CHAPTER I

The equivocation of culture

> Of all learned discourse, the ethnological seems to come closest
> to a fiction.
>
> –Roland Barthes

After his arrival in London, where he would establish his career as a novelist, Henry James wrote, "I take possession of the Old World. I inhale it – I appropriate it." Beginning his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, Bronislaw Malinowski wrote in his diary of "feelings of ownership": "This island, though not 'discovered' by me, is for the first time experienced artistically and mastered intellectually."[1] James's life in London, of course, was dramatically different from Malinowski's in the Trobriands, but coupled together, the quotations point to a striking similarity. In these two ventures – an American crossing the Atlantic to repossess the Old World, and an anthropologist mastering a "primitive" world – the language of colonial discovery is cast in new terms: these travelers come not to seize lands and people but to write them. Despite their differences, James's innovations in realist fiction and Malinowski's in ethnography are part of a new way of seeing and writing about social life that developed in the later nineteenth century. Each writer refashions an earlier, more provincial genre of manners – the novel of manners, in one case, and the traveler's customs-and-manners survey, in the other – to produce a complex professional and international discourse. Each discourse, in turn, fosters for the writer an enhanced authority over a bounded sphere of culture, an aesthetic and intellectual "ownership" of manners intended to surpass coarser forms of cultural possession. Virtually unknown at the time of their respective arrivals, James and Malinowski each would become, by way of his books and essays, a new kind of liberal hero, each becoming an acknowledged expert, a recognized "Master" of

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culture. In these two exemplary careers, writing about manners becomes the genesis of a modern liberal authority.[2]

Edith Wharton, who knew both writers personally and read them carefully, would bring to the surface their common strategies by describing her New York "tribes" of the rich, aligning drawing-room culture and ethnographic culture – we might say table manners and tribal manners – as interchangeable idioms. In this way, Wharton reads both James and Malinowski as practitioners of what she would call "a backward glance," a vision of inherited manners as the true site of social origins and transformations, enabling her to telescope the old world of tribal primitivism with the Old World of Europe and the New World's Old World that she calls Old New York, all in opposition to the sphere of modern America but containing the keys to its future as a civilization. Through these permutations, Wharton revises and exhibits manners as the essential, sometimes disguised, rites of social cohesion and punishment rather than as inherent standards of propriety, giving her a new purchase on a particular social body and its powers, transitions, and supposed signs of decline or extinction. This backward glance, then, is anything but glancing. As the remarks by James and Malinowski suggest, it is a vision that "takes possession," that takes up and explains seemingly marginal practices by deciphering a cultural logic hidden in what Wharton calls the "nether side" of the social scene. It is a form of expert observation, realized in writing, that gives the observer mastery over a cultural territory. "Do New York!" As famously prompted by James, Wharton would "do" New York, as he had done cosmopolitan Europe and as Malinowski was simultaneously doing the Trobriand Islands.

But what does it mean for a novelist to master manners in this way, as a venture comparable to the enterprise of writing an ethnography? In the simplest sense, it reminds us that novel writing is a social practice. James's advice to Wharton expressly casts fiction as an activity or process, something one can do to aesthetically "appropriate" a social scene. In its phrasing, James's injunction to "do" New York anticipates Clifford Geertz's emphasis on anthropology as the work of "doing ethnography."[3] In my study, understanding fiction – primarily novels by Hawthorne, James, and Wharton – means understanding what it is to do fiction, what kind of social and aesthetic office it performs. To analyze fiction as a practice, as a way of mastering manners on the page, I explore conver-

gences between novels and ethnographic texts and their collabora-
tion in helping to produce our modern discourse of culture. In turn,
the collaboration opens for us new historical and critical perspec-
tives on the particular mastery of manners that is fiction writing.

In my use of it, however, the domain of "culture" has neither the
intellectual coherence nor the historical sovereignty that my claim
of collaboration might seem to suggest. For Malinowski and James,
writing about manners seemed to promise a formal mastery of
culture, but of late the discourse of culture has been discussed as
presenting us with a "predicament" far more than a secure posses-
sion. Even as culture has become a ruling category of thought, it
has exemplified with unsettling clarity the "crisis in representa-
tion" that Edward Said notes is symptomatic, even normative, for
the human sciences in our time. "Culture is a deeply compromised
idea I cannot yet do without": this declaration in James Clifford's
study of a constellation of twentieth-century ethnography, litera-
ture, and art, entitled *The Predicament of Culture*, points to a rather
remarkable state of affairs. It suggests that the culture concept has
both an enduring analytic centrality and a new instability – that it
is at once foundational and equivocal.[4]

A century ago, few would have predicted a "deeply compro-
mised" status for the idea of culture. Wharton's smooth suturing of
the imagery of tribal rituals and bourgeois manners implies a new
compatibility between what had been historically antagonistic
strains of the culture idea. By splicing together the roles of novelist
and ethnographer to create a figure she calls "the drawing-room
naturalist," Wharton appears to transcend blithely the distinction
between a humanist tradition, in which culture signifies a set of
prized Western values that advance human perfectibility, and a
sociological sense of culture as the web of institutions and lived
relations that structure any human community, what E. B. Tylor
announced in 1871 as "culture in its wide ethnographic sense."
Within this expanded sense of culture, savage and civilized worlds
can share, at long last, a common language of interpretation. Ray-
mond Williams, for instance, asserts just such a historical merging
of these disparate notions of culture in his groundbreaking work,
Culture and Society (1958), where he argues that Tylor's anthropologi-
cal understanding of culture as an organic "whole way of life" has
its roots in a rich literary tradition and is "continuous from Cole-
ridge and Carlyle," but that "what was a personal assertion of

value has become a general intellectual method."[5] Like Williams's study, my argument in this book assumes that ethnographic culture shares a kinship with the more belletristic lineage of Arnoldian culture, but the intellectual history narrated by Williams, in which the "culture" of social scientists is the undisturbed outgrowth of the "culture" articulated by poets and critics, offers little to account for the current perplexities in cultural and literary studies.

It does not account for the contradictions, for instance, in the way notions of culture are now deployed in arguments of virtually all political stripes. How it is that culture is invoked as a signature of authenticity (every genuine folk or people has its own pattern of culture) at the same time that it can serve as the mark of the inauthentic (the merely "culturally constructed" inferiority of women)? Why is culture a category of both the local (Balinese or Appalachian lifeways) and the global (the culture of consumption)? What of the fact that the idea of culture can be shown to carry a vestigial imprint of the imperialism it supposedly was designed to combat? More pertinent here than these blurry semantic bound-aries is the broader "crisis" of representation that the word brings to the fore. Just what is the class of objects to which the language of culture gives intelligible verbal form? As many scholars have ob-served, the discourse of culture shows with sometimes embarrass-ing ease that the invisible thing called culture is a "serious fiction" that must exist before there can be constituted any concrete object for cultural analysis to address. Such circularity is by no means unique to the study of culture, but it is especially striking when it surfaces there.[6] In this study, recognizing the self-referential lan-guage of culture prompts new questions about just what writers like James and Malinowski had "discovered" and mastered when they portrayed the social manners of their respective fields. We leave off asking whether they adequately captured what Malinowski called a "true picture" of Trobriand tribal life or what James called a "fun-damental statement" of Old World society and, with a sometimes disorienting slippage to a different level of inquiry, we are led to questions about the conditions of representation that make tribal life and Old World society visible as coherent objects to be de-scribed in the first place.[7] Once such questions come into view, the fictive status of culture persistently shadows the interpretation of fiction, and novels never quite rid themselves of this background riddle of representation.

In the span of time reaching from Hawthorne's era to our own, then, fields of discourse organized around the culture idea offer us both the resources of an authorial mastery and the vexations of an authorial crisis. How did we get from one to the other, from the magisterial force of, say, Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* and Tylor's *Primitive Culture* to the "conceptual free-for-all" muddying the term "culture" today, or the politically conflicted connotations of a phrase like "cultural relativism"?[8] To put the question that way presupposes a story of entropy, a falling off from a once-coherent fullness of meaning. But it is one of the aims of this study to rearrange that entropic tale of a modern predicament of culture. Instead of suggesting a lapse from an earlier coherence, I will argue that definitive authorial powers *and* dilemmas are present from the first in the nineteenth-century production of a discourse of culture in fiction, and that the resulting mastery and anxiety together mutually constitute both the social authority of novelists and the fictions of society they bring to life. In this study, the very predicaments inherent in representing culture provide a window on the formation of a high literary authorship for American novelists, a new select status organized around a specialized practice of writing about manners. By the same token, culture is treated here as a problematic but enabling myth, a literal pretext for the work of writing manners and the site at which fiction both feeds and is nourished by other nonfictional genres. It is not the concept of culture that is at issue here, then, but its particular services as a serious fiction in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Viewed in this way, the troubling circularity in texts about culture is also a productive circularity; New York exists as a culture in part because authors like Wharton had "done" it, no less than New York had "done" or produced Edith Wharton and her fiction.

What I describe is not a closed system, however. The relations between fiction and culture are in some sense circular, but they are not tautological. My analysis is concerned with preserving the real uncertainty and mutability in fiction's relation to the social world it represents. Literary scholars run the risk of lodging a tautology in our own critical practice when interpretations are determined in advance by an assumption that novels either irresistibly uphold or inherently critique the political force fields of the society they depict. This tautological trap is something I want not merely to avoid but to analyze. Debates about the political disposition of fiction

have a special weight for the particular body of literature I will examine, a literature in which the portrait of manners has been seen as either a genteel armor designed to fend off the approach of a chaotic modernity or, conversely, as a subtle destabilizing of the social restrictions that everyday manners necessarily enforce. The later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a flourishing literature of manners by writers from the United States. The three I examine most closely, Hawthorne, James, and Wharton, together produced what would amount to a small library of manners – innumerable volumes of travel writing, "international" novels and short stories, notebooks of social observation, and critical essays on American life. This library is central to what historians have shown was the formation of a sphere of high literary art in the United States during this era. We can identify a national institution of letters that took shape around Hawthorne's career, became professionalized through the monumental figure of James, and was claimed for women writers by Wharton.[9]

But if the "school of Hawthorne," as it has been called, was the core of an institutionalization of American letters, there is no simple way to gauge the politics of its sanctified authority. The familiar provinces of this fiction – the secure spaces of homes, drawing rooms, and European galleries – might suggest that these writers were in retreat from what appeared to be the anarchic tendencies of the new kind of market society taking root in these decades. And the literature I examine can indeed seem sealed away from other literary trends of this period – from the popular adventure novels, for instance, which made visible the far reaches of commercial and political empires, or the biological fables of naturalist fiction with their revised wilderness territories of the marketplace, laboratory, and battlefield, or the postbellum race melodramas by both African American and white writers that displaced Civil War conflicts onto literary landscapes. Yet it is easy to point to textual clues indicating that some of the political themes and energies from these subgenres had crossed the threshold into the indoor narratives of manners and high culture as well. In Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*, for instance, Praxiteles' statue of a faun is made a figure of the "tribes below us," and fine art mediates questions of a "savageness" that figures forth modern immigration, racial conflict, and urban unrest. In Wharton's New York, Washington Square is a "reservation" for elite "Aborigines" who are "vanishing" with the

advance of new-money invaders, as emergent class tensions are coded ethnographically. James's refined heroines emit silent "primitive wails" behind the walls of country-house settings, one of the hints of the severity and eeriness that mark James's revision of an earlier body of domestic fiction. These metaphors are more than a stylistic gloss. Through them the novels display traces of the social contests and worldly dislocations that were addressed more openly in other kinds of contemporary fiction. With the estranging stare that defines Victorian anthropology, the parlors and museums of polite society were refashioned into conspicuous exhibits of a new and often ominous-seeming social reality. In this fiction, the civility of the drawing room – and the sovereign sign of Civilization itself – are subjected to disfiguring narrative pressures. When we pay close attention to these defamiliarizations, it becomes harder to assume an inherent social conservatism in this American literature of manners.

But neither is it certain that these kinds of exotic formal features – either the estranging "latitude" of reference in Hawthorne's romance or the extravagant metaphors in the realism of James and Wharton – are in themselves evidence of the authors' desire to resist the sway of inherited institutions and powers. In fact, by laying claim to manners, to the details of custom, dress, body carriage, and verbal style, the novelists become authorities over the most subtle and intimate (and therefore most powerful) kinds of institutional regulation. Manners, the personalized, bodily absorption of social habits and decorum, are deeply political. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, manners are the "symbolic taxes" by which a society fashions individuals for its own survival, extracting a tribute unknowingly paid by our own reflexive gestures and physical bearing.

> The principles em-bodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable than . . . the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as "stand up straight" or "don't hold your knife in your left hand" . . . . The concessions of *politeness* always contain *political* concessions.[10]

Viewed in this way, manners are a form of active regulation, the installation of a social order deep within the body and personality

of the subject. Similarly, the activity of writing about manners is a contingent – though not identical – process of supervision, providing as it does a natural-seeming account of the fashioning of the self as a rounded, social character. To recognize as much, though, still leaves open the question of the nature of that supervision, whether the portrait of manners in a novel is intended either to reinforce or to subvert the internalized "cosmology" that is the matrix for the controlling laws of decorum. Does writing about manners defend or undermine the hierarchies they serve?

These opposed alternatives, I suggest, constitute a false dilemma. By recasting narratives of manners as a kind of practice, I seek to offer a more dynamic model of novelists' authority over manners, and over the potent social powers that manners implant in the subject. Fiction is not a static judgment on the society it depicts; it does not merely endorse or condemn a preexisting reality. Rather, fiction constitutes one of the activities through which writers order and circulate the authority to write about society in the first place. Novel writing is itself one of the finite ways in which a society goes about inventing, testing, and altering its claims to legitimacy. At the same time, writing fiction is one of the ways in which manners become intelligible as the stuff of a larger totality, the web of invisible social relations – a perceived culture – that endows the minutiae of social manners with their meaning. Novels are a way of creating, not just reporting, the real, governing fictions of culture. At the same time, though, the writers' mastery of culture is inseparable from a profound uneasiness about the individual in society, or about what we might call here the *subject of manners*: that is, the subject or self understood as wholly constructed and controlled by the ruling powers of manners, the identity wholly composed – and therefore potentially de-composed – by external social forces. If deciphering the power of manners held the promise of social control, it also threatened cherished myths of individual agency. This study tracks the productive play of these interlocking energies of cultural mastery and anxiety by exploring ethnographic tropes informing fiction. Reading the traces of an imagined primitivism in a literature of manners, I analyze scenarios in which a civilization's power to cultivate the self converts all too easily to a savage loss of civilized composure, an unraveling of identity that motivates an even greater vigilance over manners.

A return to my starting examples of James and Malinowski can

illustrate these conditions. Recent criticism has significantly reor-
iented James's accomplishment as a novelist. Whereas his mastery
of form once signified James's supreme aesthetic detachment, in
many current interpretations that same trait reveals his social en-
gagement; critics have explored the way James's sophisticated nar-
rative strategies, even at their most experimental and arcane, are
continuous with social practices of the turn-of-the-century era.[11]
Yet this common interest in the cultural grounding of James's vision
has not ushered in any clear consensus. Is James through this
mastery a master spy, an invisible agent of power exercising the
pleasure of "seeing without being seen," as one reader has sug-
gested, or, at the other end of the spectrum, is he a hero of subver-
sion, a figure whose powers of sight are used to unsettle imposed
social and sexual identities?[12] Is he a plainclothes policeman or a
disguised double agent, a Mata Hari for the Resistance, in a top hat
and waistcoat? James's narrative practice can be cast still differ-
ently and, I think, more profitably, in a historical context that
includes the rise of professional ethnography and a new scientific
interest in customs and manners. So situated, James's role as novel-
ist is neither one of surveillance nor of a decentering subversion but,
like the ethnographer's, a role always ambiguously partaking of
both – both the pleasures of spying and the unsettling energies of
relativism. It is this ambiguity that makes James a figure of a
particular liberal authority, whose office it is to communicate be-
tween a civilization and the forms of otherness that the civilization's
own powers have "discovered" and aspired to master.

By calling James's fiction "ethnographic," I mean that James
practices what Michel de Certeau calls an operational schema of
"ethnological isolation" and inversion: a "recipe," as Certeau la-
bels it, of "cutting out and turning over" that produces the intellec-
tual control expressed in the remarks by James and Malinowski
quoted at the beginning of this chapter. It is a technique in which
the writer "cuts out certain practices" from a broader social fabric,
"in such a way as to treat them as a separate population, forming a
coherent whole but foreign to the place in which the theory is
produced." This group of practices, "at first obscure, silent, and
remote . . . is inverted to become the element that illuminates theo-
ry and sustains discourse."[13] The strategy, which, as Certeau sug-
gests, is rooted in nineteenth-century ethnology, provided perhaps
the most powerful analytic fulcrum for the emergent social sciences.

The remote totem markings of Emile Durkheim's Australian tribes, "cut out and turned over," hold the key to the cohesion of modern society. The intricacies that Lewis Morgan discovered in the Iroquois kinship system contain the secret to understanding the nature of property. Maori magic lies behind the neurosis of Freud's Vienna patient and her casual decision to walk past the shop where her husband's razors are sharpened, revealing in that city stroll "the pleasurably accented idea that her husband might cut his throat."[14] These kinds of startling inversions often made scholars themselves conspicuous (and occasionally notorious), even as they were installed as cultural authorities. The public display of expertise, of skills possessed by the few and held up before mere spectators, was one of the ways that the hierarchical space of expert authority was ordered in the later nineteenth century.[15]

James's own formal expertise is nowhere more on display than in his 1901 novel *The Sacred Fount*, a work that he said was "calculated to minister to curiosity."[16] The curiosities of the novel are obvious: the narrator describes an astonishing weekend party at an English country villa where one woman looks decades younger than she appeared when he last saw her. Similarly, a man once exquisitely stupid now is discovered to be witty and learned. But in pointing to these occult elements of the curious, James includes the more distancing or clinical term "to minister," suggesting an intention to cultivate or manage, even to administer the curious. Within the novel, the ministering is done by the unnamed narrator, a character armed with extraordinary powers of observation and an elegant but outrageous theory. The narrator is convinced that the miraculous new youthfulness of Mrs. Brissenden has come at the expense of the preternatural aging of her husband, and that the new intelligence of Gilbert Long must be drawn from some other, unidentified woman now slipping quickly into imbecility. These linked transferences, he deduces, contain the secret to an underlying social arrangement of alliances and love affairs among the small social circle ("intimacy of course had to be postulated"). The novel is James's most explicit romance of science, with the central narrative energy devoted to a search for "a law governing delicate phenomena." Like Certeau's recipe, the narrator's method promises what he calls "the joy of the intellectual mastery of things unamenable." By isolating particular gestures, words, and images from among "the pleasant give and take of society," the novel defines a cultural totality, a discrete