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Representation and the Novel

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The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope that we know where we are.

—Henry James, “Preface” to *The American*

How might one tell a story that has a claim to being, in some way, *the* story of a shared region of cultural experience and circumstance? How might one write in such a way that one’s narrative shows what it means to be burdened with a particular society, history, or character and to do so in such a way that one’s story can claim for itself the right to stand for something general about one’s world and the forms of experience it renders possible? The conceit of such an effort might bewilder, but as a kind of literary project it should sound familiar enough. And of all the representational arts, it is the novel in which this project finds its most perfect expression. Not that all novelists, even of a realist stripe, have such ambitious interests in the real. But in the modern world such ambitions have come to feel more at home in the novel than in any other literary form, the odd attempt to revive epic poetry notwithstanding.¹

Since at least Ian Watt, literary scholars have had much to say that we still find compelling about the conditions of history, culture, and art that underwrote the grand representational projects of the traditional realist novel, but the same cannot be said of philosophers of literature. I will simply assert² that in contemporary philosophy we do not possess sufficient tools for explaining what it means for a novel to represent our world, or, which is just as interesting, to fail to do so. This is peculiar, since much philosophy of literature still concerns itself with the old question of how literary fictions can be adequate guides to the real—though of course in some circles

the notion of neither fiction nor the real is found interesting (and, without an answer to this question, we will find ourselves dumbstruck or gesturing wildly in the direction of a dismissive theory when called on to explain the novel's power of cultural articulation).³ But it is this extra step of actually accounting for the novel's ability to represent, when it wishes, the real that we do not quite know how to take. This is not to say that contemporary literary aesthetics has missed the point when it comes to representation. It is just that the point has been made to be almost exclusively about the novel's ability to generate *fictional* worlds and not its capacity to illuminate the real one.⁴

Theories, as Henry James's brother William told us, are simply tools, and, like any mere instrument, a theory should be refined or abandoned as soon as we find that it fails to help us fix the problems for which we enlisted it. It is the business of refinement that will occupy me here, and the problem I will argue we need to fix concerns the issue of how a literary representation could be "real," that is, realist not just in a genre sense but in the deeper cultural sense of having a claim to betoken, in addition to fictions, the world beyond the work: *our* world, whatever that may exactly be. Unsurprisingly, talk of the "real" is what typically provokes philosophical suspicion here, though, unless we think that one must be doing metaphysics whenever one draws from the fund of everyday English, we should be suspicious of this philosophical suspicion. At any rate, it is a mistake twice-over to see a discussion of reality as the ground on which to defend a notion of what we might just as well call "real representation": a representation in a work of fiction that presents itself as at once also a representation of the real.⁵ As we will see, it is a mistake in the primary instance because nothing much rides on what we mean by the "real" or "reality," apart from letting the terms designate a novel's success in implicating the reader's worldly interests in a fairly precise way. And it is a mistake in the second instance because it is the very notion of *representation* that is the true source of the problem.

To motivate this discussion, I want to look at the case of Henry James and a novel from his early period, *The American* (1877) (the hubris of the definite article was not lost on its early critics⁶). It was James who declared that "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (EL 46), and *The American* is worth considering on account of, as the title hints, its manifest representational project. The novel is often not thought to be among James's most successful, but that is beside the point here. In fact, part of what interests me about *The American* is what the critical praise and complaints together bring to view about the ground on which a literary work can acquire the status of a representation. This will initially sound amiss: our habit of thinking about representations in essentially *mimetic* terms makes it ring odd to speak of a novel as "acquiring the status of a representation," much as it would sound bizarre to speak of a photograph or portrait "becoming" a representation of its subject. It either is or isn't, some part of us wishes to say. That would be the mimetic part of our thinking about art, and, as I will argue, this is what needs to be questioned. In fact, what I want to suggest here is that "representation" usually means something radically different when applied to a novel than it does when philosophers invoke it to explain how a sentence, a thought, or an image can be revelatory of the world. I should warn that I have no interest in reconstructing

James's conception of realism or in making what I say about representation square with his theory of the novel. It is the example of a novel with such explicit and unabashed interest in the real that I care about here, and James and *The American* are apposite for my purposes because they act as a powerful reminder to philosophers of literature of something their theories of representation ought to be able to explain.

It is helpful, if not always entirely accurate, to read both Henry and William James as implicitly struggling to answer Emerson's question of what it means to think and write in "this new yet unapproachable America" (320). Both of the brothers were concerned with how to inherit yet also overcome the traditions of European thought that gave them their respective fields of creative activity. But if William James found the legacy of European philosophy old, ossified, and unresponsive to the demands of modern life, Henry James found the legacy of European art that most interested him—the novel—as young, yet to reach full maturity, and, for this reason, as posing a very different set of problems for, and possibilities of, inheritance. Henry was able to see himself in a way William never could as poised to play a significant role in *creating* the very corner of culture to which he wished to contribute. This naturally led Henry James to wonder what the American scene, indeed what the American, could contribute to the novel, a genre whose artistic homeland was clearly on the other side of the ocean.

James early on found the transatlantic encounter to be rich material for his literary explorations.⁷ The study of the "warring between two opposing civilizations" (qtd. in Banta 25) opened up for him a way of working through the problems of the novel, not only as modernity's freshest art form but, in its realist inflection, also as its potential book of life. In James's hands this "warring" is often dramatized in terms of a pressure placed on relationships, say as designating the point at which the European and the American, despite their hearts or best intentions, are bound to remain unavailable, even inscrutable, to one another—the American, for instance, unable finally to penetrate into the rigidness of old world cultural life and the European confounded by, of course, the Americanness of the American and what it might mean to embrace, or simply accept, that. At any rate, this pressure surely informs the writing of *The American*, and it produces most of the dramatic energy, such as it is, in what transpires for the worse between Christopher Newman, the titular American, and Claire de Cintré, a member of the Bellegardes, a noble French family.

Newman is decent, though naive, risibly earnest, and in possession of a distinctly new world form of arrogance, a self-assuredness that consists primarily in his belief that he is as good as everyone else. The Bellegardes, for their part, are intended to be seen as an image of high decay, of an ancient family now low on resources and capable of spectacular immorality yet utterly assured, presumably like Europe itself, that their place in civilization makes them superior in general and atmospheres above the American in particular. When Newman asserts that he too is "noble," Valentin Bellegarde, his ally in the family, kindly notes the equivocation, and this is one way James reveals the wall that Newman insists does not exist despite the fact that he keeps walking into it (see *AM* 107–09). Newman, in whose "eye innocence and experience were singularly blended" (7), in effect sees all class distinctions as illusory if not grounded on ethical distinctions—*noble*, *fine*, or *worthy* as meaningful only if translatable to marks of *moral* character. And he is willfully oblivious to the problems, some real, such a déclassé union will present to a family he thinks should see him as

entitled to every epithet they are solely because he is, at root, a very decent person. He stakes his claim to worthiness on the fact that he is an immensely successful *self-made* man, and he has a tin ear when told that for a family like the Bellegardes this is one way of putting what is wrong with him.

The Bellegardes are very attracted to Newman's wealth, but after initially accepting, if never quite condoning, his match with Claire, they come to realize that it is preferable to sacrifice her happiness than to allow a man who seems to have made his fortune producing washtubs marry one of their own. Claire accepts her family's verdict and becomes, incredibly, a Carmelite nun, which the reader must believe appeals to her more than the prospect of humiliating, or simply turning against, her family. The novel's great moment comes when Newman acquires ocular proof that the Marquise de Bellegard, Claire's mother and the family's reigning matriarch, had, along with the help of her son, played a role in the death of Claire's father. Newman intends to use the damning document to blackmail the Bellegardes into returning Claire to him. They refuse, and the novel concludes with Newman deciding to burn the proof instead of enlisting it for what would now be mere revenge, and in this act the moral authority of the American is asserted. This, in fact, is the point of *The American* for James: "the situation, in another country and an aristocratic society, of some robust but insidiously beguiled and betrayed, some cruelly wronged, compatriot, the point being in especial that he should suffer at the hands of persons pretending to represent the highest possible civilization and to be of an order in every way superior to his own" (AN 22). Newman had it within his power to destroy the Bellegardes, and for James Newman's claim to moral superiority rests with his ultimate refusal to exercise this power, thereby placing Newman on the side of the Kantian angel who is motivated by an inner moral sense and not, as the Bellegardes are revealed to be, by vulgar self-interest. The dramatic reversal is almost perfectly Aristotelian, though James, much to his credit as an artist, casts the peripeteia in purely moral terms, as an elegant motion of consciousness.

There is much complexity in the story, and parts of it are surely brilliant, both formally and in respect to what we naturally want to call its representation of life. For example, James's manner of representing Newman as both culturally innocent yet morally superior often works extremely well. The class distinctions Newman refuses to countenance are, in the grand scheme of things, anathema, and James himself found that his own experience of being an "eternal outsider" (qtd. in Brooks, *Paris* 45) during his Paris years bore witness to an aspect of European society that one can be justified in finding ugly and small. But the American is also shown to be in many respects unworthy of the culture he places such a high premium on experiencing. The trope of the American as mere cultural spectator and acquirer works very well in the novel. We see it in the opening scene in which Newman is reclining on an ottoman in the Louvre, "his head thrown back and his legs outstretched . . . staring at Murillo's beautiful moon-borne Madonna in profound enjoyment of his posture" (5). A few moments later he meets Noémi, an unremarkable artist who produces copies of masterpieces, and Newman orders an impossible number of imitations from her to be brought back to America. The quality of detail clearly does not matter much to Newman—it is significant that the American is blind to detail—and it seems he thinks that capturing the general form of a painting will suffice to transfer the "art" found in the original to its copy.

Newman reveres high European culture enough to escape to it when he quits his days of money-making, but, apart from the aesthetic tingles and entertaining experiences it affords him, he has little interest in opening himself up to it such that it might change him. His mind is never quite expanded by what he sees and his emotional life does not suffer any improvements, apart from realizing the power of his moral intuitions, which, strictly speaking, could have happened anywhere. He simply derives a kind of pleasure from knowing that he is in a position to bear witness to things of great value.⁸ To be sure, the reductive dollar and cents attitude that defined his commercial days still dominates his mode of perception on his grand tour. In pursuing Claire he wishes “to possess, in a word, the best article in the market” (44), and in Europe he finds “a great bazar, where one might stroll about and purchase handsome things” (82) just for, it appears, “the glory of possession” (123). He is comic to this extent but entirely recognizable as one who suffers from what James elsewhere described as “a profound, imperturbable, unsuspectingness on the part of many Americans of the impression they produce in foreign lands” (qtd. in Porter 40).⁹ Newman the American is the man of commerce who takes himself abroad so that he may acquire much more durable goods, though he would not quite describe his cultural project in these terms. We cannot help but see ourselves, or at least some of our neighbors, implicated in this.

It is important to note that claiming, as critics often do, that *The American* is not one of James’s brightest literary achievements is hardly an insult: in the words of an early review, “it is so good that we regret very much that it is not better,” and there is much to sustain the interests, both literary and philosophical, of the reader. The novel manages to fascinate in part because of the artistic struggle to which it bears witness, a search for literary forms and dramatic devices suited for capturing what James took to be essential about these two worlds and the predicament of culture to which their distance gives rise. James himself is a fine critic of his novel, telling us that while setting out to write a work of realism he had been “plotting an arch-romance without knowing it” (AN 25), and, as critics often note, it is a work that turns abruptly to melodrama while starting out in social comedy and irony.¹⁰ If this does not make for an entirely satisfying novel, it does add much to our sense of the artist as a young man exploring the material of his chosen art, struggling, in Peter Brooks’s words, “to define and create what would be the properly Jamesian form” (“Turn” 47).¹¹

But James’s own reason for regarding the novel a failure is in the end resolutely representational, though in a way that cannot be neatly disentangled from the formal and aesthetic elements of the narrative (in the case of art, the representational element never can be). The novel fails to get the world just right, in James’s final assessment, because it fails to get the Bellegardes, and hence the region of the world for which they stand, just right. In James’s words, “their preferred course, a thousand times over, would have been to haul him and his fortune into their boat” (AN 36). In short, the hook on which James hangs the novel’s drama cannot also support its claim to realism: a family such as the Bellegardes *never* would have refused Newman and his wealth. And for James this compromises the entire narrative, since it makes Newman’s plight itself seem fantastic, contrived, as though part of a romance that cruelly denies the reader a happy ending. Newman does not get the girl because James rightly saw that this would undermine his attempt, in effect, at social criticism. But the portrayal of

the Bellegardes compromises, for James, the novel's realism and hence the very thing that can sustain its critical project.

Clearly more can be said about the novel than this, and I have no illusions that I have provided a serious critical engagement with *The American*. But what I have said suffices, I hope, to stage the philosophical question I want to ask. Before posing the question, the reader must grant me a few things. Assume, as James does, that *The American* cannot credibly present itself as having shown us what it wished to show us, since the Bellegardes, unrealistic in their behavior and concerns, compromise James's attempt to reveal something of significance about the transatlantic encounter and the two national characters he sought to bring into relief with his story. In short, assume *The American* in fact does fail in its representational project. The philosophical question is, of course, what does this mean, exactly, and what does it tell us about what it means for a novel to be, or to fail to be, a representation of something real? Put differently, exactly why does getting the Bellegardes wrong show that *The American*, a novel "that does attempt to represent life," cannot claim to have succeeded in doing so?

To entertain a silly but instructive way of approaching these questions, just why should muddling it with the Bellegardes be so decisive in determining whether *The American* offers a real representation? James's treatment of Newman succeeds in bringing much to view that seems essential about Americans, and one can assume that he gets right so many of the regions of Parisian life that concern him, from the culture of the opera house to the oppressiveness of the American expatriate community (represented by the Tristrams, whose name hints at how sad the community really is). Great expanses of the novel are, as philosophers sometimes put it, adequate to life. If a portrait provides a serviceable likeness of its subject, then surely it thereby offers a representation of it (perhaps the nose is off, but, so what?). And, likewise, if a novel such as *The American* gets so much life right, how could we possibly deny it the status of a representation? One could even argue that the Bellegardes cannot be so quickly dismissed as unrealistic and hence incapable of bonding the novel to the world beyond it. Presumably one can find in the great world an example of the French aristocracy that would be inclined to put family honor before material gain, and, if we are being literal, this should be sufficient to show that the world does answer in the affirmative to the question of whether James's novel mirrors it, certainly in this respect. Viewed this way, if James assures us that the world is not as he represented it to be in *The American*, his proof seems altogether paltry. Indeed, if the question of whether a novel is a representation is a matter of whether a novel matches, mirrors, or corresponds to items in the world, it is virtually impossible to understand how a novel could ever fail to offer a representation of life, at least if its author is in any way serious about her artistic labor. In the case of *The American*, all one would have to do is show that there is an item in the real world (with the right kind of passport) that is relevantly similar to an item in the novel, and finding such an item will not be a great challenge.

We know better than this, and the above line of reasoning should strike us as manifestly ridiculous. But why? First things first, we know that a novel never acquires its right to be called a representation of life because we can tally up the instances in which it gets the world right and find that on the whole it balances out in its favor. Whatever "representation" means when applied to a novel, it surely does not mean this. And we also understand perfectly well what James is saying when he complains

about his treatment of the Bellegardes and hence the window his novel attempts to open on the world. He is not, or not just, looking to the world beyond the text and wondering whether what goes on there is sufficiently like what goes on in his story. In fact, his worry is, of course, primarily a *literary* one. It turns attention to the work and highlights, above all else, a problem with its interior rather than just a relation it bears to something external to it. What James is lamenting, in a word, is his handling of his own dramatic material, as a matter of whether the Bellegardes, narrative creations that they are, are wrought as they must be for us to find them, and hence the story they hold together, compelling.

If this point appears obvious, it brings to our attention something massively confusing in how we think about representation in respect to the novel. The confusion concerns this intrusion of strictly literary formal and narratological questions in our assessment of whether a novel offers a representation of life. This is bound to perplex since so much of our thinking about representation in philosophy deems all of this irrelevant. The broadly aesthetic features of a representation have much to do with whether we *value* it, but they have exactly nothing to do with whether it *is* a representation. When a tourist produces her Canon and points and clicks, the image she creates is a representation. Whether it is also well-taken or an embarrassment, beautiful or ugly, dramatic or dull, is wholly irrelevant to its status as a representation. More to the point, if you recount a harrowing tale of a family reunion gone awry, *how* you tell your story has no bearing on whether it is true or false, whether, that is, it represents reality aright. But in the case of the novel, how a story is told very much does seem relevant, and not merely to its status as “art” but also to whether we are willing to say of it, “this is how we are, too.” Put differently, whether we are willing to call *The American* the story of the American lost in Europe seems importantly tethered to the extent we think the story is well told, and none of the novel’s formal, literary, or aesthetic accomplishments can be ruled out in advance as irrelevant.

The confusion, I suggest, is nearly entirely a matter of how we have been trained to think of representation in philosophy, and everything from the philosophy of fine art to the theory of mind and language conspire against one who tries to apply it to the novel. The problem is, as I said above, our habit of thinking of representation in essentially mimetic terms. This is not the place to offer a serious reckoning with the immense tradition of work on mimesis, but a few comments will hopefully do. To go back to the source, consider Plato’s account of *mimêsis* in the *Republic*, at least according to a standard, if simplistic, way of interpreting it. In Book 10 of *The Republic* Plato offers the famous picture of the artist (*poiētēs*) as simply holding up a mirror to nature, merely “copying” (*mîmeisthai*) appearances (see 597d-e). Plato’s account of mimesis casts it as a kind of representation that “imitates” that of which it is a representation. Thus the image a mimesis offers up is—to list some terms that are at home here, though not all at once—a likeness, simulacrum, depiction, illustration, reproduction, picture, *a representation*.

While it cannot be said that philosophy is still especially Platonic in its theories of representation, Plato’s binding of representation to mimesis is still very much with us. We feel its presence in much philosophy of mind and language when it explains how a thought or a sentence can represent reality—by, in effect, producing a mental or linguistic copy of some worldly state of affairs—and contemporary philosophy of art confesses its reliance on mimesis almost perfectly when one considers what is

by all counts its chief contribution to these debates, Kendall Walton's 1990 *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. The title, I take it, makes my case. In many ways brilliant, Walton's book offers a theory of not real but fictional representation. It is well he should, for the manner in which artworks, especially novels, represent their fictional worlds is arguably the most purified version of mimesis humans have produced: the fictional world a novel generates is *perfectly* adequate to the text that generates it, since the words of the work conjure up the very world to which those words refer, matching it, as it were, at the seams. The images a camera or portraitist produce are rarely so neatly mimetic, but, to the extent they offer fair copies of their subjects, they have the right to be called representations.

Asking of a novel, *any* novel, whether it represents the world in such a way is a waste of time.¹² I take it that the above "silly" questions I asked reveal why, though I have left out the most important reason. Simply, given that the narratives novelists weave are fictional, how could they possibly offer an apt vehicle for a real representation mimetically construed? *What* could a fictional tale copy such that it could be said to be an image of the real? One might retreat to an Aristotelian view of poetry as "representing universals" or what humans do "necessarily or for the most part" (see *Poetics*, li. 51a38–51b12). But good luck making that work: what, exactly, is being represented here, and how could fictions be apt for mimetically rendering it? One will likely either have to posit very bizarre features of the real or attribute awesome metaphysical powers to the novel. James on occasion does speak in a way that may seem to invite some such approach. One can be forgiven for thinking this when he claims that it is "our general sense of the way things happen" (AN 34) that constrains our ability to call a novel a representation of life, but James, note, puts the emphasis on "our sense" and thus turns attention on to ourselves and not the behavior of a world external to us and the art we produce. This is crucial, and it shows him to be no Aristotelian in modern clothing.

One should acknowledge why philosophers of literature are at times tempted by the idea that literary fictions are in the business of offering mimeses of essences, universals, and the like. For it can seem that we need recourse to metaphysical talk of this sort if we are to have an adequate story to tell of *how* a fictional mimesis could be of interest from the point of view of the real. The idea that fictions are mimetic renderings of essential or universal aspects of human circumstance offers a powerful, if ultimately empty, way of identifying what we find in fictions that can repay the worldly interests we bring to the novel. And, shorn of this metaphysical embroidery about essences and universals, it seems the most the concept of mimesis will entitle us to say is, for instance, that Christopher Newman shows us not *the* American but just an American, and a fictional one at that, as the addition of a merely imaginary member to a class of things that is already highly populated and greatly varied. Put differently, once brought down to earth, the concept of mimesis appears apt for sustaining little more than the utterly uncontroversial idea that in the realist novel fictional characters often behave, more or less, like real people. Such a notion of mimesis will make the novel's representational activity appear to consist in no more than its ability to render its fictions *lifelike*, which is a step short of life itself. This clearly is not what James had in mind when he praised the novel's great representational power.

What I suggest the philosopher of literature do is reserve the concept of mimesis, as Walton would urge, for making sense of *fictional* representation and ignore it more

or less entirely when attempting to understand *real* representation. But what do we replace it with such that we can explain how the novel might offer a representation of life? What is the power a novel holds that accounts for its ability, at least on occasion, to come to be *about* the world, to show us something of “real” consequence? The suggestion I want to make is that we replace the idea of *mimesis* with that of *representativeness* in our thinking of how fictions can come to represent the real. Perhaps the crudest thing we can do when trying to understand how a novel binds itself to the world is to ask “what does the novel represent” and then go in search of some real state of affairs of which the novel acts as a kind of mirror. But we begin to seem much more sensible if we ask how a fictional narrative can come to be representative—can come to stand for, even to embody for us—various regions of worldly experience and circumstance.

A conception of representation-as-representativeness will suggest that the relationship between the novel and the real is more primary, more foundational, than the mimetic view can allow, which, after all, just makes art a copy of the real and so not especially essential or enlightening; we presumably might just look on the real thing itself. But if interpreted as a claim about representativeness, a metaphor better suited for describing the novel’s representational power is to say that it has the ability to function not as a mirror but as bedrock, offering narratives that hold down and, in doing so, make available to a culture generally, a highly specific purchase on the world. If the novel is not a great mirror it surely is a great organizer, and part of what it organizes is cultural material, weaving narratives that bestow a kind of meaning, a sense of the significance, the import, of the aspects of life it explores. The novel’s mode of cultural presentation may be fictional, but the fictions it offers are fictions upon which we often find we can stand if we wish to view the world around us in a similar light. So my suggestion is that to say that a novel succeeds in its representational project is at least in part to say that it achieves a significant degree of success in its attempt to offer a narrative that organizes our perceptions, feelings, thoughts, interests—all the things we rely on when struggling to gain a purchase on our world—in the right way in respect to the region of the cultural life it wishes to explore.

If this conception of representation-as-representativeness initially strikes one as odd, it should not perplex any more than does the issue of how something—some face, some event, some object, some place—can achieve the status of a symbol, icon, or image. Note immediately that to say, for example, that Detroit is an image of American urban decay, or that a poster advertising a certain music festival symbolizes the 1960s, is manifestly not to claim that Detroit is a *copy* or *imitation* of urban decline in the U.S. or that the countercultural movement *looked like* a colorful advertisement for Woodstock. But it is to say that in a certain culture this city and this poster have come to represent these things, only the representational relationship in these cases is not mimetic but emblematic, as matter of one thing acquiring the role of being representative of some broader, more general, and typically grander state of affairs. This is why, as promised above, it turns out to make sense to speak of an image and even a narrative as “becoming a representation.” And for a novel to become a representation, is, in the most perfect instance, for it to become the story we find ourselves compelled to proffer when called on to share a sense of our culture. We

hold it up as representative of the region of social and cultural life upon which we wish to cast light, allowing the structure of its narrative to constrain and guide our thinking about the world beyond it.

Of course, features internal to a literary work will constrain in all sorts of ways our capacity to see our world through it. In other words, a reader cannot, through a sheer act of will, turn just any literary narrative into a representation in the sense I am arguing for here. This, and perhaps good manners, explain why James points to his novel and not to its readers when explaining why *The American* fails as a representation of life. In other words, I am not arguing for a kind of vulgar reader response theory or an inane subjectivist account of literary meaning, approaches that would threaten to make the question of whether a literary work is a representation of something worldly hang entirely on what a reader feels like doing with a novel. But I do think that making literal sense of how the novel, which trades in fictions, can be said to represent our world, requires that we look not just in a novel but also beyond it and to the ways a culture has put it to a certain use. This “use” is arguably built into the fabric of the institution and culture of the realist novel, intended by authors, anticipated by informed readers, and in general bound up with just about everything we know about it and the aesthetic, artistic, and political interests that underwrite its production. The point is that unless we look beyond the novel’s interior and to established ways of receiving it, we will inevitably fail to identify how sturdy, public links come to be established between its fictions and the world external to it. If it is wrongheaded to put all of the emphasis on the reader when telling the story of how a novel forges a real representation, it is equally misguided to think all of the emphasis can be placed on the novel and what “it” does. Author, text, and reader should all be seen as mutually implicated in a practice that itself allows us to make sense of the notion of real representation. The idea of a cultural practice here acts, as it often does, as a kind of third term to explain how readers and works are united in a more or less orderly and principled way such that, in tandem, they can accomplish that which neither, taken in isolation, can.

So here we are with the question I used *The American* to stage. What I think we should say first is that we can see realist novels such as *The American* as issuing a particular kind of invitation, proposing, if you will, that we allow it to frame a specific way of thinking about the culture it explores. And we might regard the claim that a literary work in fact does represent reality as having implicit reference to a kind of privilege we give it, that of allowing it to stand for us in a certain way: to *represent* us. If this is so, then to say that *The American* does not succeed as a representation of life is to say that ultimately, perhaps regrettably, we deny it this privilege, that we find we must refuse its invitation to let it provide for us an orientation to our world. In dull and plain terms, it is to say that the story of *The American* cannot be held up as the story of the American, that we are not willing to produce the image of Christopher Newman and the Bellegardes if called on to articulate a sense of our culture and how we take some of those who populate it to be. But to say this is, again, not to mark a mere lack of willingness on our part. The list of formal, narratological, and artistic complaints James airs about this early work is itself an excellent example of how the very crafting of a novel can defy an author’s attempt to produce a work “that does represent life.”

If we regard a novel as a mere piece of language and look nowhere beyond it, the very question of whether it represents the world is likely unintelligible. But the question becomes ponderable if considered in terms of the novel's place in a culture that has embraced it and come to link it in all sorts of manifest and implicit ways to its self-conception. The practice of criticism itself is one example of how these links can be established, and all the various regions of our culture that make use of the novel, from the university professor to one trying to dazzle at a dinner party, help fill out this story of how a culture establishes these points of connection such that it becomes sensible to speak of a novel as a representation of our world. What we see in James's comments on *The American*, and in much (though of course not all) criticism in general, is the attempt to situate fictions in broader contexts of life, contexts that reveal how a fiction can be made to be *about* or *mean* something of general, and real, significance. The very idea of the transatlantic encounter, so central to making sense of much of James's work, is one obvious example of this process of worldly contextualization. The story of *The American*, because it is muddled up with the Bellegardes, cannot ultimately be so situated, at least not in James's reckoning. But if *The American* fails to attain such status of a real representation, *The Golden Bowl* surely does not, and we will not have much trouble producing a list of literary narratives that have come to play something approximating the role of bedrock in how we make sense of our world. They needn't all do so to the extent, say, Milton's story of The Fall (ours, not Satan's) does. It is enough that a novel comes to occupy a certain privileged space in a culture, even in just some rather peculiar corner of it (think, say, of *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*). It is enough, that is, to show that of the great variety of stories we have at our disposal, a certain novel is among those we find apt when attempting to say something important, or simply interesting, about what we call our world.

Here we see that questions of what reality "really" is or whether we even possess "a world" are, contrary to a fashionable tick in certain circles in philosophy and theory, quite irrelevant to the issues of whether a novel can be representational. All that matters here is, as James saw, "our sense" of things, and I take it as uncontroversial that we do have a sense of ourselves as inhabiting a social world, and this is all that is needed for a novel to work its representational magic. If this is so, we can now answer what just above seemed a mystery: why should *how* a story is told make any difference when determining whether it offers a representation of our world? Of course it makes a difference, for the way in which the story is told becomes the way in which we wish to tell our story of our culture, whatever it precisely is and however we take it to be.¹³

NOTES

¹To give just a few obvious examples, think of the elaborate representational interests that find expression in Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, C. S. Lewis's *Dymer*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, or, in a very different way, Louis Zukofsky's "A."

²I argue for, rather than merely assert, this in *Fiction*, esp. chapters 1 and 2.

³Stolnitz provided one such dismissive theory for contemporary analytic aesthetics, Barthes for literary theory.

⁴I say much more about this in "Literature and Knowledge."

⁵The term "realist," so standard in our talk about art, is best not used to mark more or less precise philosophical positions, hence my use of the slightly queer-sounding "real" instead of "realist" representations.

⁶As a July 1877 review in the *Galaxy* complained, "Mr. Christopher Newman is certainly a fair representative of a certain sort, and a very respectable sort, of American, but he is not such a man that

Mr. James, himself an American living in Europe, is warranted in setting him up before the world as ‘*The American*.’ . . . Why then put him forth thus set up on the pedestal of the definite article?’ (qtd. in Banta 24).

⁷See Brooks (*Paris*) for an extensive discussion of James’s French experience and its relevance to his development as a novelist.

⁸See Otten for a general discussion of the significance of the merely material in much of James’s fiction.

⁹From an 1876 letter to William Dean Howells.

¹⁰In this paragraph I am much indebted to Brooks’s discussion (“Turn”).

¹¹I am here again indebted to Brooks’s “Turn.”

¹²For a heroic, if not entirely convincing, attempt to prove otherwise, see Nuttall.

¹³I am grateful to Kristin Boyce’s and Rob Chodat’s very helpful suggestions and criticisms.

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