

INTRODUCTION TO UNITS 4, 5 & 6

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I. TRANSFORMATION OF A NATION

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the fertile, mineral-rich American continent west of the Appalachians and the Alleghenies was peopled and exploited. Americans, their numbers doubled by a continuous flow of immigrants, pushed westward to the Pacific coast, displacing Indians and Spanish settlements where they stood in the way. Vast stands of timber were consumed; numberless herds of buffalo and other game gave way to cattle, sheep, farms, villages, and cities; various technologies converted the country's immense natural resources into industrial products both for its own burgeoning(floreciente) population and for foreign markets.

The result was that, between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the First World War, the country was wholly transformed. Before the Civil War, America had been essentially a rural, agrarian, isolated republic whose idealistic, confident, and self-reliant(autodependientes) inhabitants for the most part believed in God; by the time the United States entered World War I as a world power, it was an industrialized, urbanized, continental nation whose people had been forced to come into terms with the implications of Darwin's theory of evolution as well as with profound changes in its own social institutions and cultural values.

The Civil War cost some 58 billion and claimed 600,000 lives. It seems also to have left the country morally exhausted. Nonetheless, the country prospered materially over the five following decades in part because the war

had stimulated technological development and had served as an occasion to test new methods of organization and management that were required to move efficiently large numbers of men and material, and which were then adapted to industrial modernization on a massive scale. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; industrial output grew at a geometric rate, and agricultural productivity increased dramatically; electricity was introduced on a large scale; new means of communication such as the telephone revolutionized many aspects of daily life; coal, oil, iron, gold, silver, and other kinds of mineral wealth were discovered and extracted to make large numbers of vast individual fortunes and to make the nation as a whole rich enough to capitalize for the first time on its own further development. By the end of the century, no longer a colony politically or economically, the United States could begin its own imperialist expansion (of which the Spanish-American War in 1898 was only one sign).

The central material fact of the period was industrialization, on a scale unprecedented in the earlier experiences of England and Europe. Between 1850 and 1880 capital invested in manufacturing industries more than quadrupled, while factory employment nearly doubled. By 1885 four transcontinental railroad lines were completed, using their own construction and carrying to manufacturing centers in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago the nation's quintupled output of steel. This extensive railway system -and the invention of the refrigerated railway car- in turn made possible such economic developments as the centralization of the meat-packing(envasado de carne) industry in Chicago. Control over this enterprise as well as other industries passed to fewer and larger companies as time went on. In the two decades following the 1870s, a very small number of men controlled without

significant competition the enormously profitable steel, railway, oil, and meat-packing industries.

This group of men, known variously as buccaneers, captains of industry, self-made men, or robber barons, included Jay Gould, Jim Hill, Leland Stanford, Jim Fisk, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and John D. Rockefeller. However different in temperament and public behavior, all of these men successfully squeezed out their competitors and accumulated vast wealth and power. All were good examples of what the English novelist D. H. Lawrence described as "the lone hand and the huge success". These were the men who served as exemplars of Mark Twain's Colonel Beriah Sellers, a character who in turn epitomizes much of the spirit of acquisitiveness excoriated (censurar ácidamente) by Twain in *The Gilded Age* (1870s), 1873 (a novel written in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner).

In this half century, as industry flourished, America's cities grew. When the Civil War broke out, America, except for the northeastern seaboard, was a country of farms, villages, and small towns. Most of its citizens were involved in agricultural pursuits and small family business. By the turn of the century only about one third of the population lived in farms. New York had grown from a city of 500,000 in 1850 to a metropolis of nearly 3,500,000 persons by 1900, many of them recent immigrants from central, eastern, and southern Europe. Chicago, at mid-century a raw town of 20,000, had over 2,000,000 inhabitants by 1910. By the end of the First World War one half of the American population was concentrated in a dozen or so cities; the vast majority of all wage earners were employed by corporations and large enterprises, 8,5 million as factory workers. Millions of people participated in the property that accompanied this explosive industrial expansion, but the social costs were immense.

The transformation of an entire continent, outlined above, was not accomplished, that is, without incalculable suffering. In the countryside increasing numbers of farmers, dependent for transportation of their crops on the monopolistic railroads, were squeezed off the land by what the novelist Frank Norris characterized as the giant "octopus" that crisscrossed the continent. Everywhere independent farmers were placed "under the lion's paw" of land speculators and absentee landlords that Hamlin Garland's story made famous. For many, the great cities were also, as the radical novelist Upton Sinclair sensed, jungles where only the strongest, the most ruthless (despiadados), and the luckiest survived. An oversupply of labor kept wages down and allowed the industrialists to maintain working conditions of notorious danger and discomfort for men, women, and children who competed for the scarce jobs.

Neither farmers nor urban laborers were effectively organized to pursue their own interests, and neither group had any significant political leverage (fuerza, influencia) until the 1880s. Legislators essentially served the interests of business and industry, and the scandals of President Grant's administration, the looting (saqueo) of the New York Treasury by William Marcy ("Boss") Tweed in the 1870s, as well as the later horrors of municipal corruption exposed by journalist Lincoln Steffens and other "muckrakers" (periodista sensacionalista) were symptomatic of what many writers of the time took to be the age often violent, and such groups as the notorious "Molly Maguires", which performed acts of terrorism in Pennsylvania, seemed to confirm the sense of the public and of the courts that labor organizations were "illegal conspiracies" and thus public enemies. Direct violence was probably, as young Emma Goldman believed, a necessary step toward establishing collective bargaining as a means of negotiating disputes

between industrial workers and their employers; it was, in any event, not until such an alternative developed -really not until the 1930s- that labor acquired the unquestioned right to strike.

This rapid transcontinental settlement and the new urban industrial circumstances were accompanied by the development of a national literature of great abundance and variety. New themes, new forms, new subjects, new regions, new authors, new audiences all emerged in the literature of this half century. As a result, at the onset of World War I, the spirit and substance of American literature had evolved remarkably, just as its center of production had shifted from Boston to New York in the late 1880s and the sources of its energy to Chicago and the Midwest. No longer was it produced, at least in its popular forms, in the main solemn, typically moralistic men from New England and the Old South; no longer were polite, well-dressed, grammatically correct, middle-class young people the only central characters in its narratives; no longer were these narratives to be set in exotic places and remote times; no longer, indeed, were fiction, poetry, drama, and formal history the chief acceptable forms of literary expression; no longer, finally, was literature read primarily by young, middle-class women. In sum, American literature in these years fulfilled in considerable measure the condition Whitman called for in 1867 in describing *Leaves of Grass*: it treats, he said of his own major work, each state and region as peers "and expands from them, and includes the world...connecting an American citizen with the citizens of all nations". Self-educated men from the frontier, adventurers, and journalists introduced industrial workers and the rural poor, ambitious businessmen and vagrants(vagabundos), prostitutes and unheroic soldiers as major characters in fiction. At the same time, these years saw the emergence of what the critic Warner Berthoff aptly designates "the literature of argument",

powerful works in sociology, philosophy, psychology, many of them impelled by the spirit of exposure and reform. Just as America learned to play a role in this half century as an autonomous international political, economic, and military power, so did its literature establish itself as a producer of major works. In its new security, moreover, it welcomed (in translation) the leading European figures of the time -Tolstoy, Ibsen, Chekhov, Hardy, Zola, Galdós, Verga- often in the columns of Henry James and William Dean Howells, who reviewed their works enthusiastically in *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's Monthly*, the *North American Review*, and other leading journals of the era. American writers in this period, like most writers of other times and places, wrote to earn money, earn fame, change the world, and -out of that mysterious compulsion to find the best order for the best words- express themselves in a permanent form and thus exorcise the demon that drove them.

II. LOCAL COLOR, REALISM AND NATURALISM

Terms like *realism*, *naturalism*, *local color*, while useful shorthand for professors of literature trying to "cover" great numbers of books and long periods of time, probably do as much harm as they do good, especially for readers who are beginning their study of literature. The chief disservice these generalizing terms do to readers and authors is to divert attention away from the distinctive quality of an author's sense of life to a general body of ideas. In a letter turning down one of the many professorships he was offered, Howells observed that the study of literature should begin and end in pleasure, and it is far more rewarding to establish in Emerson's phrase, "an original relationship" to particular texts and authors than it is an attempt to fit them into movements.

However, since these generalizations are still in currency, we need to examine some of them.

One of the most far-reaching intellectual events of the last half of the nineteenth century was the publication in 1850 of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. This book, together with Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1870), hypothesized that over the millennia, man had evolved from lower forms of life. Humans were special, not -as the Bible taught- because God had created them in His image, but because they had successfully adapted to changing environmental conditions and had passed on their survival-making characteristics genetically. Though few American authors wrote treatises in reaction to Darwinism, nearly every writer had to come to terms somehow with this challenge to traditional conceptions of man, nature, and the social order.

One response was to accept the more negative implications of evolutionary theory and to use it to account for the behavior of characters in literary works. That is, characters were conceived as more or less complex combinations of inherited attributes and habits conditioned by social and economic forces. As Émile Zola, the influential French theorist and novelist, put the matter in his essay *The Experimental Novel*:

we must operate with characters, passions, human and social data as the chemist [...] physicist work on inert bodies, as the physiologist works on living bodies. Determinism governs everything. It is scientific investigation; it is experimental reasoning that combats one by one the hypotheses of the idealists and will replace novels of pure imagination by novels of observation and experiment.

Many American writers adopted this pessimistic form of realism, this so-called "naturalistic" view of man, though each writer, of course, incorporated this assumption, and many others, into his or her work in highly individual ways.

In sum, despite residual prohibitions that insisted on humanity's special place in the universe, and a status-conscious gentility that militated against the ugly as well as the "morally" unclean, America proved to be a fertile ground for naturalistic ideas and realistic literary technique, though the ideas were often undercut (rebajadas), and the technique, while commonly documentary, was adapted to highly individual uses. The country's democratic spirit (in any case, the principle of equality) and the harsh realities of country and urban life that accompanied industrialization and unbridled economic competitiveness made it receptive to a literature of familiar people and ordinary places keenly observed by eye and ear.

II.1. LOCAL COLOR (REGIONAL WRITING)

Regional writing, another expression of the realistic impulse, resulted from the desire both to preserve distinctive ways of life before industrialization dispersed or homogenized them and to avoid the harsh realities that seemed to replace these early times. At a more practical level, much of the writing was a response to the opportunities presented by the rapid growth of magazines, which created a new market for short fiction. By the end of the century, in any case, virtually every region of the country, from Maine to California, from the northern plains to the Louisiana bayous (pantanos), had its "local colorist" (the implied comparison is to painters of so-called "genre" [≈ costumbristas] scenes) to immortalize its distinctive natural, social, and linguistic features. Though often suffused (bañada) with sentimentalism

and nostalgia, the best work of these regionalists renders both a convincing surface of a particular time and location and penetrates below the surface to the depths that transform the local into the universal. This ambiguity of attitude may be seen in an early example of local-color writing such as Bret Harte's *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, which made Harte a national celebrity in the rest of the country about the gold-rush. His country was satisfied in this and other myth-making stories Harte produced early in his career.

Before the Civil War, New England -and Boston and Concord in particular- had long dominated the American literary scene, and its authors had created, in works such as Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), a strong image of itself as a bucolic landscape with still a suggestion of the wild at the edge of its clearings (claros). Harriet Beecher Stowe has also provided in her *Old Town Folks* (1869) one of the most successful postwar evocations of a mode of life that had never quite existed. And her earlier novel, *Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862), inspired Sarah Orne Jewett of South Berwick, Maine, to become a writer.

II.2. REALISM AS ARGUMENT

During these fifty years a vast body of nonfictional prose was devoted to the description, analysis, and critique of social, economic, and political institutions and to the unsolved social problems that were one consequence of the rapid growth and change of the time. Women's rights, political corruption, economic inequity (injusticia), business deceptions, the exploitation of labor - these became the subjects of articles and books by a long list of journalists, historians, social critics, and economists. A surprising amount of this writing survives as literature, and much of it has genuine power that is often attributed

only to the older, "purer" forms. Certainly in that most ambitious of all American works of moral instruction, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), Adams registers through a literary sensibility a sophisticated historian's sense of what we now recognize as the disorientation that accompanies rapid and continuous change. The result is one of the most essential books of and about the whole period, and it seems fitting that Adams should have the last -though surely not the conclusive- word about his own problematic times.

Of all the problems of the day, perhaps the most persistent and resistant to solution was the problem of racial inequality (desigualdad), more specifically what came to be known as the "Negro problem". Many works have touched one aspect or another of the long, shameful history of white injustices to black Americans, but two items by major black writers and leaders have a special claim on our attention: the autobiography of Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (1900), and the brilliantly analytical essay on Washington in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W. E. B. DuBois. The Washington-DuBois controversy set the major terms of the continuing debate between black leaders and in the black community with respect to the future. Will blacks accept anything less than complete equality educationally, socially, politically, and economically?

The more enduring fictional and nonfictional prose forms of the era, however, come to terms imaginatively with the individual and collective dislocations and discontinuities associated with the closing out of the frontier, urbanization, intensified secularism (laicismo), unprecedented immigration, the surge of national wealth unequally distributed, revised conceptions of human nature and destiny, the reordering of family and civil life, and the pervasive spread of mechanical and organizational technologies. The examples of courage, sympathy, and critical understanding on the part of our writers were a

legacy to be drawn on, often unconsciously, often rebelliously, as America entered her next round of triumphs and tragedies, as the country self-consciously began its quest(búsqueda) for a usable past.

In this half century, material, intellectual, social, and psychological changes in America went forward at such extreme speed and on such a massive scale that the enormously diverse writing of the time registers, at its core, degrees of shocked recognition of the human consequences of these radical transformations. Sometimes the shock is expressed in recoil(retroceso) and denial -thus the persistence, in the face of the ostensible triumph of realism, of the literature of diversion: nostalgic poetry, sentimental and melodramatic drama, and swashbuckling(de capa y espada) historical novels.

II.3. REALISM AS LITERARY TECHNIQUE

American literary Realism was a reaction, influenced by figures such as Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola in France and Turgenev, and Chekhov in Russia, against the idealized vision of life inherent in the Romanticism of writers like Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, as well as a host of minor sentimental escapists, who were concerned with the ideal and transcendent and whose works incorporated the imaginative elevation of mystery, terror, ideality, and sublimity. The development of empirical Darwinism science led realistic American writers to a positivistic factualism that stressed careful observation and depiction of the outer world, a concern with the mundane lives of common people, a concentration of the modern and the regional, a dramatic method of presentation that distanced the author from the scene of the work, mimetic dialogue, and a transparent narrative style.

Among important American writers usually considered realists are Hamlin Garland, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Henry James, John W. De Forest, Harold Frederic, Bret Harte, and Sarah Orne Jewett. Crane identified himself with the realists early in his career and said in this respect, "Later I discovered that my creed was identical with the one of Howells and Garland and in this way I became involved in the beautiful war between those who say that art is man's substitute for nature and we are the most successful in art when we approach the nearest to nature and truth, and those who say -well, I don't know what they say". Yet despite his fidelity to observed experience and rejection of romantic sentimentality, Crane fits uneasily under the rubric of literary realism. Crane's characters were seldom common men, and he rarely wrote about ordinary experiences. His almost pervasive(omnipresente, penetrante) irony, symbolistic techniques, narrative ambiguities, and sometimes deterministic, sometimes nihilistic view of the natural and social universe place his fiction beyond the taxonomy of literary Realism.

II.4. NATURALISM

Epitomized in the fiction and literary theory of William Dean Howells, its leading American exponent, Realism stressed "the truthful treatment of material" with a focus on the commonplace and a reliance on an objective view of human experience, to the extent that objectivity can be attained by a writer. Naturalists depicted the same world of everyday occurrences but emphasized the aberrant or abnormal within this milieu, centering on acts of violence and passion, the extraordinary, and the excessive.

In *The Experimental Novel* (1880), Zola regarded free will and moral choice as illusions and considered it the task of the novelist to place

characters, often those with inherited temperamental deficiencies, in well-defined, usually adverse, social circumstances and to observe the effects of hereditary and social contingencies on their behavior as a scientist might observe the interaction of substances in a laboratory.

In the United States the most prominent writers influenced by the central philosophical and stylistic conceptions of literary Naturalism were Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries and, later, John Dos Passos, Richard Wright, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck. These writers developed their own distinctive artistic methods and individual philosophical approaches to the problems of the human condition; none of them was committed to a single-minded monistic determinism.

Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage* and the correspondent of "The Open Boat" survive because they develop the mental and physical resources to comprehend and struggle with the circumstances of the external world that threaten them. Crane is a naturalistic writer in that he emphasizes the importance of natural and social environment in deciding the destiny of men and women, but more often than not, sheer (puro; completo) chance determines the outcome of any given situation in his fiction. He falls short of being doctrinaire pessimistic determinist since he believes it at least possible for the individual, through effort and struggle, to acquire internal capabilities, a sense of selfhood that will ensure survival even in a universe of chaotic and contending social and natural forces. Stylistic devices such as Crane's impressionistic technique, ironic tone, and use of symbolism also contribute to the indeterminacy in his work.

III. IMPRESSIONISM

Rather than a static, preconceived reproduction of reality, a painting should render the immediate and fluctuating sensory impression of light and color on the eye. The impressionist renders experience as the subjective and fleeting (fugaz, pasajero) deposit of the moment. Since the eye obviously could not rest on two things simultaneously, impressionists gave detailed treatment of only a specific portion of a scene, while the foreground or background was filled with shadow or masses of confused color. (Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad...). Conrad wrote in the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897) that, "All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses".

Crane was exposed to the literary aesthetics of Hamlin Garland, who believed that the impressionistic stress on individual sense experience was in accord with his own "veritism": "I am...an impressionist, perhaps, rather than a realist...". Crane experimented with the impressionistic techniques in his early writing. His first novel, *Maggie*, is not a continuous narrative but a series of short, dramatic episodes in which incidents are filtered through the limited point of view of the characters and their distorted sense impressions of the flux of reality.

"The Open Boat" also employs painterly scenes, terse dialogue, and a detached narrator with an ironic perspective that is juxtaposed to the encompassed, fearful preoccupation of the men in the dinghy whose eyes are so fixated on the sweeping waves that threaten to swamp the boat that "[n]one of them knew the color of the sky". This contrast between an objective narrator and apprehensive, fearful characters unable to discriminate between distortive

sensory experience and objective reality conjoined with episodic structure and fragmented dialogue are correspondingly evident in "The Blue Hotel" and "Death and the Child".

Crane's experience as a war correspondent probably had a great deal to do with his movement away from Impressionism in his later fiction. It became necessary to replace pictorially conceived, disconnected configurations with sustained chronological narratives. Then, his later war stories are more concerned with ascertaining (averiguar, descubrir) the nature of reality than with the problem of perceiving it and resemble his newspaper dispatches in being less intense and less carefully executed than *The Red Badge of Courage*.