

Introduction

Up to this time I had written only a few poems, and some articles descriptive of boy life on the prairie, although I was doing a good deal of thinking and lecturing on land reform, and was regarded as a very intense disciple of Herbert Spencer and Henry George – a singular combination, as I see it now. On my way westward, that summer day in 1887, rural life presented itself from an entirely new angle.

Hamlin Garland, 1922 “Author’s Preface” to *Main-Travelled Roads*
(first edition of *Main-Travelled Roads* published in 1890)

There would be a thousand matters – matters already the theme of prodigious reports and statistics – as to which I should have no sense whatever, and as to information about which my record would accordingly stand naked and unashamed. It should unfailingly be proved against me that my opportunity had found me incapable of information, incapable alike of receiving and imparting it; for then, and then only, would it be clearly enough attested that I *had* cared and understood.

Henry James, “Preface” to *The American Scene* (1907)¹

This book explores how certain key works of American literary realism articulate within themselves new ways of gaining intellectual prestige or distinction – new ways of gaining, that is, some degree of cultural recognition as unusually intelligent, discerning, sensitive, alert, knowledgeable, or even wise. Recent scholarship on American literary realism has concentrated on realism’s correlation with a wide range of professional discourses – social-scientific, reformist, juridical, managerial, and others – that were all closely associated with the new middle classes’ rise to hegemony in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Focusing on what Nancy Bentley calls “convergences” between literary realism and other emergent discourses and disciplines such as social work, city planning, and anthropology, this historicizing work has in part

been inspired by a Foucauldian impulse to locate forms of power operating within arenas that are not explicitly political. We have learned, for example, that literary realism and ethnography both strove to produce an “expert observation . . . that give[s] the observer mastery over a cultural territory.”² Scholars including Bentley, Mark Seltzer, June Howard, Howard Horowitz, Eric Sundquist, and others have shown that “realist” frameworks structured a wide range of the new middle classes’ participation in, and responses to, the period’s remarkably rapid changes.³ Yet Henry James and Hamlin Garland, in prefacing works that treat many of the same aspects of American reality that, for instance, sociologists and reformers also investigated, are at pains to distinguish their approaches from precisely those others.

James not only admits, he even boasts of a paralyzed incapacity in relation to “reports and statistics,” which at the turn of the century were rapidly becoming the most privileged forms of knowledge in “an American culture defined increasingly by the emerging disciplines of social science.” Indeed, James designates that cognitive incapacity as primary proof of the special value that readers should accord to his perspective: “for then, and then only, would it be clearly enough attested that I *had* cared and understood.” So too, Garland’s description of gaining an “entirely new angle” on rural life, the angle from which, as he implies, *Main-Travelled Roads* would be written, is accompanied by a self-ironic reference to his own previous viewpoint, which he now recognizes as deriving from an immature, even incoherent, set of allegiances to the sociologist Herbert Spencer and the radical land reformer Henry George.⁴ The centrality that these two authors give to differentiating their own writing’s “angle” from the angles of other emergent approaches begins to indicate the need for us to pay closer attention to the specificity of literary realist claims to intellectual authority. Recent criticism’s project of elaborating literary realism’s consanguinity with other cultural practices roughly contemporary with it has enabled us to recognize importantly overlapping assumptions, methodologies and goals, as well as pervasive cultural imperatives towards, for example, the investigation and mapping of social spaces. Yet this same historicist emphasis on revealing connections among cultural endeavors traditionally thought about in separation has, I believe, caused us to move too quickly past the particular complexities characterizing claims to privileged intellectual status by and within literary realist texts themselves.⁵

REALIST DISPOSITIONS

Literary realist works elaborate new forms of intellectual prestige, which are, in various cases, identified with an authorial persona, personified through a fictional character, instantiated in a text's narrating voice, and/or implicitly proffered to readers. Claims to what we might call "realist prestige" exhibit at their center the assertion of a paradoxical relationship – comprising a unique degree of emotional and cognitive intimacy with, yet also controllable distance from – whatever category of experience a given literary work posits as the most recalcitrantly *real*, most intransigently *material*, that life has to offer.⁶ As we will see, however, what comes to count in turn-of-the-century American literary realism as most irreducibly material (as, that is, the *realist* real thing) not only changes from work to work but also shifts within individual works.

Categories of human experience put forward as the *realist* reality at different moments of literary realist texts include, for instance, physical suffering, life in the slums, money and sex (or, at some moments, desire as such), people's overriding need for social converse, death, and the class hierarchies of American society. At other moments, American realist works also position linguistic events, whether regionally marked speech or facets of the actual scene of writing, as "most real" in the implicit hierarchies of realness that they set up. Finally, that which occupies the category of most resistantly *there* in American realist writing can even be not-strictly tangible notions such as, for instance, the impossibility of justice, or the ironies built into being a middle-class radical; I will turn to this category in chapter 1 (which focuses on William Dean Howells).

The reader will notice that, compared to virtually all other recent book-length studies of American literary realism, my book spends relatively little time discussing contemporary events or written sources outside of the literary texts that I read. This was not my intention when I first became interested in writing about literary realism and intellectual prestige. I imagined continually comparing explicit and implicit claims to intellectual status that I found within literary realist works with roughly analogous claims in social-scientific and other writing, all the while as I also explored the interrelating sets of historical institutions and circumstances in which these various bids for prestige emerged. As I worked, however, I became more and more convinced that the detail-attentive reading permitted by concentrating on a relatively small selection of literary texts would be methodologically necessary, at least for me, if I wished to follow the layered operations and many vicissitudes

involved when powerful, self-conscious works of literature engage in any sort of cultural work, let alone in a concerted attempt to develop new modes of intellectual distinction.

Despite its relative absence of historicist trappings, however, I nonetheless believe that the present study works responsibly within an historical framework. Indeed, I would contend that the argument I pursue throughout the book – an argument about the elaboration of specific literary realist methods of asserting intellectual distinction – is itself important for any attempt to achieve a detailed understanding of middle-class, professional American culture since the Civil War.⁷ We still have much to learn about the fascinating intricacies of “internecine struggles within the middle classes” over different modes of asserting cultural status. If the professional–managerial middle classes achieved cultural hegemony during the late nineteenth century, certainly it is crucial for us to understand how the literature most prominently identified with them helped them to define themselves, as a grouping, in relation to other groupings, such as working-class immigrants. Thus, studying the role that literary realism played in helping the new middle classes differentiate themselves from people of “lower” (and, to a certain extent, of “higher”) socioeconomic status has been one of recent scholarship’s most central concerns.⁸ But, if only because the professional–managerial middle classes are still culturally hegemonic in America, it is equally important that we strive to understand *intra*-class differences and competitions. Internecine struggles over cultural status among different middle-class fractions and even sub-fractions, such as literary and social-scientific intellectuals, play just as central a role (and often a more immediate one) in defining various middle-class identities and cultural positions as *inter*-class conflicts do. The examples of what might be called “realer-than-thou” one-upmanship that this book attempts to dissect in literary realist works (and, in the book’s final portion, in recent literary-critical and theoretical writings) are almost entirely middle class in origin as well as aimed *at* middle-class competitors. This is true even when immigrant slum life, for example, is the ostensible referent of literary claims to have a more intimate grasp of the really real.

At the risk of trying the reader’s patience, I must emphasize a bit further what this book does not do. It does not seek to describe the intellectual status or cultural prestige given to “literary realism” as a genre in turn-of-the-century American culture.⁹ Neither does the current study attempt to characterize the status acquired by individual “realist” writers – whether Henry James or Abraham Cahan – in the world outside of

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their texts. Nor, finally, does the book's governing interest center on the portrayal of those fictional characters whose activities make them easy to label as "intellectuals" – writers, for instance, or scientists.¹⁰ I desire, rather, to capture a particular "realist disposition," exploring how selected works of literary realism both articulate and valorize its intellectual authority.

"Disposition" is a useful term for me because it encapsulates several of the most important specificities that I have found in literary realist claims to intellectual distinction. First, "disposition" connotes not only mood and personal temperament, but also general outlook on, as well as characteristic modes of interaction with, the world. "Disposition," moreover, moves towards the large semantic category of taste. Constructions of intellectual status within literary realism self-consciously emphasize personal preferences and opinions, emotional responses, and both physical and psychological postures.¹¹ This contrasts markedly with the attempts at systematized objectivity stressed in turn-of-the-century social science.

Second, the *dis-* in "disposition" helps point to the prominence of paradoxical embraces of negativity – embraces of specific incapacities (such as those Henry James boasts of in *The American Scene*), of blockages, painful ironies, and other forms of limitation and frustration – in literary realism's favored styles of intellectual prestige. The intellectual distinction attached to recognizing the effective reality of these modes of negativity constitutes another key difference from intellectual status in the more openly confident social–scientific, reform, and managerial discourses of the period. In chapter 5, I will suggest that American literary realism's conferral of distinction on an intellectual orientation towards various sorts of negativity can be understood as one anticipation within American literary culture of the significant prestige that poststructuralism's emphasis on absence and aporia would come to carry in the US literary academy during the 1970s and 1980s.¹²

Finally, the *-position* in disposition signifies that to talk about prestige is to talk about relational positions and positionings.¹³ Rather than trying to understand the biographical positions of particular authors on a variety of social and institutional axes, however, my readings will explore the establishment of certain textual positions *within* realist works. These textual positions (or, rather, "*dispositions*") accrue intellectual status and prestige for themselves through asserting an exclusively proximate relationship with, yet also a signifying distance from, life's most nitty-gritty dimensions.

I tend to use “prestige” and “status” more or less interchangeably with “distinction,” but the latter term is probably most apt and it deserves particular emphasis here. Each of the realist writers with whom this book deals regularly employed “distinction” when referring to recognizable manifestations of a privileged status. (Abraham Cahan’s David Levinsky, for instance, refers to a suit giving its wearer “an air of distinction.”)¹⁴ In addition, “distinction” evokes difference or separateness, which is an important component (sometimes taking the form of isolation) of the realist dispositions that the current study explores. At the same time, however, distinction remains more syntactically dependent than either prestige or status on prepositions such as “between,” which helps to stress that both it and its possession can only be defined in relation to something or someone else. Moreover, as a term distinction seems better able than status or prestige to encompass forms of recognition that, like those treated here, tend to be informal or new, and which do not easily align with institutional or other long-standing hierarchies.

I most wish to foreground the term “distinction” here, however, because it references the writing of Pierre Bourdieu, above all his remarkable study, *Distinction: a Social Critique of Judgments of Taste*. This is a work whose theoretical and methodological implications I rely on but also seek to challenge and refine throughout.¹⁵ Bourdieu’s *Distinction* draws on extensive interviews, surveys, and other data from France during the 1960s and early 1970s in order to map the ins and outs of cultural prestige. Although Bourdieu sometimes seems to use some of his own terminology a bit loosely, the term “distinction” in his work refers most specifically to one form of the larger category “symbolic capital.” Symbolic capital encompasses any aspect of an individual’s status, authority, privilege, honor, or socially effective reputation that does not directly equate with his or her material wealth. The version of symbolic capital that Bourdieu calls “cultural capital” has sometimes struck me as the category most appropriate to the forms of realist prestige that I seek to understand, and thus I do make some use of the term. But, as John Guillory points out, in Bourdieu’s work “cultural capital” often refers to specific “knowledge, skills, or competence” that can be certified by “objective mechanisms,” such as university diplomas.¹⁶ “Distinction,” by contrast, eschews official certification because it depends on the ineffable aura attached to “cultivation,” “refinement,” and, most of all, “taste.”

An individual’s “distinction” registers his or her place within one or more intangible, but nonetheless socially meaningful, cultural hier-

archies. Familiar hierarchies of distinction include, for just a few classic examples, the ability (or lack of ability) to appreciate fine wines, the degree of abstraction that an individual is comfortable with in modern art, and a preference for “high” literature over popular fiction.¹⁷ Distinction is characteristically demonstrated through acts of taste. One earns distinction through exhibiting a nuanced ability to *distinguish among* art objects, consumption choices, and lifestyle practices alike. Taste classifies the external world, but, as Bourdieu powerfully demonstrates, it also “classifies the classifier” (p. 6).

What determines whether a particular taste or practice will earn “distinction” for its possessor? For Bourdieu, cultural distinction defines itself first and foremost via its inverse relationship to those necessities imposed on us by “crudely material reality” (p. 196). Distinction in modern Western culture functions above all to show (or show off) one’s “objective distance” from needing to worry about “the demands of biological nature,” such as, for example, the body’s requirements concerning nourishment and shelter (p. 255). Socially prestigious modes of dining – for instance, serving meals in discrete, leisurely courses – stress formal features of the experience over and against any direct need to satisfy bodily hunger; a dynamic that also explains why the “finest” restaurants proverbially serve the smallest portions. In Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Lord Hubert’s recommendation of a particular restaurant as “the only restaurant in Europe where they can cook peas” renders emphatic how far those who frequent it are (or wish to be seen as) from any need to treat eating as putting sufficient food inside their stomachs.¹⁸ “Distinction” can also accrue, Bourdieu observes, through demonstrating distance from “the necessities of the . . . social world” (p. 5). In *The House of Mirth*, the Duchess of Beltshire’s impregnable social status not only allows for, but is also reinforced by, the bravado with which she swerves from social conventionalities that others feel bound to obey. When Lily Bart is accused of sexual misconduct, for instance, her friend Carry Fisher feels compelled to follow “the other women’s lead” and shun her. But the Duchess of Beltshire publicly and “instantly” sweeps Lily “under her sheltering wing,” and makes with her an “almost triumphant progress to London.”¹⁹ Equally pertinent here is Michael North’s observation that “bad grammar has long been the privilege of the upper classes, who demonstrate their superiority to social constraints by slipshod speech.”²⁰

MATERIAL CLAIMS

Bourdieu's insistence that cultural distinction constitutes itself through the form of its relationship with material or social reality would seem to make his work particularly resonant for a discussion of prestige and literary realism. Indeed, each of my chapters relies in one way or another upon his central insight: that what he calls "strategies of distinction" (which may be consciously or unconsciously practiced) shape themselves through displaying a relationship with the real (p. 65). Yet I have also found Bourdieu's notion of the relationship between "distinction" and "reality" to be limiting in significant ways. Most obviously, where Bourdieu assumes that displaying distinction requires exhibiting a *distance* from the "basely material" (p. 196), the literary realist dispositions that I will explore claim special *intimacy* with materiality. Realist dispositions insist upon their own privileged access to hard, irreducible realities.

In addition, as will be developed more fully in chapter 3 on Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, I have found Bourdieu's writing too reductively literal-minded about what reality is, and where one should look for it, to capture the workings of distinction in American literary realism. For Bourdieu, strategies of distinction may be mobile, subtle, continuously reinvented, often multi-leveled, as they seek to distinguish their possessors within an ever-competitive field of practices (p. 230). But he almost always takes for granted that the "crudely material reality" against which strategies of distinction shape themselves is just stably there, easy to point to. Bourdieu analytically dissects different exhibitions of *freedom* from certain hard material realities of life, but implies that those realities themselves are what they are, and that one can simply refer to them in the course of studying distinction.²¹

Because of the constitutive roles that language and representation play in all human experience, however, the "real" is only ever available via mediating contexts and constructions. Directly accessible, easily delimitable "material reality" must be recognized as itself a construction. For the works of American literary realism explored in the following chapters, the "material reality" in relation to which distinction defines itself acts as a far more mobile category than Bourdieu's work ever considers. Moreover, the position of "the real" in realist texts is more variable, more flexible, than has been assumed by recent critical work on the period. As noted above, what comes to count as most real not only changes from literary work to literary work but also shifts within individual works.

I have found Judith Butler's account of *materialization* extremely sug-

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gestive for reckoning with the shifting nature of those categories, whether in literary realism or in critical theory itself, that come to count as bottomline, irrefutable reality. By “materialization,” Butler means the processes by which various discourses “materialize a set of effects” and thereby produce what will appear within those discourses as unconstructed, prediscursive *matter*.²² Like Butler, I believe it crucial that we try to trace how, and with what implications, that which is “considered to be most real, most pressing, most undeniable” gets textually defined and positioned.²³

The present study, therefore, follows Bourdieu in his insistence that “taste” and other modes of manifesting distinction involve dynamics of self-situating vis-à-vis “crudely material reality.” Yet my exploration of different modes of prestige in American literary realism also demonstrates, I believe, that Bourdieu’s sociological insights are most analytically productive when combined with a poststructuralist sensitivity to the role played by discourse and representation in constituting the hard facts of reality as such.²⁴ Conversely, however, I try to show as well, in chapter 5, that the understanding Bourdieu’s work helps us to gain about intellectual status in realist literature also illuminates a central facet of intellectual distinction in recent critical and theoretical writings, including Butler’s (and also including John Guillory’s currently influential applications of Bourdieu). From deconstruction to cultural studies, it is fair to say that the recent critical scene has been permeated by versions of “realer-than-thou” claims.

A diverse range of competing bids for intellectual authority center on claims to provide readers with new analytic access to – or at least superior glimpses of – an underlying level of materiality. Even poststructuralist critical approaches, which tend to be regarded as eschewing realist frameworks, actively participate in these contests to be more materialist than alternative perspectives. Thus, I will contend that, just as recent poststructuralist insights can help us to an improved understanding of how certain constructions of and orientations towards the nitty-gritty real operate to assert prestige within literary realism, so too understanding prestige in this earlier context gives us a new analytic purchase on poststructuralism’s own dynamics of intellectual prestige. The supposedly more *material* materialities staked out by poststructuralist writing include, for example, American deconstruction’s (Paul de Man’s) necessary yet also disfiguring acts of linguistic positing, as well as recent Lacanian critics’ (for example, Joan Copjec’s and Juliet Flower MacCannell’s) appeals to a “non-symbolizable” real.

I will be interested throughout the following chapters in how claims – whether they appear in realist literature or in critical theory – to a privileged representational intimacy with hard “reality” or irreducible “materiality” operate as bids for intellectual prestige. Here, however, I wish to broach the problems that I have had in trying to negotiate what Joseph Litvak aptly calls the “inexplicit but unmistakable effect of sardonic unmasking, along with the strong, lingering odor of bad faith” that frequently inheres in Bourdieu-influenced analysis.²⁵ It is difficult not to seem as if one is muckraking (and with a fairly indiscriminate rake, at that) when setting out to uncover a range of distinction-gaining practices that have not previously been acknowledged as such. Granted that, like other hierarchical relations involving symbolic capital, intellectual prestige might disappear altogether in some for now unimaginable future that has managed to eliminate the unequal distribution of social “goods” as such.²⁶ In the mean time, however, I view late nineteenth-century American literature’s new emphasis on the “real” over and against the ideal as, for the most part, a positive, democratizing development. Similarly, I believe that late twentieth-century criticism’s pervasive investments in what might be called an “are-we-being-materialist-enough-yet?” paradigm is much more of a good thing than a bad thing.²⁷ During both periods, sustained focus on the “real” or the “material” has brought into discursive presence people, things, categories of experience, dimensions of the social order, various sorts of textual and other relationships, that were previously underrecognized within the traditions of writing involved. However different writers, then and now, describe “material reality,” it no doubt deserves all of the flexible, creative, complex attention that intellectuals can give it, and more as well.

Nonetheless, although I very much admire many aims of both the realist and the critical-theoretical works here discussed, I think it crucial that we recognize the multiple achievements of realism as fully and honestly as possible. In particular, we should strive to make ourselves as aware as possible of the role that “material claims” have played and continue to play in the dynamics of intellectual distinction within late nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literary culture – just as, of course, structures of prestige and distinction also operate in most other cultural arenas.²⁸ To investigate these dynamics in literary realist writing does not mean to dismiss the social and moral value of bringing focused literary attention to areas of American life excluded or treated with light ignorance by most previous American writing. As a genre, realist writing strove to move the overlooked into mainstream view, or, alternately, to