

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 32 (2015)

**Artikel:** Form, reform, refomulation : William Dean Howells's Annie Kilburn  
**Autor:** Metz, Katharina  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583872>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 22.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Form, Reform, Reformulation: William Dean Howells's *Annie Kilburn*

Katharina Metz

William Dean Howells's later critical and fictional work, in which he approaches issues of social reform, is concerned with a distinct formal problem: How can a realist text stay true to the maxim of objective, truthful representation while fulfilling its moral(istic) or reformist objectives? This essay argues that the conflicting aims of the reformist realist novel inspired a necessity of reformulation. Reformulation is conceived of as an endeavor to reconcile competing epistemological claims about human nature and the human good, and as a reinvestigation of sentimental literary strategies of reform that Howells considered unproductive for his conception of literary realism. A close reading of a scene from *Annie Kilburn* (1888) illustrates how the notion of reform is consistently linked to an exposure of a representational crisis of realist literature, and how this problem is tentatively reconciled by strategies of reformulation, among them self-reflective irony. This essay's focus on reformulation challenges an important strand of criticism which holds that the novel's overt reformist agenda runs counter to Howells's own claims about realist aesthetics because it results in occasional instances of (sentimental) didacticism.

The agenda of reform influenced, and, arguably, co-constructed the literary movement of realism. I conceive of realist reform as both an ethical and an aesthetic project: The idea of "reform" points toward a desired social, cultural, or political function of the realist text, and, at the same time, "reform" can be understood as a header for a larger project of reinvestigating literary form. William Dean Howells's oeuvre can be seen as a paramount example of the double-edged issue of reform. The

*Literature, Ethics, Morality: American Studies Perspectives.* SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 32. Ed. Ridvan Askin and Philipp Schweighauser. Tübingen: Narr, 2015. 159-173.

author's realist program became more concerned with issues of social inequality and the growing conflict between capital and labor in the 1880s and 1890s. Many biographers and critics emphasize Howells's shock and alarm about the 1886 Haymarket Riots in Chicago as a turning point in his literary and critical work, leading him to write his so-called "economic novels" starting in the late 1880s, among them *Annie Kilburn* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and *A Traveller from Altruria* and its sequels (1892-1907).<sup>1</sup> Howells's reformist realism has been discussed in terms of its social function, which is conceived of as "critical realism" (Carter 190), as symbolic enactment of an underlying ideal of a "right shape of society" (Ickstadt 77), as a form whose (desired) function is to raise awareness about deficiencies in society's endeavors to fulfill its civilizational potential (Fluck, *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit* 20), or as "novels of purpose" (Claybaugh 7).

In terms of literary form, Howells defined the realist novel of reform first and foremost by distinguishing it from the preceding, but still highly popular form of the sentimental reform novel.<sup>2</sup> In American sentimentalism of the mid-century, a text's educative purpose, its "cultural work," was deemed to be generated by the powers of the faculty of sympathy.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, many sentimental writers employed strategies of sympathetic identification and didacticism in the hope of educating their readers. Howells, in his advancement of the new literary program of realism, was highly critical of the sentimentalists' reformist literary strategies; he considered didacticism unproductive for his own project of reformist realism. Rather than participating in didactic moralizing,

---

<sup>1</sup> Winfried Fluck explains the markers "economic" and "social" for Howells's later novels (*Inszenierte Wirklichkeit* 308). Cady (67-91), Carter (179-85), and Christianson (175) elaborate on the importance of the Haymarket affair for Howells's later work.

<sup>2</sup> More often than not, Howells defines realism by negation, but he is inconsistent in naming his adversaries. Howells's criticism of the kind of literature identified as "sentimentalism" in this essay bears parallels to his rejection of what he refers to as "romance" or "romanticism" in other instances of his critical writing (see, for example, *Selected Literary Criticism* 19-21, 124-26). Howells's often-polemic denunciation is probably not directed at the canonical writers scholars today associate with American romanticism, but rather at the popular trend of sentimental writing. This noticeable confusion about generic markers lends support to my argument about a problem of literary form in Howells's later work.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Tompkins's influential *Sensational Designs* explores sentimentalism's political potential for (feminist) interventions by conceiving of the novel as "cultural work." A large body of criticism has since then stressed the importance of Scottish moral sense philosophy and the concept of "sympathy" for the (desired) reformist and political function of sentimentalist novels. See, for example, Handler.

Howells and others claimed that the reformist function of their novels should be activated through a truthful representation of society.

The dictum of “truthful representation” lies at heart of Howells’s conception of the form of the realist novel as one of aesthetic reform. It is framed by a discursive distinction that became increasingly more prominent for literary criticism in the advance of Anglo-American realism at the end of the nineteenth century, namely that between “realism” and “idealism.” In an essay from 1887, John Addington Symonds argues that the rising influence of the social sciences and evolutionary philosophy at the end of the century resulted in an increasingly political urgency of the conflict between a positivist notion of the “real,” defined as “the presentation of natural objects as the artist sees them, as he thinks they are” and as an “attempt to imitate” according to “senses” (123), and an interpretivist notion of the “ideal,” defined as “the presentation of natural objects as the artist fain would see them, as he thinks they strive to be” and as an “attempt to imitate” according to “interpretation” (123).<sup>4</sup> Symonds, however, claims this distinction to be unproductive, even false and “illogical” (125) for literary criticism and consequently argues for an interdependent relationship between realism and idealism. The realism/idealism debate assessed by Symonds had significance for Howells’s conception of American realism. In one of his columns for *Harper’s Magazine*, the *Editor’s Study* from December 1887, Howells contributes to Symonds’s distinction (74) with his famous example of the grasshopper. Howells differentiates an “ideal” grasshopper, formed after pre-conceived notions of what is beautiful and what is culturally perceived as typical or artful, from a “real” grasshopper, which is linked to Howells’s frequent evocations of “commonness” and “truthfulness” (74). While the representation of an “ideal” grasshopper, endowed further with the attributes “heroic,” “impassioned,” “adventureful,” and “good old romantic” (74), relates to an idea of uncritically taking into account premises about what literature is supposed to be, the representation of a “real” grasshopper is described as “simple, honest, and natural” (74), characterized by “life-likeness” (73), a qualification that gestures toward immediacy and objectivity. Howells thus conceptualizes his literary program of “truthfulness” as contingent upon the distinction between the real and the ideal. This distinction, though,

---

<sup>4</sup> The essay “Realism and Idealism” first appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* and was republished in a separate essay collection in 1890. I quote from this later publication. For further information on the realism/idealism divide and its significance for early definitions of literary realism, see also Watt (10).

is profoundly complicated by the formal problem that concerns this essay: how can a “real” grasshopper be enlisted in the service of reform?

In the *Editor’s Study* from December 1888, which deals with the notion of “Christmas Literature,” Howells addresses the problematic relationship between reform and realism more explicitly. He begins his column with an attack on the recurring (and hypocritical) urgency in the practice of almsgiving around Christmas time. This gives way to the main target of Howells’s criticism, namely that kind of literature which prides itself on “celebrating the bestowal of turkeys upon the turkeyless” (103). Howells’s sarcasm continues in the first part of his column, in which he condemns the sentimental literature of yore for its failure to address the social and political realities of the times. Howells proceeds to endorse a “new Christmas literature,” one that is spearheaded by Tolstoy and “appeals to no sentimental impulse, but confronts its readers with themselves” (104).<sup>5</sup> He continues, “Turkey to the turkeyless [ . . . ] – yes, these are well, and very well; but ineffably better it is to take thought somehow in our social, our political system” (104). On the one hand, Howells upholds his belief in the transformative power of “taking thought,” an expression he repeats at the end of the column, where he proposes to “take thought for [society’s] healing” (106) and connects the truthful representation of reality to the revelation of the social wrongs of “the system” (104). However, Howells’s choice to entitle his discussion of ethics in literature “Christmas Literature” introduces an additional issue, one that is not immediately compatible with the realist aim of truthful representation, of a rational way of conceiving of and representing society: Howells claims Christ himself to be “the forgotten factor” (104) in literature’s dealing with reform. The teachings of the New Testament and Christ, presented as the epitome of self-sacrifice, are elevated to an exemplary, ideal status in Howells’s notion of reformist literature. To rationally engage with the socio-economic reality is thus not Howells’s only concern. Rather, he advocates a moralization, a Christianization of literature (105). The sacrificial, ideal figure of Christ is thus conceived as a programmatic standard for art itself.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> On Tolstoy’s influence on Howells’s later work, see Cady (7-10) and Daugherty (22-25).

<sup>6</sup> Howells negotiates his indebtedness to the Social Gospel, a reform movement within some American churches at the end of the nineteenth century. In the task of reformulating Protestant doctrine and the project of reorientation towards issues of social justice, parts of the movement also embraced socialist thought (and were, accordingly, referred

The problematic relationship of these two maxims – to “take thought” and to take Christ as an example – make up the main formal tension that is at stake in Howells’s project of reformist realism. The conflicting aims of the reformist realist novel inspire the necessity to *reformulate* various seemingly incommensurable paradigms – the real and the ideal, the rational and the religious, the realist agenda of truthful representation and the sentimentalist interest in educating and influencing the reader. In my conceptualization of reformulation, I draw on Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), in which he understands processes of “translation” or “reformulation” as semantic and conceptual changes accompanying and prefiguring the development of a crisis preceding a scientific revolution (55). Accordingly, I use the term “reformulation” in order to foreground a desired reconciliation or an endeavor of adjusting one paradigm to another, of a combination or inclusion of two paradigms that are perceived as incommensurable. Applied to Howells’s formal problem, this means: The realist novel negotiates its interest in reform by reconciling the desire to ameliorate society and the rejection of existing models of (sentimental) literature that explicitly announce their reformist function. The realist novel of reform thus embodies various endeavors to reconcile competing paradigms. My following reading of a scene in Howells’s *Annie Kilburn* (1888) further explains and develops the realist novel’s thematic and formal concern with the three key concepts that guide the present essay: form, reform, and reformulation.

*Annie Kilburn*, not coincidentally published in the same year as Howells’s Christmas column, is an exemplary text that deals with the problem of reformist realism introduced above. Annie, the protagonist of Howells’s novel, is already on the first page of the novel described as a character with altruistic inclinations that lack both direction and an object after the death of her care-dependent father. Her “habit of giving herself” (643) motivates Annie, who has spent most of her adult life in Rome, to return to her hometown in Massachusetts with “high intentions” (646) to “do some good” (645). The novel’s plot is driven by Annie’s various endeavors to translate her altruistic intentions into

---

to as “Christian Socialism”). See, for example, Ahlstrom (785-804) and Vidich and Stanford (53).

The highly popular genre of the Social Gospel novel, classified either as propagandist literature designed to popularize the teachings of the movement (Hopkins 140), or as an accompaniment of literary realism (Jackson 14), shared many formal features with sentimentalism. It is thus possible that Howells’s criticism in the Christmas column is also directed at the emerging literary form of the Social Gospel novel.

action. However, most of Annie's charitable actions remain ineffective due to their inapplicability to the seemingly impenetrable complexities of her recently industrialized and modernized New England hometown. This is precisely the problem that lies at heart of the novel's thematic concern: the practical, that is, individual, institutional, and organizational application of good intentions in light of the ongoing radical transformation of American society at the end of the nineteenth century.

Annie's conflict negotiates the necessity of adapting sentimental and religious conceptions of "doing good" to a changed social world:

She had always regarded her soul as the battlefield of two opposite principles, the good and the bad, the high and the low. God made her, she thought [. . .]; but she would not have said that He made the evil in her. Yet her belief did not admit the existence of Creative Evil; and so she said to herself that she herself was that evil, and she must struggle against herself; she must question whatever she strongly wished because she strongly wished it. It was not logical; she did not push her postulates to their obvious conclusions; and there was apt to be the same kind of break between her conclusions and her actions as between her reasons and her conclusions. She acted impulsively, and from a force which she could not analyse. She indulged reveries so vivid that they seemed to weaken and exhaust her for the grapple with realities; the recollection of them abashed her in the presence of facts. (647)

In the first half of the quote, the narrator presents to us Annie's reflections about her divided soul, about the good and the bad in her. Annie is certain that her goodness is God-given, and, as a good Protestant would, she excludes the possibility of "Creative Evil," that is, an independent Satanic power or entity, concluding that all evil must originate from within herself, and that this evil must be contained. On the one hand, Annie tries to make sense of her complex moral character, on the other hand, she internalizes religious commandments ("she must struggle," "she must question") as a consequence of her realization that "she herself was that evil." In this quote, Annie's moral and religious questions are accompanied by a sense of self-disciplining: Her wish to be good is interestingly and somewhat paradoxically paralleled with the self-imposed task of a "struggle" against her "wishes." In a curious manner, Annie's religious considerations are thus rationalized.

Interestingly, the religiously motivated division between good and evil presented in this quote is mingled with a theory of human nature that stems not from a religious paradigm, but from a scientific, evolutionary one: Annie conceives of her soul as a “battlefield of two opposite principles.” The narrator’s reference to the “battlefield” and to the “struggle” Annie takes on, a struggle that is further said to be directed against an internal “force” that makes her act “impulsively,” frames her questions by way of a rhetoric that is clearly influenced by early psychological and evolutionary studies.<sup>7</sup> As the narrator tells us, Annie’s attempt to “logic[ally]” engage in an “analysis” of her impulses fails. But the very fact that the narrator deems a positivist approach toward understanding one’s self and one’s religion important hints at the notion that Annie’s reflections about her soul-as-battlefield are likewise directed by “opposite principles,” namely by two different epistemological paradigms. Strikingly, however, these two paradigms, the religious and the scientific, usually conceived of as dichotomous, or in Kuhnian terms, incommensurable, are presented to be only partially at odds with one another. In fact, the problem of how to reconcile religious belief with evolutionary logic and positivist epistemology is one of the main themes of the novel: In various other instances in the novel, the theme of evolution, and more importantly, the influence of “Science” on religion and Christian reform is approached, mainly via the figure of Reverend Peck, who functions as a representative of the Social Gospel movement. On the level of language, one could thus conclude, the seemingly incommensurable paradigms are, tentatively, reconciled by the mingling and mixing of registers. The quote first and foremost embodies a wish for reconciliation and posits a demand for articulating an idea of adjustment. It is exactly the curious reformulation of religious truths and ethics in a scientific rhetoric that lies at the core of the novel’s negotiation of how to *do* good and, in this instance especially, how to *be* good.

---

<sup>7</sup> Among many other representatives of the early social sciences, Howells references William James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1870) and John Fiske’s studies on Darwinian theory in his critical writings (see, for example, *Selected Literary Criticism* 16-18, 174-77). For Howells’s use of psychological and evolutionary rhetoric, see Alkana (82-102). My argument about *Annie Kilburn*’s negotiation of different epistemological orders could be complemented by a detailed discussion of the various strands of late nineteenth-century pragmatism. Two studies about pragmatism’s influence on American literary realism should be mentioned here: Sämi Ludwig reads Howells and other realist authors through the lens of a pragmatic “cognitive paradigm”; Susanne Rohr approaches literary realism with a theory of pragmatist semiotics informed by Charles Sanders Peirce’s writings.

Moreover, the question of how to do good, of the possibilities and limits of reform, is extended from the level of representation to a self-reflective discussion of literary *form*: it addresses the realism/idealism debate introduced above, that is, the problem of a reconciliation of aesthetic demands of “the real” with formulations of an ethical “ideal” of altruism. Annie’s reflections about her wish to be good, so the narrator informs us, prompt her to “reveries so vivid that they seemed to weaken and exhaust her for the grapple with realities.” The use of the plural in this instance is telling, hinting at once at the narrator’s understanding of a multiplicity and heterogeneity of human experience of reality, and of the repeatability and plurality of acts of imagination that are presented as unavoidable distractions. Howells’s description of Annie’s character thus serves to expose a conflict between the real and the ideal, elucidated by the narrator as “a kind of break” between “conclusions and [ . . . ] actions” and “reasons and [ . . . ] conclusions,” respectively, that is, between the “facts” of reality, and the moral principles and ideas by which reality is ideally shaped and framed. This conflict is not merely a moral one. In fact, it can be read as a self-reflective commentary on realist literary form: do only idealists engage in moral(istic) reflection, in “vivid reveries”? Does an idealist or moral(istic) agenda have an impact, does it “weaken and exhaust” the realist form? How can a novelist eager to be both realist and reformist abstain from “vivid reveries” and thus be victorious over the “grapple” with reality? *Annie Kilburn* reflects on its own realist form, reflects on the conflict between the real and the ideal, an aesthetic conflict that is, in turn, framed and inspired by a desire to reformulate sentimental and religious notions of reform.<sup>8</sup>

The problem of a practical application of Annie’s good intentions directs the novel’s plot. Episodically, the reader learns about Annie’s failures, which are sometimes caused by her naivety, but are, more often, a consequence of the fact that Annie’s moral ideals no longer correspond to the reality of her recently industrialized hometown. As a visiting outsider who returns to a drastically changed social environment, Annie is a quasi-utopian traveler, and the descriptions of her hometown resemble a case study.<sup>9</sup> This is not only implied in the

<sup>8</sup> In the novel, the question of reform is also reflected in discussions about appropriate terminology: both the concept of “philanthropy” (736) and the model of sentimental sympathy (684) are discarded. Here, too, the problem about how to frame and to phrase moral principles is extended to self-reflective discussions of literary form.

<sup>9</sup> An intertextual reference to the figure of the philanthropist Hollingsworth of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* (686) suggests that Howells borrows from the

town's telling name – "Hatboro" is a nickname derived from the town's straw hat industry that has replaced its agrarian economy – but it can also be seen in the fact that most other characters in the novel function as representatives of different contemporary approaches toward social reform: Annie meets and consults with a group of charity ladies, whose attempts at reform are revealed as exclusionary and hypocritical. Annie is most strongly influenced by Reverend Peck, who functions as a representative for a more radical, Christian-socialist approach towards the problem of reform, but he experiences an untimely and symbolical death at the end of the novel. Finally, Annie's love interest, Dr. Morrell, stands for a rational, "realistic" approach towards social reform, but his endeavors, too, turn out to be mostly futile. The novel thus emphasizes not a psychological portrayal of Annie's altruistic character but rather the problem of social injustice and the devastating effects of modernization and industrialization on a small American town. One could therefore read *Annie Kilburn* as an allegory on the problem of reform, or at least as a text whose primary interest lies in conveying a moral message.

In fact, its perceived plotlessness, as well as its episodic and schematic illustration of the problem of social injustice partially explains why *Annie Kilburn* has, in much of the literature available on the novel, been discussed as a text whose reformist agenda is in conflict with the main formal characteristics presented in Howells's own conception of realist aesthetics, most importantly with his rejection of didacticism. Edwin H. Cady detects a "new economy of movement and directness of development" (83) in the novel's form that he later describes as "forceful" (88). In *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit*, Fluck reads the novel as exhibiting a somewhat "purposeful" or "controlled" narrative (316; my translation) and this, in turn, as a sign for Howells having partially sacrificed his already-established realist model of communicative interaction for a conception of literature as exemplary, symbolic space of action. Alan Trachtenberg claims to perceive a forced "symmetry of form" (201) in Howells's reformist writing; he reads his "morally pleasing" endings as an indicator for the author's resort to the form of the romance (192). The fact that *Annie Kilburn* has been placed within the canon of the Social Gospel novel (Suderman 50), and thus has been received as an example of sentimentalist fiction, provides further

---

utopian form. It can also be read as an ironic critique not only of reformist philanthropy, but also of the utopian form itself, since Hawthorne's novel, too, bears elements of satire and parody concerning the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of "reform."

support for reading the novel not only as an exhibition of the problem of realist reform, but also as a testament to its insolubleness.

A second look at the quote seems to substantiate such a reading: In the first half, the narrator presents Annie's private reflections. The insight into Annie's consciousness is made explicit by inquits like "she thought" and "she said to herself." Annie's experience is here directly and immediately quoted. However, this mediation is interrupted: In the second part of the quote, the narrator's voice becomes more and more audible, starting with his evaluative comment "It was not logical" and continuing the commentary until the end of the quote. What function does this shift to a more authorial narrative mode perform? If we follow narratologist Dorrit Cohn's insights, authorial narration can provide the reader with a more "panoramic view" (*Transparent Minds* 34) of a character's inner self; it shows a tendency toward "typifying," and finally, to "explicit, didactic evaluation" (23). If one were to read the shift in narration – which is not an isolated case but rather a strategy that is paradigmatic for the narrative style exhibited in the novel as a whole – as a sign of the narrator's didacticism, then this would indeed provide grounds for a reading of the novel as a mere allegory on the issue of social reform. With such an interpretation of the novel's narrative structure, *Annie Kilburn* would not stand the test of Howells's formal problem: moral meaning would trump form.

But to use narratological insights in order to jump to conclusions about the politics of a novel is a questionable endeavor. The rather heated scholarly debate between Cohn and a group of literary critics around Mark Seltzer, published in a volume of *New Literary History* in 1995, emphasizes this problem. Seltzer's provocative *Henry James and the Art of Power* can serve, due to the argument's tenacity in ensuing criticism on realism, as an example of a larger trend of revisionist literary criticism taking shape in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> In his book, Seltzer examines the idea of a "politics of the novel" in Henry James's work, claiming that inscriptions of power are not only present in political claims represented in James's texts but also, and even more influentially so, in the very techniques of realist representation themselves. In an analysis highly influenced by Foucault, Seltzer interprets formal characteristics of the realist novel, for example that of omniscient narration, as constitutive of a politics of surveillance and control: "The realists share, with other colonizers of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Comprehensive criticism of Seltzer's reading is provided, for example, by Fluck, "Radical Aesthetics" and Kaplan.

urban scene, a passion to see and document ‘things as they are,’ and this passion takes the form of a fantasy of surveillance” (52). Omniscient narration thus exerts power and discipline in Seltzer’s reading of James’s novels.

Cohn criticizes this approach harshly in her essay “Optics and Power in the Novel,” which was republished as the last chapter of her *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999). Cohn argues that Seltzer and related “ideologically-oriented” critics misuse and misunderstand basic insights of fictional form and narrative poetics (173). To combine the Foucauldian reading of the panopticon, which underlies Seltzer’s theory, with claims about the narrator’s position is, as Cohn rightfully observes, flawed: Power “can only exist between entities that coexist, ontological equals that share the same space and the same time” (171), and authors, narrators, characters, and readers simply and decisively do *not* exist on the same ontological plane – after all, the narrator is the product of the author’s own imagination, is part of the fictional universe. Finally, Cohn extends these important observations to a reinvestigation of the history of literary criticism on the genre of the realist novel. The gradual shift from authorial narration to figural narration, enabled by the introduction of the device of free indirect style at the end of the nineteenth century, has been foundational for tracing the development of the realist novel in literary history. As Cohn claims, this shift has been accompanied by corresponding interpretations: while authorial narration is usually said to be “designed to propagate clear and absolute values, beliefs authoritatively held and didactically targeted” (177) and is thus often read as “conservative,” the latter type has been read as illustrating “a liberal stance that believes in normative flexibility and allows for multiple and ambiguous meaning” (177). This “mode-meaning correspondence” is also clearly at work in Seltzer’s study. However, as Cohn concludes, it is important to complicate this distinction. If one recalls that narrators themselves embody a *fictional* voice, one must also concede an inherent ambiguity to the narrator’s presumed reliability and normative attitude. Cohn therefore suggests a “potential reversal of the mode-meaning correspondence” in the final paragraph of her book (180).

Howells’s reformist novels certainly engage to a large degree with a mode of authorial narration, with what Cohn identifies as the historically older type. In *Annie Kilburn*, the rare moments of intro-, of figural narration, are frequently interrupted, evaluated, and guided by the narrator’s commenting voice, which explains why the novel has been subject to accusations of didacticism in much of the literature available

on the text. However, the “mode-meaning correspondence” can be complicated, and Howells’s presumably moralizing narrative strategies can be reinvestigated by a last look at the quote that is at the center of this essay. Interestingly, the above-discussed shift in narrative voice, the break with the introspective mode observed in the second half of the quote, is, in a final manoeuver, literally spelled out by the narrator. The quote continues:

With all this, it must not be supposed that [Annie] was morbidly introspective. Her life had been apparently a life of cheerful acquiescence in worldly conditions; it had been, in some measure, a life of fashion, or at least of society. (647-48)

The reassurance about Annie’s lack of “morbid introspection” must be read as ironic. On the level of content, the reference to Annie’s “cheerful acquiescence in worldly conditions,” and the evocation of a “fashionable” society recalls Howells’s charges against the shallowness of charity put forward in his Christmas column. It thus ironically calls into question the genuineness of Annie’s good intentions, and the validity of her ensuing reformist endeavors – and therefore, arguably, the probability of successful social reform in general. How, then, should a reader trust in the representation of the narrator’s moral authority if their presumed normative stances are repeatedly called into question? Howells’s ironic distancing from the reformist objectives of his novel makes it difficult to sustain an accusation of moralizing didacticism, or a “conservative” reading of the novel. More importantly still, the narrator’s reference to “introspection” is, of course, also a self-reflective comment on the very narrative mode that precedes the quote. The introspective glance into Annie’s consciousness has, due to the shift toward authorial narration, already been proven unstable, and is now ultimately and irreversibly broken by the evaluative comment of the narrator in the continuation of the quote. If one takes into account that the form of the nineteenth-century realist novel is often said to be dedicated to the representation of individual experience by engaging in a mode of introspection (Watt 13), the reference to Annie’s lack of “morbid introspection” is an ironic stance on a narrative strategy characteristic for a literature that is received as realist.

Distancing irony, finally, is yet another strategy in an ongoing process of reformulation.<sup>11</sup> The novel’s ambiguous ending, too, can be

---

<sup>11</sup> Sarah B. Daugherty reads the irony in *Annie Kilburn* to an opposite effect, namely as a strategy that undermines both the question of reform and “the central tenets of

read in favor of Howells's interest in pointing out both the possibilities and the limitations of reform: Annie establishes a "Social Union" which, far from being a "brilliant success [ . . . ] is still not a failure; and the promise of its future is in the fact that it continues to have a *present*" (863; my emphasis). In these last paragraphs of the novel, the narration switches into the present tense, thus emphasizing, again both on the level of content and form, the persistent present-ness of the problem of realist reform and the perpetual continuation of the problem of reformulation. This is further emphasized by yet another quote that can be read as responding to the debate of the real and the ideal, as a self-reflective comment on realist literary form: "[Annie] is *really* of use, for its [the Social Union's] working is by no means *ideal*" (862; my emphasis). In the last paragraphs of the novel, the ironic evocation of the conflict between the real and the ideal, the aesthetic demands of realist form, and the ethical dimension of social reform in the late nineteenth century, is reformulated, and it is crucially linked to an opening up of literary form.

Howells's literary criticism and fictional work of the 1880s and 1890s implicitly and explicitly revolves around the formal problem of realist reform. Howells points out, and tentatively endeavors to resolve, competing epistemological claims about the human condition, as put forward by religion, by sentimental ethics, and by new scientific findings of psychology and sociology. The negotiation of the problem of reform, however, extends beyond the level of content. In *Annie Kilburn*, Howells continuously links the idea of (failed) reform to an exposure of a representational crisis of realist literary form. This exposure is often enabled by ironic self-reflection, a mode that would also figure heavily in his next novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and in his Altrurian Romances. In Howells's reformist literary work, reformulation is enabled by the mixing and mingling of scientific and religious rhetoric, by a repeated attempt to reconcile diverging interpretations of human nature and the human good, and, finally, by self-reflective ironic statements not only about the question of reform, but also, and importantly so, about a mode of representation that calls itself "realist." *Reformulation* can thus be seen as an endeavor to reconcile, or, at the very least, a way of negotiating the formal problem of reformist realism.

---

Howells's realism" (25). Daugherty, however, does not consider Howells's self-reflective discussions of the process of alleged realist narration, which I read as an endeavor to point out and reconcile the formal problem of reformist realism.

### References

Ahlstrom, Sydney E. *A Religious History of the American People*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972.

Alkana, Joseph. *The Social Self: Hawthorne, Howells, William James, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

Cady, Edwin H. *The Realist at War: The Mature Years 1885-1920 of William Dean Howells*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1958.

Carter, Everett. *Howells and the Age of Realism*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1950.

Christianson, Frank. *Philanthropy in British and American Fiction: Dickens, Hawthorne, Eliot, and Howells*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Claybaugh, Amanda. *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

—. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Daugherty, Sarah B. "Howells, Tolstoy, and the Limits of Realism: The Case of Annie Kilburn." *American Literary Realism* 19.1 (1986): 21-41.

Fluck, Winfried. *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit: Der amerikanische Realismus, 1865-1900*. Munich: Fink, 1992.

—. "Radical Aesthetics." *REAL - Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 10 (1994): 31-47.

Handler, Glenn. *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Hopkins, Charles Howard. *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism 1865-1915*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940.

Howells, William Dean. *Novels 1886-1888: The Minister's Charge, April Hopes, Annie Kilburn*. New York: Library of America, 1989.

—. *Selected Literary Criticism. Volume II: 1886-1897*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Ickstadt, Heinz. "Concepts of Society and the Practice of Fiction: Symbolic Responses to the Experience of Change in Late-Nineteenth Century America." *Impressions of a Gilded Age*. Eds. Marc Chenétier and Rob Kroes. Amsterdam: Amerika Institut, 1983. 77-95.

Jackson, Gregory S. *The Word and its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Ludwig, Sämi. *Pragmatist Realism: The Cognitive Paradigm in American Realist Texts*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

Rohr, Susanne. *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung: Wirklichkeitskonstitution im amerikanischen Roman 1889-1989*. Munich: Fink, 2004.

Seltzer, Mark. *Henry James and the Art of Power*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Suderman, Elmer F. "The Social Gospel Novelists' Criticism of American Society." *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 7 (1966): 45-60.

Symonds, John Addington. "Realism and Idealism." *Essays: Speculative and Suggestive*. 3rd ed. London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1907. 108-27.

Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007.

Vidich, Arthur J. and Stanford M. Lyman. *American Sociology: Worldly Rejections of Religion and Their Directions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

