

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 20 (2007)

Artikel: Literature in transition : European aesthetics and the early American novel
Autor: Schweighauser, Philipp
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100057>

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Literature in Transition: European Aesthetics and the Early American Novel

Philipp Schweighauser

This paper seeks to account for the strangely double nature of the early American novel. For twenty-first-century readers, novels such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* or Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* seem firmly embedded in a pre-modern culture that subordinates the rights of art under those of religion, morality, and education. In their persistent didacticism, their claims to truthfulness and social utility, and their long authorial digressions, these texts perform those kinds of heteronomous functions Romantic theorizing and literary practice of the early nineteenth century would seek to reject in their quest for literary autonomy. Yet a closer look at early American novels also reveals elements of modern artistic practice that exist side by side with premodern residues. Brackenridge, for instance, repeatedly insists that his work is but an exercise in style devoid of ideas, praises originality and the figure of the genius, consistently privileges form over subject matter, and ridicules the excessive didacticism of his contemporaries. In such passages, we can see a modern consciousness at work. Tensions between these modern impulses and a premodern sensibility pervade both early novels and aesthetics, another invention of the eighteenth century. This paper discusses those tensions from a systems-theoretical perspective.

The validity of eighteenth-century European theorizing on art extends well beyond its own time.¹ The questions thinkers such as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant raised laid the ground for that special branch of philosophy we now know as aes-

¹ This essay is a revised, shorter version of an article entitled "Book and Wax: Two Early American Media of Deception," which is forthcoming with *Philologie im Netz*. Let me thank Cindy-Jane Armbruster for proofreading both texts and for her many good suggestions. Thanks are also due to a number of scholars and friends who have given me valuable feedback on earlier versions of these texts: Gabriele Rippl, Frank Kelleter, Ulla Haselstein, Winfried Fluck, Christoph Ribbat, Miriam Locher, Matt Kimmich, Nicole Nyffenegger, Lukas Rosenberger, Anne-Françoise Baer and Kellie Goncalves.

thetics. Disciplinary configurations and developments as different as the recent “return of aesthetics” in US American Studies, the canon debates, reception theory and feminist scholars’ revalorization of sentimentalism testify to the continuing relevance of questions of artistic form, aesthetic quality, perception of and by art and the power of sympathy in literary and cultural criticism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Yet the writings of early aestheticians are equally clearly embedded in their own time.

That time was a time of transition not only in the sociopolitical realm (the Enlightenment, American and French Revolutions, emergence of commodity capitalism, to name but a few of the most important historical markers) but also in the practice and theory of art. Both artists and aestheticians acknowledged the obligation of art to perform functions for religion, morality, and politics. At the same time, their work anticipates the Romantic notion that art is autonomous and does not have to pay any dues to extra-aesthetic realms. In other words, eighteenth-century aesthetics and art sit on the fence between a pre-modern understanding of art as instructor and purveyor of truth and a modern understanding of art as a sphere of human activity that obeys only the laws it gives itself.

But how do we make sense of this period of transition, and how do we account for pre-modern/modern tensions in eighteenth-century art and aesthetics? Moreover, why is it that American artists of the late eighteenth century and contemporaneous aestheticians in Europe raised the same kinds of questions? This latter question is especially pertinent because European contributions to the emerging field of aesthetics did not have a direct impact on American artistic practice. To put it bluntly: Charles Brockden Brown’s fictionalized reflections on the deceptiveness of sense impressions in *Wieland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798) were not inspired by a reading of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*), which was published eight years earlier. Yet both the American writer and the German aesthete reflect on art and perception and in doing so explore the limitations of an empiricist worldview.

This essay argues that systems theory provides us with an adequate conceptual framework for understanding such convergences. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann’s notion of “functional differentiation,” I argue that both early American novels and mid-to-late-eighteenth-century aesthetic theories are caught between a pre-modern and a modern understanding

of the social functions of art. In making that argument, I seek to bring into a dialogue early European theorizing on art and eighteenth-century American literary practice as distinct but related cultural manifestations of Europe and America on their slow and winding paths toward socio-economic and artistic modernity.

Early American novels are strangely mixed objects. On the one hand, books such as Brown's gothic *Wieland*, Susanna Rowson's sentimental *Charlotte Temple* (1791), and Hugh Henry Brackenridge's picaresque *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815) clearly belong to a pre-modern media culture that did not assign literature autonomous status. To a large extent, these novels subordinate what modern readers tend to consider the core business of fiction – to invent a good story and to tell it well – to the extra-literary purpose literary texts serve in the worlds of religion, politics or education. This pre-modern quality of early American novels is most clearly visible in their claims to truthfulness and social utility and in their persistent didacticism, which materializes most prominently in prefaces and in authors' extensive moralizing digressions from their main narrative threads.

Rowson's preface to *Charlotte Temple*, her best-selling novel about the seduction, abandonment and death of the eponymous young woman, is exemplary in this respect. Rowson explains the purpose of her book as follows:

If the following tale should save one hapless fair one from the errors which ruined poor Charlotte, or rescue from impending misery the heart of one anxious parent, I shall feel a much higher gratification in reflecting on this trifling performance, than could possibly result from the applause which might attend the most elegant finished piece of literature whose tendency might deprave the heart or mislead the understanding. (6)

To most twenty-first-century readers, novels such as Rowson's will seem confined in a utilitarian straightjacket. To a large extent, these texts conform to a pre-modern understanding of literature as a medium that subordinates the right of fiction to invent imaginary worlds to the educational and moral functions literature performs. For Rowson, literature should instruct rather than delight.

On the other hand, we can detect in early American novels signs of an emergent autonomy aesthetic. Particularly Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, which was published in seven volumes between 1792 and 1815, shows traits of a more modern model of the relationship between lit-

erature and the world. At the heart of Brackenridge's *opus magnum* is the story of the adventures of Captain Farrago and his Irish servant Teague O'Regan. Farrago and Teague are late-eighteenth-century versions of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and *Sancho Panza*. Together, they travel across the western parts of the new republic and along the way encounter the full diversity of frontier life: Quakers and conjurers, colleges and whorehouses, Indian treaty-making and local elections. At the heart of Brackenridge's narrative, we find the illiterate but ambitious Teague's efforts to climb up the social ladder. Teague's aspirations meet with the support of many an office-holder and almost all the general public, and Teague is in turn offered the positions of state legislator, philosopher, cleric and congressman. The aristocratic Farrago is shocked by the people's readiness to lift his servant into positions for which he is clearly unqualified, and he uses all his rhetorical skills to talk Teague out of his ambitions so as not to lose his "bog-trotter" (15 et passim).

The novel's main narrative thread is constantly interrupted by philosophical ruminations, comments on current political affairs, advice on how to interpret the text correctly and moral instruction of the reader. Those digressions regularly take up whole chapters in which the authorial and the narratorial voice merge to such an extent that they can no longer be distinguished with confidence. Emory Elliott's decision to label the novel's highly overt narrative voice(s) "narrator-author" (266) captures this doubleness well.²

Even if it is, as Ulla Haselstein and Cathy N. Davidson (260-266) have demonstrated, exceptionally difficult to pin down the positionality of Brackenridge's text, one of the main objects of its satire clearly is the excesses of America's nascent democracy in general and "the evil of men seeking office for which they are not qualified" (611) in particular.³ Both Farrago and Brackenridge's narrator-author consistently emphasize the "great moral of this book" (611), and the latter explains the

² For further discussion of the complex issue of voice in *Modern Chivalry*, see Paul Gilmore's "Republican Machines" (work cited in References), which in its first footnote provides a concise survey of some of the contributions to the debate (317n.1).

³ Note, however, that like *Don Quixote*, *Modern Chivalry* is a picaresque novel and a satire that leaves open the question of whether Farrago or Teague is the primary object of censure and ridicule. Critics of the novel differ widely on its politics and on who the target of Brackenridge's satire actually is. For diverging assessments of such questions, see, for instance, the contributions by Winfried Fluck (*Das kulturelle Imaginäre*) and Ulla Haselstein.

purpose of the novel in words that recall Rowson's prefatory remarks quoted earlier:

I shall have accomplished something by this book, if it shall keep some honest man from lessening his respectability by pushing himself into public trusts for which he is not qualified; or when pushed forward into a public station, if it shall contribute to keep him honest by teaching him the folly of ambition, and farther advancement. (479)

However, to describe *Modern Chivalry* as a didactic vehicle for the moral and political education of its readers would be too facile, even if that is one of the functions the book performs.

Brackenridge emerges as a more modern type of writer when he repeatedly insists that his work is but an exercise in style devoid of ideas (3, 5, 36, 77, 162), when he consistently privileges "manner" over "matter" (655), and when he satirizes literary didacticism. Brackenridge's introductory remarks concerning his implied readership read much like a parody of Rowson's as well as his own didacticism:

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, stile and matter at once, you surfeit the stomach, and turn away the appetite from literary entertainment, to horse-racing and cock-fighting. (4)

Moreover, Brackenridge throughout *Modern Chivalry* defends books that aim at nothing but amusement (e.g. 405-406), and he repeatedly uses notions such as "originality," "taste," "genius" and "imagination" – notions that began to be theorized in new ways in French, English and German reflections on the nature and purpose of art in the course of the eighteenth century. These and related reflections would gradually develop into what we know as aesthetics today.

Brackenridge's frequent recourse to the figure of the "genius" is especially interesting in this context, since he most often uses the term in its modern sense of a human being who possesses "[n]ative intellectual power of an exalted type" or an "instinctive and extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery" (OED). That sense of "genius" emerged only in the second half of the

eighteenth century and owes much to the work of Immanuel Kant. Brackenridge thus aligns himself with reflections on art that affirm the originality and natural force of the artist as genius, and which paved the ground for early-nineteenth-century practices and theories of autonomous art in the Romantic era.

More clearly than other novels of the period, Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* testifies to the strangely mixed nature of the early American novel because it simultaneously and paradoxically insists both on its social utility and didactic purpose *and* on its right to liberate itself from such demands. In *Modern Chivalry*, those tensions are all the more noticeable because no linear development from older to more recent conceptualizations of art can be discerned in a work that was published over a period of twenty-three years. Considering the long publication history of Brackenridge's text, we may well be inclined to expect that the later volumes testify to a more modern aesthetic attitude while the earlier ones adhere to an older conception of art as directly answerable to demands from other realms of human activity. But in fact, quite the contrary is the case: it is particularly in the early volumes that Brackenridge ridicules didacticism and asserts that his work is devoid of ideas; and it is in the later volumes that he seeks to ensure most decisively, and by way of heavily italicized passages, that the book's moral "message" gets across.⁴ In *Modern Chivalry*, the tension between autonomy aesthetic and literary didacticism is irreducible.

Recent critical discussions of the early American novel have greatly helped us to understand the *political* significance of such tensions. While earlier scholarship on these texts by and large considered their contradictions and inconsistencies artistic failures of a nascent art form,⁵ to-

⁴ From a historical point of view, this increase in didacticism must be understood not so much in the context of the anti-fiction movement discussed further below as in the context of the Sedition Act (1798), which prohibited the publication of false or malicious writings against the federal government as well as agitation for opposition to any act of the President or Congress. The passing of this Act and the repressive measures it enabled at least partly account for Brackenridge's turn, in the later volumes, from the dangerous political critiques of satire to the safer ground of literary didacticism. Brackenridge himself thematizes the reigning culture of fear in his conclusion to the fifth volume (1804): "How a man feels himself cramped in such a fear, and trembling of mind! I am positively more afraid at this moment of the mistake of the honest, than I was of the resentment of the *knaves* at a former period. During the reign of terror my strictures were very free; but I begin almost to call this a reign of fear, which is the same thing with the former reign" (463).

⁵ For critical works that subscribe to such a literary-historical positioning of the early American novel, see, for instance, G. Harrison Orians's *Censure of Fiction*, Donald A.

day's critics tend to read the same formal features as reflections of ideological tensions in the new republic.⁶ In these readings, the era's gradual shift in dominance from a more community-oriented republicanism to a more individual-oriented liberalism is a major source of ideological strains that are reflected in early American novels' textual tensions. The political meanings critics attribute to those tensions differ considerably. Generally speaking, while critics of broadly feminist persuasion such as Cathy N. Davidson are sympathetic to the emancipatory potential of liberalism and tend to read textual instabilities as subversive of rigid patriarchal social structures, critics of a roughly post-Marxist bent such as Michael Warner, Michael T. Gilmore and Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky lament the passing of republican culture and its communitarian ethos and tend to argue that formal tensions in early American novels signal their complicity with an emerging liberal-capitalist order.⁷

This shift of focus from questions of artistic quality (or, more precisely, its absence) to questions of the political significance of literary form has reinvigorated the study of early American novels. Regrettably, though, it has also largely abandoned aesthetic considerations – considerations that are by no means limited to questions of artistic quality and taste.

In the remainder of this essay, I seek to redress that imbalance by situating early American art within the context of debates in the contemporaneously emerging field of aesthetics. From that vantage-point,

Ring's *Charles Brockden Brown*, and Henri Petter's important *The Early American Novel*, which in the early 1970s introduced a new seriousness into the study of early American novels despite its occasionally harsh judgments about the aesthetic value of many of those texts.

⁶ The publication of Cathy N. Davidson's seminal *Revolution and the Word* marks a watershed in criticism of the early American novel. Since then, discussions of these novels have shifted decisively from considerations of aesthetic quality to political readings. This is also true for more recent scholarship such as Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-century America* (1990), Larzer Ziff's *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (1991), Shirley Samuels's *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation* (1996), Grantland S. Rice's *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (1997), and the relevant entries in *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991) and in the first volume of *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1994) by Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Michael T. Gilmore, respectively. In most cases, these critics assess the political valence of American novels in decidedly less favorable terms than Davidson while remaining within the framework of political criticism.

⁷ Winfried Fluck's survey and critique of recent scholarship in "From Aesthetics to Political Criticism" has helped me greatly in identifying the major positions in current debates on these texts.

an awareness of the seemingly skewed line of development within *Modern Chivalry* – from an incipient autonomy aesthetic to open didacticism – invites us to reflect on literary-historical questions whose relevance extends well beyond Brackenridge's text. More specifically, it invites us to revisit one of the most powerful stories told about the early American novel, namely the notion that the real interest of these texts lies not so much in their own artistic merit as in their anticipation of the truly great work produced a quarter of a century later by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville and Hawthorne. This story, of course, owes much to F. O. Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* and its foundational myth. It is the story Winfried Fluck has labeled the "infancy thesis" ("From Aesthetics" 226-232), and it is a story that informs even some of the early American novel's most sympathetic critics. Donald A. Ringe's book on Charles Brockden Brown is an illustrative case. Ringe speaks of *Wieland*'s "historical value" and marvels at "how much of later American fiction is foreshadowed in this novel" (43, 44).⁸

In its repetitiveness and structural flaws, *Modern Chivalry* does not necessarily contradict this type of assessment, and it does not necessarily contradict the story of fiction's gradual emancipation from its utilitarian straitjacket. But Brackenridge's novel certainly pinpoints the uneven, nonlinear nature of such processes. Yet how can we explain the paradoxical doubleness of a work such as Brackenridge's?

To my mind, the systems-theoretical notion of functional differentiation allows us to theorize that doubleness best. For Niklas Luhmann, functional differentiation is the process that brings modernity into being. Luhmann defines it as the gradual differentiation of Western societies into social systems that each perform a specific function for society as a whole. Functional differentiation is a long historical process whose beginnings Luhmann locates in the late sixteenth century, and which gives rise to functionally differentiated social systems such as politics, religion, science, economics, education, law or art, which all operate according to their own logic and perform a unique social function (*Gesellschaft* 707-76; *Beiträge*).

⁸ To be fair to Ringe, it needs to be pointed out that he does balance his account of Brown's novels as "structurally flawed" (139) anticipations of Hawthorne's, Melville's and Cooper's work with the repeated insistence that "one would not wish by any means to suggest that Brown's importance can be completely defined by such relations" (138).

Thus, in the wake of the reformation and the religious wars of the seventeenth century, religion and politics began to drift apart, forcing each emergent social system to reflect on its own nature and develop its own *modus operandi*. In the case of the political system, notions such as “reason of the state” or “sovereignty” in its modern sense of “supreme controlling power in communities not under monarchical government” (OED) only began to emerge in the latter half of the sixteenth century (Quaritsch, Münker). Only since then can we begin to speak of politics as a social system whose functioning is no longer determined by (religious) forces outside itself.⁹

In the process of functional differentiation, both politics and religion emerge as self-referential, organizationally closed systems that each have their own semantics and perform a specific function for the social whole that is not shared by any other system. In the case of the political system, that function is the enablement and implementation of collectively binding decisions (Luhmann, *Politik* 84); in the case of the religious system, it is the elimination of contingency by way of the transformation of indeterminable complexity into determinable complexity (Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion* 26).

These may well sound like both forbiddingly abstract and indefensibly reductive descriptions of the functions that the religious and the political system enact. However – and this is crucial to Luhmann’s account – these are abstractions and reductions of complexity the systems themselves perform as they draw borders that separate them from other systems located in their environment so as to sustain their own mode of operation. Moreover, they are reductions of complexity that allow for an increase in complexity *within* each system.

Analogous to the differentiation of the political and religious systems, other social systems emerge that each also perform their own specific functions: the function of the economic system is to reduce scar-

⁹ Herfried Münker explains that “the term ‘reason of the state’ originated in the language of professionalized political personnel, in particular that of the secretaries and diplomats administering the Italian territorial states of the sixteenth century.” In this modern usage, the term describes an “autonomous political rationality of action” that was first theorized in Giovanni Botero’s *Della ragion di stata* (1589) (66; my translation). “Sovereignty” is an older term whose origins date back to the monarchical contexts of thirteenth-century France and fourteenth-century England. As Helmut Quaritsch points out, the term was first theorized in its modern meaning of “the absolute and perpetual power of a republic” in French lawyer Jean Bodin’s treatise *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566) (Quaritsch 1103).

city, the function of the scientific system is to produce new knowledge, and so on. Luhmann also considers the system of art to be a functionally differentiated social system. In Luhmann's systems theory, each social system can only perform one specific function for society as a whole. Luhmann's own version is rather close to the theory of fiction proposed by Wolfgang Iser in *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*. “[T]he function of art,” Luhmann argues, “seems to lie in the production of world contingency. The ingrained, mundane version of the world is shown to be dissolvable and becomes a polycontextural reality that can also be read differently” (“Das Kunstwerk” 624; my translation).¹⁰

Siegfried J. Schmidt provides another systems-theoretical account of the function of art. For him, art holds out the promise of identity-formation and human self-realization, allowing subjects to dress the psychological wounds that the process of functional differentiation has inflicted upon them: “[I]ts function for society as a whole,” Schmidt argues, “consists in [. . .] the suspension, by way of the communicative treatment of life world [*Lebenswelt*] and culture, of the alienation subjects suffer as a result of social differentiation” (422-423; my translation). Niels Werber provides yet another systems-theoretical account of the function of art. Reminding us of Brackenridge's defence of literature as amusement, Werber argues that the function of the literary system is to provide entertainment to address the modern problem of leisure time and growing demands for its structuration (27, 64, 76-77).

This is not the place to discuss the benefits and pitfalls of such attempts to pin down *the* social function of art. Suffice it to say here that even Werber's surely contentious account can teach us much about the possible social function of art, provided that we are aware that Luhmannian systems theory accounts for all phenomena it discusses exclusively in *social* terms. With respect to the question of the function of art,

¹⁰ Note that there are, of course, fundamental differences between Iser's and Luhmann's reflections on the function of art, the major difference being that while Iser is crucially interested in processes taking place between human beings and the texts they read, Luhmann's nonhumanist social theory moves subjects to the margins of the discussion or, more precisely, to the environments of social systems. For a concise definition of “polycontexturality,” see Kneer and Nassehi: “Polycontexturality means that a plurality of differentiations and different contexts exist that cannot be compared or translated into one another from an Archimedean vantage point” (103; my translation).

we need to remind ourselves that Luhmann and Werber seek to define the function of art for society as a whole, not its function for subjects.¹¹

The insight of systems theorists that modernization is a process of functional differentiation that happens at specific historical moments is particularly pertinent to my discussion of early American novels. With respect to the literary system, Werber and Schmidt agree that the latter half of the eighteenth century marks a decisive shift. In Schmidt's words,

Since the second half of the eighteenth century, literary systems in the sense of self-organizing social systems have begun to emerge in Europe. This emergence occurred within the context of the gradual restructuration of European societies from stratified to functionally differentiated societies as networks made up of social systems. (9; my translation)

This systems-theoretical account is in line with more traditional accounts of the gradual emancipation of literature from church and patronage during the eighteenth century and its coming into its own as autonomous art in nineteenth-century Romantic theorizing and literary practice.

What such accounts of literary evolution help us to understand is that both aesthetic and ideological tensions in works of literature do not merely reflect conflicts in the sociopolitical realm, but are also signs of a shift in the positioning of literature within society as a whole. Such traces are visible both in works of art and in aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century.

To discuss those traces, let me briefly focus on the relation between art and morality, and on how that relation is negotiated both in literary writing and in aesthetics. I will focus on aesthetics first. The Platonic triad of "the good, the true, and the beautiful"¹² is a pre-modern notion that considers morality, science, and art to be inextricably intertwined. In the late eighteenth century, it is Immanuel Kant's three critiques that most obviously signal their distinctness: while the *Critique of Pure Reason* is concerned with the true, the *Critique of Practical Reason* is concerned with the good, and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* with the beautiful.

¹¹ For that reason, Schmidt's account is, strictly speaking, at odds with his own systems-theoretical framework: social systems never perform functions for subjects. See Werber for a critique of Schmidt along those lines (24-26).

¹² See, for instance, Socrates' speech and his replies to other speakers in Plato's *Symposium* (66-121).

Simon Jarvis rightly refers to this as the “central architectonic assertion” of Kant’s work (8).

Niels Werber’s reading of Kant’s third critique as a theory of art as functionally differentiated and autonomous is therefore certainly correct to an extent. Moreover, Kant’s celebration of originality and the figure of the genius (Kant 186-189), and his assertion that art “pleases immediately” and “without any interest” (227) all point in the same direction.¹³

Yet to read the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as a fully-fledged theory of autonomous art would not do it justice. In discussing the sublime, Kant builds a bridge between morality and art: the experience of the sublime belongs to religious and moral experience; it is moral ideas that allow us to perceive and judge the sublime in the first place (Kant 148-149). Moreover, as Gottfried Boehm has shown, what is autonomous in Kant is less the work of art than our judgments of taste and the freeplay of the human imagination. Kant’s understanding of art remains indebted to a pre-modern notion of beauty whose supreme expression can be found in the divine order of nature, not in art. Not even the genius is an autonomous being: he is a force of nature, and nature acts through him (Boehm lxix-lxxi).¹⁴ In Kant’s own words,

Genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. Since the talent, as an inborn productive faculty of the artist, itself belongs to nature, this could also be expressed thus: Genius is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art. (186)

Kant’s third critique should not, then, be read as a theory of autonomous art but as a work that still subscribes to pre-modern notions of art as answerable to external demands even as it seeks to set art free from precisely such constraints. Such tensions pervade the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. From a systems-theoretical perspective, those tensions testify to Kant being caught in the midst of a process of functional differentiation that is still underway in the late eighteenth century.

As we have seen, similar tensions between the demands of art and those of morality abound in the early American novel. For Bracken-

¹³ Nick Zangwill’s essay “Unkantian Notions of Disinterest” has helped me to clarify my understanding of Kant’s notion of disinterested pleasure.

¹⁴ To be fair to Werber, he does acknowledge that Kant’s notion of the genius marks an important limit to a systems-theoretical reading of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as a theory of art as autopoietic system (44-47).

ridge's *Modern Chivalry*, we can now specify what makes this novel modern, and where the limitations of such a reading lie. Brackenridge's work is modern to the extent that it observes itself and other works of literature as autonomous, and it is pre-modern when it insists on its duty to perform functions for other social realms. The truth claims and persistent didacticism of Brackenridge's text pay homage to a pre-modern notion of art for which "the good, the true, and the beautiful" are still inseparable; the novel's praise of originality, of the figure of the genius, and its parodic subversions of didacticism gesture toward a modern notion of art.

More so than most other novels of the period, *Modern Chivalry* testifies to pre-modern/modern tensions of literature at a crossroads. Yet Brackenridge is clearly not alone in this. Even in Rowson's strongly didactic, non-parodic and unironic *Charlotte Temple* we can discover traces of a process of literary modernization. After an extended allegorical discourse on Humility, Filial Piety, Conjugal Affection, Industry, Benevolence, Content, Religion, Patience and Hope, Rowson's motherly narrator says, "I confess I have rambled strangely from my story" (35). This said, she immediately justifies such digressions by re-affirming the educational work her tale performs. Yet the very fact that the narrator uses the verb "to ramble" and the adverb "strangely" to describe that digression points to the fact that Rowson was aware of expectations on the part of her empirical readers that may well diverge from those of her implied readers. Rowson was, in other words, aware that many of her readers cherished her book not for its moral advice but for its gripping story, emotional force, and its underhanded invitation to readers to sympathize with Charlotte's plight. And that awareness registers the existence of a more modern understanding of the social function of art on Rowson's part than the one to which her moralist narrator adheres.

If early aestheticians such as Kant observe art from the outside and, in doing so, postulate that it is both autonomous and performs heteronomous functions for other social realms such as morality and religion, novels such as Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* and, to a lesser extent, Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, engage in an act of self-observation from within the system of art that reaches similar conclusions. In both the literature and the aesthetics of the latter half of the eighteenth century, an irresolvable tension between pre-modern and modern notions of art obtains, and that tension testifies to the transitional status of writing in the midst of a process of functional differentiation. For scholars inter-

ested in the specificity of both the forms and the functions of literature, it is those tensions – tensions that are first and foremost aesthetic in nature – that make the early American novel such a rich field of inquiry.

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