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The Cultural Dynamics of Metafictional Discourse in Early American Literature: A Response to Jürgen Wolter*

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Given the well-established theory that the censure of fiction was a pervasive feature of American cultural criticism in the nineteenth century, one may well be surprised to read statements which profess a rather untimely preference for the novel. Although attacks on the pernicious influence of novel reading abound in the Early Republic and throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century,[1] novels met with the approval of the reading public to an extent that was unprecedented and—considering the ruling condemnation of fictional literature—seemed to be possible only much later. As a matter of fact, proud assertions of the new habit of novel reading can be found as early as 1797 when, for instance, the narrator of Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* comments on the revolution that had taken place in the literary market during his protagonist's absence from America:

> On his return from captivity, he found a surprising alteration in the public taste. In our inland towns of consequence, *social libraries had been instituted*, composed of books *designed to amuse rather than to instruct*; and country booksellers, fostering the new-born taste of the people, had filled the whole land with modern travels, and novels almost as incredible. The diffusion of a taste for any species of writing through all ranks, in so short a time, would appear impracticable to an European. The peasant of Europe must first be taught to read, before he can acquire a taste in letters. In New England, the work is half completed. In no other country are there so many people, who, in proportion to its numbers, can read and write; and, therefore, no sooner was a taste for *amusing literature* diffused, than all orders of country life, with one accord, *forsook the sober sermons and practical pieties* of their fathers, for the

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> gay stories and splendid impieties of the traveller and the novelist. The worthy farmer no longer fatigued himself with Bunyan's Pilgrim up the "hill of difficulty" or through the "slough of despond," but quaffed wine with Brydone in the hermitage of Vesuvius, or sported with Bruce on the fairy-land of Abyssinia [...].[2]

Although Tyler's optimism about the flourishing of the new taste for products of the imagination may be an expression of wishful thinking and may be as exaggerated as his favorable assessment of the literacy of the rural population,[3] one has to acknowledge that the novel had already won considerable popularity in late eighteenth-century America.

Yet Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* not only makes us aware of the expanding institutionalization of social or circulating libraries[4] and the subsequent changes in the reading habits of many Americans who did not at all submit to the imperatives of the then still common censure of fiction. It also highlights the cultural reorientations which the so-called democratization of the American mind[5] brought about. In her seminal study *The Revolution and the Word,* Cathy N. Davidson has convincingly argued that the sensational rise of the novel in America originated, to some extent at least, in the destabilization of public authority during and after the American Revolution. The dramatic changes in the public discourse on authority made possible an increasing disregard for the still prevalent censure of fictional literature as well as the rise of a new "aesthetics of amusement."

For all its intellectual rigor and rather comprehensive argumentation, Jürgen Wolter's analysis of the various forms of metafictional discourse in early American literature fails to pay due attention to the alterations in the reading habits of a large part of the citizens of the Early Republic, and, what is more, in the cultural and ideological orientations of American society. Certainly, Wolter's comments on the "social, philosophical and ideological contexts conducive to metafictional writing" (67) are convincing: he is able to show that the epistemological crisis of the eighteenth century caused writers of fiction to challenge the naive concepts of human perception which still flourished in eighteenth-century America in the wake of the predominant Scottish Common-Sense philosophy. Nevertheless, the reference to the incessant influence of a mentality which succeeded in merging the Puritans' craving for didacticism and moral

utility with an Enlightenment glorification of reason and common sense cannot sufficiently account for the pervasiveness and intensity of the vilification of works of the imagination at a time which witnessed a simultaneous vogue of fiction. What was the use of the incessant repetition of stereotyped verdicts diagnosing a reading-inflicted moral decline of the entire nation when the American reading public's actual behavior proved the futility of all such attempts? Did America's cultural leaders still believe that their authority would be able to stem the tide of a literature which, being in the ascendant all over the Western World, expressly rejected the traditional focus on rationalism and utility?

As Wolter has convincingly shown in his analysis of the metafictional elements in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland; Or, The Transformation* (1798), the late eighteenth century witnessed a process of aesthetic reorientation which finally led to the subordination of the former insistence on the *prodesse* of a work of art under the new aesthetic regimen of *delectare*. Yet, although Wolter avoids simplistic explanations and is well aware of the complex changes in the cultural and ideological matrix of the young nation, he creates the impression that American literature developed in a linear manner from obeying the dictates of moral utility to a stage of conflict and subversion, and finally to a stage of emancipation from the oppressive doctrine of a Puritan and/or rationalist mentality. In contrast to a view which "emplots"[6] the dynamics of literary history in terms of a teleologic development, I want to propose a model of emplotment which describes the cultural dynamics in terms of an ongoing process of negotiation in which conflicting attitudes were problematized rather than reconciled.[7]

A model which takes into account conflicting impulses may be able to explain the fact that American writers could at the same time be faithful servants of the old doctrines castigating the corruptive influence of works of fiction and actively engage in propagating a new faith in the power of the imagination. The fact that often one and the same author proclaimed literature to be and be not a means of moral improvement betrays a frame of mind which was no longer able to relate its value judgments to an undisputed basis of common norms. Novelists exempted their works from the popular indictments of the genre by advertising their writing as based on fact, thereby reaching a climax of

fictionalizing; yet, in the very same texts, they also satirized the devastating consequences of novel reading.[8]

A crucial factor in the success of the novel in America at the end of the eighteenth century was its ability to voice the conflicting aspirations of an increasingly self-confident middle-class readership. As a result of the rise of political democratization after the American Revolution and the subsequent emancipation of the individual from oppressing social conventions, America underwent a process of a far-reaching redistribution of public authority.[9] And, as works of fiction had been the prime target of Puritan-Protestant moral campaigns, criticism of the novel was predestined to become a prominent battlefield on which the war over public authority was to be fought. As a consequence writers such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge flatly rejected the validity of the doctrine of utility by leading the traditional claim *ad absurdum*. In his introductory chapter to his satirical novel *Modern Chivalry*—the introduction was written and published as early as 1792—Brackenridge even went so far as to recommend his text to his readers because of its lack of moral usefulness:

> Being a book without thought, or the smallest degree of sense, it will be useful to young minds, not fatiguing their understandings, and easily introducing a love of reading and study. Acquiring language at first by this means, they will afterwards gain knowledge. It will be useful especially to young men of light minds intended for the bar or pulpit. By heaping too much upon them, style and matter at once, you surfeit the stomach, and turn away the appetite from literary entertainment, to horse-racing and cockfighting. I shall consider myself, therefore, as having performed an acceptable service to all weak and visionary people, if I can give something to read without the trouble of thinking.[10]

With its constant use of (parodistic) metafictional digressions,[11] Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* is a rather exceptional text; yet no study of the rise of the metafictional discourse in the Early Republic can afford to ignore it because it satirizes the entire repertoire of contemporary aesthetic principles. It is, *ex negativo* at least, an indispensable sourcebook for all critics who are interested in the aesthetic standards that were supposed to regulate the production and marketing of literary texts in late eighteenth-century America. Most of the metafictional digressions offer

valuable comments on matters such as literary tradition and authority, but also on the extra-literary forces that determinded the success of a novel in a rapidly expanding literary market. *Modern Chivalry* may thus attest to the changes in the system of literary norms which recommended a novel to the reading public: the traditional claim to the book's moral utility was no longer very helpful in making a novel a best-seller. In the "Conclusion" of the third volume of *Modern Chivalry* the narrator eloquently presents these views:

> I have only farther to say at present, that I wish I could get this work to make a little more noise. Will nobody attack it, and prove that it is insipid, libelous, treasonable, immoral, or irreligious? If they will not do this, let them do something else, praise it, call it excellent, say it contains wit, erudition, genius, and the Lord knows what? Will nobody speak? What? Ho! are you all asleep in the hold there down at Philadelphia? Will none of you abuse, praise, reprobate, or commend this performance? (*MC* 262)

Given the enormous variety of metafictional digressions included in Brackenridge's novel, *Modern Chivalry* might have offered Jürgen Wolter an excellent basis for exploring functions of metafictional discourses other than those described in his essay. Brackenridge's text is particularly interesting as it demonstrates that the changes in late eighteenth-century American literature did not—as Wolter claims—primarily originate in the epistemological crisis, but in the different assessment of public authority and the subsequent changes in the mechanics regulating the literary market. One may even argue that the epistemological crisis could not have been as pervasive as it was, had the traditional authorities ruling moral behavior and good taste still been in command. Yet, if "negative" publicity of a novel ("noise") was more effective in securing its success than any recommendation based on its moral usefulness, one may well conclude that the conventional standards for recommending a work of art had already become obsolete. And so had the fictional claim of eighteenth-century novelists to the "historicity" or "authenticity" of their narratives already become a rather commonplace and thus not very original and effective means of answering the indictments of the genre. Writers such as Royall Tyler or William Hill Brown now used a far more efficient strategy of responding to the attacks of the critics:

they readily consented to the traditional censure, but then they redirected the criticism at an altogether different target, i.e. at the productions of their English competitors. Thus, in his novel *The Algerine Captive,* Tyler argued that the inexperienced reader of English novels might be "insensibly taught to admire the levity, and often the vices, of the parent country." An English novel, he then maintained, was likely to impress

> on the young female mind an erroneous idea of the world in which she is to live. It paints the manners, customs, and habits, of a strange country; excites a fondness for false splendor; and renders the homespun habits of her own country disgusting.
>
> There are two things wanted, said a friend to the author: that we write our own books of amusement, and that they exhibit our own manners. (*AC* xi-xii)

As American novelists of the late eighteenth century greatly suffered from the pressures of the literary market which was virtually flooded with pirated and thus inexpensive editions of English novels, they were more than willing to put all the blame that had formerly been voiced against works of fiction in general, merely on English productions. Given the nationalistic orientation of post-revolutionary America, the writers of the Early Republic also liked to think of the English novel as a severe threat to the American political system as it presented the American reader with the picture of a society which was governed by "anti-democratic" principles.

Moreover, instead of simply giving in to the stereotyped vilification of fiction, American novelists of the late eighteenth century pursued a complex strategy: they attempted to find the primary justification of their fictions by "re-inventing" the novel as a *necessary* instrument of the readers' social education, but they did so without giving in to simple-minded moralizing. Cathy N. Davidson is certainly right in stressing that the distribution and structure of public authority had fundamentally changed during the Early Republic. Indeed, as a result of the so-called democratization of the post-revolutionary American mind, the ministry, which before the revolution had held the central position of a moral arbiter and guide, had suffered a great loss of prestige. The fact that ministers became ever more avid prophets of moral degeneration caused by novel reading while, at the same time, an increasing number of

readers shunned their advice, certainly indicates a shift of public authority from the traditional centers (of authority) to the margins, i.e. from the ministry to the "democratic" individual.[12]

Writers such as William Hill Brown seem to have been perfectly aware of the threat their fictions posed to the authority of the ministry, and as if to camouflage their true intentions, namely the novelists' claim to the very authority the clergy had held before, they occasionally paid tribute to the expectations of more conservative readers. Thus, in his epistolary novel *The Power of Sympathy* (1789)—a text often regarded as the first American novel—Brown has one of his characters, Mrs. Holmes, advise the addressee of her letter (and thus the implied reader):

> I have seldom spoken to you on the importance of religion and the veneration due to the characters of the clergy. I always supposed your good sense capable of suggesting their necessity and eligibility. The ministers of no nation are more remarkable for learning and piety than those of this country. The fool may pretend to scorn, and the irreligious to condemn, but every person of sense and reflection must admire that sacred order, whose business is to inform the understanding and regulate the passions of mankind. Surely, therefore, that class of men will continue to merit our esteem and affection, while virtue remains upon earth. (*PS* 79)

Brown's plea for an acknowledgement of the authority of the ministry sounds rather wooden, especially in a text which persistently undercuts the validity of this very plea by its own claims to authority. Paradoxically enough, it is the novelist (or rather his fictionalized spokesperson) who assumes (and obviously has) the authority necessary to grant secondary authority to those who *deserve* our "veneration." Thus, what, at first glance, may well be a writer's voluntary tribute to traditional social order, may also be an indirect and, as it were, sub-conscious act of a novelist's self-empowerment.

Cathy N. Davidson's reading of the rise of the novel in the Early Republic as an expression and product of a gradual re-*formation* or re-*attribution* of social authority[13] presents an interesting new perspective on the emergence of metafictional discourse in the literature of the Early Republic. Most novels of the Early Republic attest to the novelists' claim to authority and to the role of educators of a democratically minded readership. As, at the end of the eighteenth century, American novelists

registered a drastic decline of the traditional system of social and moral values they must have been rather irritated by the increasing destabilization of the very authority they wished to exert. At the same time, they must also have felt tempted to call for what they regarded as their new role as arbiters of public taste and agents of an individualized process of self-education. In a democratic society in which the individual's actions were no longer governed by a generally accepted system of social norms, readers—so the opinion of many novelists of the Early Republic—were called upon to improve their mental faculties by continual self-education, and novel reading was recommended as a means to reach this end. Thus a character in William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* advises her friend to regard the tale of an unfortunate woman as a moral example from which she may draw moral lessons for her own self-improvement. "[I]t certainly becomes us," Brown apostrophizes through one of his characters, Miss Harriot Fawcet,

> to draw such morals and lessons of instruction from [the occurrences] as will be a mirror by which we may regulate our conduct and amend our lives. A prudent pilot will shun those rocks upon which others have been dashed to pieces and take example from the conduct of others less fortunate than himself. It is the duty of the moralist, then, to deduce his observations from preceeding facts in such a manner as may directly improve the mind and promote the economy of human life.[14]

In a society which was in the process of reorganizing its system of social control by challenging the traditional centers of authority and by stressing the individual's power of self-regulation, it may not come as a surprise that the producers of *belles lettres* immediately offered their services as competent moral educators of the public while, at the same time, challenging the established modes of moralizing. Novelists were quick with their claim that only literature could replace the traditional wardens of civic virtue. Indeed, they could even exploit the new craving for fiction and the subsequent change in the reading habits of Americans for their own purposes. If readers refrained from reading moral tracts and other texts with an explicitly didactic purpose then they had to be addressed by means of more popular genres. In his novel *The Power of Sympathy,* William Hill Brown has his fictional moral arbiter, Mrs.

Holmes, argue in support of the *belles lettres* and their claims to moral authority. "Didactic essays," Mrs. Holmes asserts

> are not always capable of engaging the attention of young ladies. We fly from the labored precepts of the essayist to the sprightly narrative of the novelist. Habituate your mind to remark the difference between truth and fiction. You will then always be enabled to judge of the propriety and justness of a thought and never be misled to form wrong opinions by the meretricious *dress* of a pleasing tale. You will then be capable of deducing the most profitable lessons of instruction, and the design of your *reading* will be fully accomplished. (*PS* 77)

Brown's novel abounds in metafictional comments on issues such as the proper purpose of novel reading, and the novel's characters constantly express opinions which engage every reader in an individual metafictional discourse. Brown's *Power of Sympathy* is perhaps the most accomplished example of the uses of metafictional self-reflexion in the early American novel. The arguments Brown's characters voice in favor of fiction eloquently display and respond to the entire repertoire of contemporaneous prejudices against novel reading. The prime foundation of the conventional censure of fiction, i.e. the belief that novel reading would corrupt the reader's moral being, is attacked and undermined with particular diligence. As the above quotation clearly illustrates, Mrs. Holmes (and certainly William Hill Brown) did not find fault with fiction, but rather with the potential naivety of novel readers. Mrs. Holmes does not want to cure the malady (the danger of misreading) by killing the patient (fiction), and therefore does not call for a ban on novel reading; quite the reverse, she advocates "novel literacy," i.e. the cultivation of the ability to read novels aright, to "remark the difference between truth and fiction" (*PS* 77) and, as a consequence, to "be capable of deducing the most profitable lessons of instruction" (*PS* 77) from a class of texts which could well help improve civic virtue. Brown's program of a training in "novel literacy" is based on an extension and intensification of novel reading, not on its reduction.

The arguments American novelists of the late eighteenth century employed in their attempts at establishing and securing their status as America's new wardens of public virtue may easily lead one to the assumption that one system of authority was merely replaced by another

which, as a matter of fact, did not even differ in the means it used in order to fulfill its functions. Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* does, however, tell a different story. Far from claiming the authority the ministry had lost, novelists like William Hill Brown did not even attempt to establish a fixed system of *common* social norms. Instead of confronting the reader with moral edification or even indoctrination, late eighteenth-century American novelists were engaged in a discussion of the very presuppositions of social norms and their claim to indisputable *public* authority. As the passage from Brown's *Power of Sympathy* lucidly shows, the didactic impulse of early American fiction was primarily directed at initiating a process of the reader's *individual* "self-education" or "self-correction." Readers were supposed to draw their own *private* lessons from the novelists' stories, and, once more in *The Power of Sympathy*, Brown uses his principal spokesperson Mrs. Holmes, in order to convey his message to his readers:

> Satire is the correction of the vices and follies of the human heart; a woman may, therefore, read it to advantage. What I mean by enforcing this point is to impress the minds of females with a principle of self-correction; for among all kinds of knowledge which arise from reading, the duty of self-knowledge is a very eminent one; and it is at the same time the most useful and important. (*PS* 50)

Brown's novel amply illustrates that moral edification had given way to a new principle of self-education, a principle which, on the one hand, promoted a rather traditional notion of civic virtue, while, on the other hand, it challenged the very basis of this notion by insisting on the subjective and individual quality of man's education. The role of moral arbiter and guardian of "female education" which Brown seems to take on in the "Preface" to his novel is, indeed, not at all the role of a writer who wants to enforce his claims to moral authority. Although Brown, like most of his fellow novelists at the end of the eighteenth century, is a moralist, he knew all too well that an enlightened and "democratized" readership would no longer accept the norm of moral edification that had once been regarded as the true basis on which a novel could be recommended to the American reader. For Brown, the best guide to proper conduct is that which *"will bear the test of reflection"* (*PS* 98).

In spite of such extremely individualistic statements, American novelists did not really refrain from claiming the authority they explicitly located in each individual person's capability of moral discrimination. Yet, although novelists did not completely abstain from blunt moralizing, they had set in motion a process which challenged their own claims to authority. They had shown that moral values were the result of a process of cultural negotiation, and they had also shown that these values might have to be re-negotiated as a result of cultural changes. The novel offered a forum for that: it invited the reader to engage in a process of self-education, and this process implied that the reader constantly submitted to *and* questioned the very authority of the text. The eminence of metafictional discourses in early American fiction attests to the fact that the writers of fiction themselves were engaged in a process of negotiation, a process in which they sought to re-define the "role" fiction should henceforth play in American culture.

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NOTES

[1]Cf. G. Harrison Orians, "Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines: 1789-1810," *PMLA* 52 (1937): 195-214, Terence Martin, *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1961) 57-101, Henry Petter, *The Early American Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1971) 4-21, and, with the focus on the response to fiction from the 1840s through 1860s, Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984) esp. chapters 3 and 9.

[2]Royall Tyler, *The Algerine Captive; or, the Life and Adventures of Doctor Updike Underhill, Six Years a Prisoner Among the Algerines*, ed. Jack B. Moore (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967) vi-ix; italics mine; hereafter cited as *AC* with page references to this edition.

[3]Cf. esp. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: OUP, 1986) 55-79.

[4]On the extraordinary success of these libraries see esp. Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1860* (Durham: Duke UP, 1940) 3-27.

[5]Gordon S. Wood, "The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution," *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic*, ed. Robert H. Horwitz (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1979) 102-28.

[6]The terms "emplot" and "emplotment" refer to the fact that in our attempts at representing reality we unwittingly impose culturally pre-established and received narrative plots onto the data the phenomenal world offers, and that we are thus able to find a coherence which is not inherent in the data themselves but stems from the culturally accepted models of "world-making" and plausibility. For a theoretical foundation of these terms see Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) esp. "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," and his essay "The Narrativization of Real Events," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981): 793-98.

[7]Cf. Winfried Fluck, "Literature as Symbolic Action," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 28 (1983): 361-71, and esp. Kenneth Burke's seminal study *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1967).

[8]An excellent example of this strategy is Tabitha Gilman Tenney's *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon* (1801; New York: OUP, 1992). The story of Dorcasina is introduced as a true biography while, at the same time, the author paradoxically testifies to the verisimilitude of the tale by referring to the literary precedent, *Don Quixote*, as the basis of its claim to authenticity: ". . . you may suspect it to be a mere romance, an Hogarthian caricatura, instead of a true picture of real life. But, when you compare it with the most extravagant parts of the authentic history of the celebrated hero of La Mancha, the renowned Don Quixote, I presume you will no longer doubt its being a true uncoloured history of a romantic country girl . . ." (3). Yet, in spite of its play with its overt fictionality, Tenney's novel explicitly censures novel reading and tries—very much like Dorcasina's mother had tried with respect to her daughter—to prevent the reader's imagination "from being filled with the airy delusions and visionary dreams . . . with which the indiscreet writers of that fascinating kind of books, denominated Novels, fill the heads of artless young girls, to their great injury, and sometimes to their utter ruin" (4-5).

[9]Cf., for instance, James A. Henretta's *The Evolution of American Society, 1700-1815* (Lexington: Heath, 1973) and Jay Fliegelman's *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982).

[10]Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry; Containing the Adventures of Captain John Farrago and Teague O'Regan, His Servant*, ed. Lewis Leary (New Haven: College & University Press, 1965) 26-27; hereafter cited as *MC* with page references to this edition.

[11]The reader of *Modern Chivalry* will, however, soon find out that Brackenridge's constant use of metafictional reflections is not digressive but the main principle which governs the novel's structure and the narrative process. Cf. esp. Helmbrecht Breinig's analysis of the novel in his *Satire und Roman: Studien zur Theorie des Genrekonflikts und zur satirischen Erzählliteratur der USA von Brackenridge bis Vonnegut* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1984) 87-125.

[12]The fact that, at the end of the eighteenth century, the clergy intensified its attacks on writers of novels and on their claim to moral authority may be understood as a sign of the desperate and rather futile attempt at winning back the authority the clergy had already lost. For a discussion of this strategy in nineteenth-century America cf., for instance, Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1978).

[13] According to Davidson, the novel posed a fundamental challenge to the existing social order. "The pervasive censure of fiction," she claims, "eloquently attests to the force fiction itself was perceived to have as an ideology (or as an agent of ideology). Had the novel not been deemed a potent proponent of certain threatening changes, there would have been little reason to attack it. Had the novel not been seen as a covert or even overt critique of the existing social order, there would have been no need to defend so rigorously what had not been called into question nor to strive to persuade potential novel readers of the harm that they would do themselves should they foolishly indulge their appetite for fiction" (Davidson 40).

[14]William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy; or, the Triumph of Nature, Founded in Truth*, ed. William S. Osborne (New Haven: College & University Press, 1970) 66; hereafter cited as *PS* with page references to this edition.