"Utopia Made Practical": Compulsive Realism
Author(s): Kenneth M. Roemer
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MLA Seminar

MLA 1974

Romance, realism, and actuality play against each other in the papers for the 1974 "New Perspectives on the Gilded Age" seminar. The problem of contemporary experience has clouded the discussion of literary realism for some time. Utopianism, Western romance, woman's experience, and personal history, the subjects of this year's papers, apply new social perspectives to literature by carefully distinguishing literary and non-literary elements. Realism is susceptible to infusions from regional romance, social vision, and family background; at the same time, works within the genre change attitudes but provide imperfect clues to the people who created them. Howellsian inclusiveness and cautious discrimination in critical technique thus bind the papers presented for discussion, with the authors as panelists, at the MLA Convention in December. The many readers of ALR are once again invited to take part and to offer suggestions for the 1975 seminar, which will return to the title "American Literary Realism: 1870-1910."

[David E. E. Sloane]

"UTOPIA MADE PRACTICAL": COMPULSIVE REALISM

If a drunkard in a sober fit is the dullest of mortals, an enthusiast in a reason-fit is not the most lively.

--Herman Melville, THE CONFIDENCE-MAN

Melville's narrator never read a late nineteenth-century utopian novel, but his "enthusiast in a reason-fit" is an apt description of the utopian mentality in America from 1888 (Edward Bellamy's LOOKING BACKWARD) to 1900. The authors of the many utopian works produced during this period were obsessed by a desire to make their idealistic visions believable and reasonable, and this desire certainly made their books less than "lively." Narratives bogged down in long dialogues between "irrepressible windbags" (the guides) and "walking interrogations" (the narrators),¹ and the history of the transition period from the dismal past to the glorious future was chronicled in boring speeches and plodding history texts, which the narrator inevitably found in his guide's home library. But this was not enough. To convince readers that they were not soft-headed dreamers, authors emphasized the practicality of their utopias in pre-
faces and afterwords: they advocated reform clubs, proposed communal or colonization ventures, solicited contributions for political activities or for model-city projects—all based upon guidelines implied by their utopias. Several authors even included detailed, full-page or fold-out illustrations of utopia; others used sobering subtitles such as "A Realistic Novel," "A Very Possible Story," or "Utopia Made Practical."

Some of these attempts at making idealism reasonable—especially the illustrations and the wealth of detail reflecting attitudes on topics as large as religion and economics and as small as baldness, fish ponds, and oysters—are still interesting today. But most of them only succeeded in transforming a potentially exciting form of literature into a singularly dull collection of fictionalized treatises—explicit treatises that deprived readers of one of the joys of a vague utopia: the freedom to project private wishes and fantasies into an author's musings about human perfectability. Furthermore, the obsession with realism made the authors vulnerable: when specific predictions about the very near future proved wrong, they were mocked as false prophets.

And yet this compulsive realism, which made the authors vulnerable and their books tiresome, makes these forgotten works fertile exploration grounds for literary historians and students of American culture. A very brief glance at the possible reasons for and implications of the authors' drive to make "nowhere somewhere" (to borrow Arthur E. Morgan's terms) should illuminate this view of late nineteenth-century utopian literature.

One obvious explanation for the utopian realism is suggested by the popularity of one book, LOOKING BACKWARD. Bellamy proved that a utopian work depending heavily upon long, explicit discussions of real contemporary problems could be a best seller and could actually change people's lives—the five hundred Nationalist Clubs attested to that. This striking example of book power offered reformers (and defenders of the status quo) an attractive medium through which to express their views on America. Many authors even used (ad nauseam) Bellamy's characters and his title: for example, YOUNG WEST, LOOKING FURTHER FORWARD, LOOKING FURTHER BACKWARD, LOOKING WITHIN.

The interest in everyday problems can also be related to the backgrounds of the authors. An occupational survey of the 148 authors of 153 utopian, partially utopian, and anti-utopian works published between 1888 and 1900 reveals that by far the largest single occupation was journalism—at least twenty-five percent of the authors worked on newspapers or magazines, and this is a conservative estimate since many of the authors who were not journalists had newspaper experience. This helps to explain the concern with immediate problems and the attention paid to concrete facts.

Besides being shaped by Bellamy's popularity and by journalism, the utopian works were also a product of certain fundamental assumptions about art and human nature. The authors revived the Puritan beliefs that the primary function of art was teaching, and the primary function of teaching was changing people. Again and again in prefaces and afterwords the authors degraded art for art's sake and championed Art for Truth (the motto for Arena Publishing Company) and art as a source of practical guidelines for everyday living. Underlying this crusade was the assumption that the best way to change people was to give them the facts; in several works, including Bellamy's EQUALITY, Americans were transformed overnight after reading books that exposed the folly and immorality of present conditions. Of course this approach was a precursor to the muckraking tactics of the "progressive era," but it also revealed an
unwillingness to confront the "irrational" psychological and cultural forces that compel people to cling to "foolish" and "immoral" ways.

Despite the criticism of art for art's sake and the muckraking forays, the utopian authors realized that they had to meet readers' expectations about novels if they were going to reach the public. One critic has called the result of this awareness "the missing link--between purely romantic fiction and purely critical realism in America." This may be a simplistic overstatement; utopian literature may not be the abominable snowman of American letters. Nevertheless, it is an interesting conglomerate of the mushy love story (most of the novels end in marriage; sometimes triple and even quadruple weddings), the popular, sentimental reform novel (à la TEN NIGHTS IN A BAR-ROOM and UNCLE TOM'S CABIN), the religious reform novel (such as IN HIS STEPS), science fiction, Howellsian realism, the proletarian novel, and the muckraking exposé. This mixture should be of interest to literary historians attempting to trace trends and to define the limits of varying concepts of fiction. Of special interest is the variety of character types--a natural outgrowth of the conglomerate nature of the novels. Upper-class industrialists rub shoulders with impoverished slum dwellers; engineers and working men team up with politicians, ministers, and socialites; or characters who begin as one-dimensional stereotypes evolve into complex, tormented individuals when confronted with a choice between the corrupt but familiar present and the wonderful but frighteningly unfamiliar future. (W. D. Howells' Eve in LETTERS FROM AN ALTRURIAN TRAVELLER is a good example of such a transformation.) Possibly even more interesting is the occasional brilliant use of clashes between two different literary perspectives. One striking example of this is the crisis in LOOKING BACKWARD dramatized by the contrasts between Julian West's sentimental enthusiasm for a new world and a "new" Edith and his nightmarish recollections of nineteenth-century urban poverty.

These contrasts and clashes may also offer insights into the anxieties of late nineteenth-century Americans or at least into the middle- and upper-class mentality since most of the authors were upper-middle class. The language in these novels and treatises betrays an ambivalence towards fact. The diction is often an uneasy mixture of boring detail and logic and hyperbolic rhetoric suggesting that the authors did not fully believe in their reasonable path to utopia. In other words, their compulsive realism may have been a cover for acute frustrations and longings growing out of the rapid changes of the late nineteenth century.

Finally, the restless lurches between optimism and pessimism, future and past, idealism and realism, in the utopian literature may help to illuminate one of the most perceptive nineteenth-century theories about Americans. In DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA Alexis de Tocqueville concluded that Americans abhorred the middle ground; they either naively thrust their heads into clouds of vague generalities or buried them in layers of minute detail. If there is any truth to this observation--and I think there is--late nineteenth-century utopian literature may well be the most "American" American literature, and attempts to understand the causes and implications of the compulsive realism and idealism that permeate it may help us to answer Crèvecoeur's old question: "What is an American?"

NOTES

1 J. C. Garrett, UTOPIAS IN LITERATURE SINCE THE ROMANTIC PERIOD (Christchurch, New Zealand: U of Canterbury, 1968), p. 61; Byron A. Brooks, EARTH REVISITED (Bos-
NEITHER SAINT NOR SINNER: WOMEN IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FICTION

In "Seduced and Abandoned in the New World," Wendy Martin argues that American heroines, the daughters of Eve, "are destined to lives of dependency and servitude as well as to painful and sorrowful childbirth because, like their predecessor, they have dared to disregard authority or tradition in the search for wisdom or happiness." This generalization, like many generalizations about American fiction, proves out if one limits oneself to the novels of Cooper, Hawthorne, James, and Hemingway, but it necessitates ignoring a very large number of other writers, particularly those exploring new fictional modes in the late nineteenth century. While it is true that the realists held to the notion that marriage is sacred and that the possibility of independence for female characters remained limited, they at least allowed for a greater variety of individuality in the women so entrapped. James's "chill winds of change" blew equally on men and women.

As early as 1862, Rebecca Harding Davis in MARGRET HOWTH / A STORY OF TO-DAY, takes a step toward providing an accurate picture of the commonplace life of the American woman. The novel is understandably much neglected in favor of Mrs. Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills," which, by virtue of being shorter, is more tolerable to read. The plot is negligible, the characters sketchy, and the prose awesomely bad. The heroine, Margret Howth, is a Virginia-born girl, who, with her elderly parents, has migrated to a mill town in Indiana. Margret is forced to work as a bookkeeper in the mill to support her parents since her father, a former school teacher, is going blind. Two years before the action begins, Margret has been jilted by—or has jilted, it is not entirely clear—Stephen Holmes because she stands in the way of his ambition to make a great deal of money. He has now returned to buy half interest in the factory in which Margret works, using a loan from a man whose daughter he has agreed to marry. Ultimately, the uninsured factory burns down and Holmes, a wiser, though considerably less interesting man, is restored to the arms of Margret, his first and finer love. The chief instrument of reconciliation is Lois, a crippled, semi-imbecilic Negro girl, whose father is an ex-con, who repeats with appalling frequency in the face of overwhelming odds, including her own dying, that "It's all going to come right." And indeed it does, because in the last pages of the novel, oil is discovered on the Howth land; and the young couple can presumably look forward to "carpets an' bunnets, an' slithers of railroad stock."