reality. In the beginning and roughly until the mid-1880s, nineteenth-century American realists saw American society as an, in principle, advanced society of great promise. But they were not uncritical exceptionalists. In contrast to European societies, America was a democracy, but still had plenty of problems (in fact, industrialization had created new ones); its progress therefore depended on strengthening its democratic potential. Literature could play an important role in this project. To do so, however, it had to change its form and function. What was needed was a form of literature that addressed issues of contemporary importance and provided a candid, unidealized picture of American culture. In this context, realism was to establish a common ground for an ongoing dialogue about the state of American society. It has its normative basis in ideals of social solidarity. In focusing on the possibility of a common experience, realism is the only appropriate literature for a democracy.

If the novel is to have an impact on American life, it has to address the reader not as an immature adolescent who likes to indulge in pleasant fantasies, as the romance does, but as a grown-up and democratic equal with whom an ongoing dialogue about the promise and remaining shortcomings of American life can be established on the basis of common experience. Many thematic choices and formal innovations of nineteenth-century American realism find their explanation here: the general shift from telling to showing, the reduction or elimination of the authorial perspective in favor of a dramatic method of representation, a thematic focus on the commonplace and on non-heroic, psychologically complex characters, on everyday events and contemporary settings, giving priority to character analysis over plot. The author's (still Victorian) guardianship had to be reduced and the reader had to be elevated to the level of a conversational equal who is supposed to see with her own

sions and misleading others. In Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, money is the driving force in a process of self-deception. In Jamesian 'heiress'-novels like *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Washington Square*, money is the reason why the heroine can never be sure whom to trust. For an analysis of the role of money in American literature, see Eva Boesenberg's study *Money and Gender in the American Novel, 1850–2000*.

eyes and draw her own conclusions.[7] However, the programmatic social vision in classical American realism is not merely the projection of a utopian promise of common experience. The realist text also functions as a test of the reality of this vision and the results are increasingly sobering and disillusioning, so that Brook Thomas can speak of "the failure to sustain the promise that an equitable social order can be constructed on the basis of interpersonal exchanges lacking the regulation of transcendental principles" (14). In *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit*, I have traced the gradual collapse of realism's nineteenth-century social vision.[8]

Part III

However, as subsequent developments in scholarship on American realism have shown, there are also other routes that can be taken, once the concept of reflection is replaced by that of representation. If realism is only another discursive construct, then we can no longer be sure to what extent we should trust its claims to offer a truthful representation of re-

[7] At least, this is the intention; in practice, it did not always work that way, as Borus points out: "Although the realists were the first group of American authors to produce a full body of theory about the purpose, function, and quality of literature, they violated their theoretical premises as often as they observed them" (17). But such diversions can only be noted and are only significant if realism is first constructed as a system that describes a new stage in the perception and interpretation of reality.

[8] On this point, see also Daniel Borus's comments on a growing sense of resignation: "This resignation mirrored the position at which realist authors had arrived by the end of the century. They had originally believed that their art was capable of providing a sense of complicity that would allow Americans to overcome the struggle and divisions that had marked their history. Realists had taken this chore upon themselves on the basis that they not only had the skills of observation and creation but also owed no firm allegiance to any of the contending social forces. They could therefore transcend the petty differences, peer into the true essence of things, and derive a series of bonds based on the commonality of feeling. Holding firmly to the concept of 'the people,' realists replaced 'class' for its particularistic and divisive claims. When the masses began to act in 'class' ways, realists found their entire plan threatened, and they responded by resignation and deflection of the problem into the realm of belief and attitude" (181–82).