

SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE IN
AMERICAN LITERATURE AND HISTORY

PROBLEMS AND ROLES OF THE AMERICAN
ARTIST AS PORTRAYED BY THE
AMERICAN NOVELIST

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IT is an accepted truism that from the start the American writer has been on the defensive about his vocation. You may recall that when Martin Chuzzlewit, on his arrival in America, tries to find out something about the state of American literature, he is sharply told: 'We are a busy people, sir, . . . and have no time for reading mere notions. We don't mind 'em if they come to us in newspapers along with almighty strong stuff of another sort, but darn your books.' Darn your books—very often that seems to be the public response that the American writer dreads in advance, and it seems to induce not only a vague sense of guilt about his calling, but on occasions more self-destructive feelings. Whether he sets about evoking a romance of the past, or attempts to address himself to contemporary realities, the American novelist usually betrays an apprehension that his role will somehow set him at odds with his society. This is, of course, no new position for the artist to find himself in. The difference seems to be the degree of anxiety and vulnerability experienced by the American artist: European artists may be equally alienated from their societies, but they seem able to draw confidence from the artistic traditions behind them. It is this sort of confidence which seems unavailable to many American writers.

Why this should be so is a fair matter for speculations, and these have not been lacking. So it is my intention in this lecture to be as specific as possible. Poets can be rhapsodic and exhortatory, critics can be theoretic and prescriptive, when discussing the role of the American artist. But the novelist deals with concrete situations, a specific environment, a totality of objects, an ongoing set of interrelationships. He shows the growth and fate of the individual in place and time. And so it is with the

portrayal of the American artist by the American novelist on which I will be concentrating.

One of the first artists in American fiction is Owen Warland in Hawthorne's 'The Artist of the Beautiful' (1844). Warland has received a severe Freudian going over at the hands of Professor Frederick Crews in his book *The Sins of the Fathers*, but I would like to recall some of his characteristics and his plight. He is small, nervous, delicate. He dislikes the processes of ordinary machinery, indeed the sight of a steam-engine makes him sick. He is an apprentice to a watchmaker, but when left to himself he shows no interest in mending clocks—he is indifferent to society's time—and he devotes himself to a secret activity, dedicating himself, as he sees it, to the spiritual and the beautiful. He is scorned by the community whose hard utilitarianism and materiality bruise him at every turn (his surname suggests an embattled rather than a peaceful life), and he loses Annie, the one girl who might have shown him some understanding, to the local blacksmith, whose virility and social usefulness make him an obvious contrast to the rather effeminate Warland. For a while Owen becomes a drunkard; he is considered mad, and, adds Hawthorne, 'the lack of sympathy . . . was enough to make him so'. When he hears that Annie is engaged to the blacksmith he relapses into 'a sort of vegetable existence' which Professor Crews suggests is eunuch-like. His one consoling activity is a prolonged attempt to realize the 'ideal butterfly' by making a perfect mechanical one. When it is completed he gives it to Annie and the blacksmith as a toy for their child. They find it a 'pretty plaything', but the child soon crushes it with one quick grasp. The story hardly suggests a very confident role for the artist in the community, nor does it really say much for either the value or durability of his products. And if the community is depressingly harsh and philistine, the artist is himself alarmingly feeble. It was perhaps with this story in mind that William Dean Howells made use of a particular image in his essay 'Criticism and Fiction'. He suggests that the plight of the would-be realist writer is like that of a young scientist being told by his elders not to bother examining a grasshopper he has just found in the grass. Instead he is advised to study an artificial wire and cardboard grasshopper which represents 'the ideal', as opposed to the merely 'photographic'. Howells was asking for real books with real grasshoppers in them; and indeed, Owen Warland's ideal butterfly had proved to be far from indestructible in the rude fist of the infant republic.

In discussing his own sense of severance from his community in the 'Custom-House' chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne compares his ejection from a rather unexact public office to a beheading. He strongly implies by this rather excessive metaphor that it was only by dying from public life and withdrawing into his private 'sunless fantasies' that he could become a 'literary man'. The ordinary world, he says, has ceased to be reality for him. 'I am a citizen of somewhere else.' This defection into art was obviously not unattended by guilt. Hawthorne was very aware of his ancestors as great law-makers, and in breaking from this tradition he is apt to appear to himself as a law-breaker. (For a helpful consideration of the tension in Hawthorne between his legalistic heritage and his more antinomian artistic impulses see Professor Larzer Ziff's paper on 'The Artist and Puritanism', in *Hawthorne Centenary Essays*, edited by Roy Harvey Pearce.) In a very legalistic society the artist is always likely to appear as some sort of antinomian. It is apt that William Wetmore Story, whose works Hawthorne used in his novel *The Marble Faun* and whose biography was written by Henry James, gave up the legal profession for art—a significant step to be re-enacted in fiction by James's first American artist, Roderick Hudson.

In the 'Custom-House' chapter Hawthorne indeed imagines his ancestors passing judgement on him. "'What is he?'" murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other. "A writer of story-books! What kind of business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or of being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!"' This self-indictment welling up from Hawthorne's ancestral conscience is tolerably complete. But over against this—the case for the prosecution, we might call it—Hawthorne reveals another sense of guilt, which implicitly makes up the case for the defence. While he was a good public servant, working for the community, giving up his time to 'Uncle Sam', he found that he was being overtaken by a 'wretched numbness' and entering a state of prolonged intellectual 'torpor'. He recalls how he had a vague sense of the characters who might make up his novel, but they contemptuously rejected him. ' "What have you to do with us?" that expression seemed to say. "The little power you might once have possessed over the tribe of unrealities is gone! You have bartered it for a pittance of the public gold. Go then, and earn your wages!" ' Thus the voice of his creative conscience berates him

in precisely opposite terms from the voice of his ancestral conscience. Working for the public gold, and working from the private imagination, are, it seems, mutually incompatible, indeed mutually exclusive, activities. It was perhaps with some similar sense of the distance between possession of public gold and mastery over the tribe of unrealities that Melville wrote in a letter of 1849: 'So far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to "fail".'

I am really touching on two very large problems here, for before considering those of the fictional artist I am commenting briefly on those experienced by the American writer himself. At any time in the nineteenth century the American writer might have worried that his practice of writing fiction should be considered irreligious (as presuming to emulate the creative work of God), or undemocratic (as issuing from, and appealing to, a highly developed individual sensibility), or unprofitable or useless (when compared with the manual and mercantile work which was building America), or degenerate or effeminate (when measured against some vague but strong notion of virility nourished by both the Puritan's and the pioneer's idea of what a man's work consisted of. In both cases some kind of mastery was believed in, mastery over the wilderness, over the community, over impulse, over the wayward fantasies of the imagination). In addition the American novelist faced another problem, that of what kind of art was suitable in America. There were problems here both of avoiding inappropriate European stylistic conventions and of discovering authentic American subjects, but these are familiar topics. Perhaps rather cryptically, I want to suggest that one major problem for the American writer was whether to regard the world as transparent or opaque. Hawthorne, conveniently for my purposes, uses both words in an important sentence in the 'Custom-House' chapter. He is, as so often, in his rather defensive apologetic mood, and he is all but upbraiding himself for his folly in going back to the past for the subject for his novel 'with the materiality of this daily life pressing so intrusively upon me'. What he deprecatingly refers to as the 'soap-bubble' of his romance of the past was constantly being broken by 'the rude contact of some actual circumstance'. 'The wiser effort would have been, to diffuse thought and imagination through the opaque substance of to-day, and thus make it a bright transparency; to spiritualize the burden that began to weigh so heavily; to seek, resolutely, the true and

indestructible value that lay hidden in the petty and wearisome incidents, and ordinary characters, with which I was now conversant.' In that opaque substance of today there was, he says, 'a better book than I shall ever write'. Notice here two opposed groups of words. On the one hand, there is the material, the actual, the circumstantial, the contemporary, the opaque. It is affirmed that this area of reality is full of concealed value, but there is also the expressed feeling that it is burdensome, wearisome, intrusive, harsh in its contact. On the other hand there is the spiritual, the romantic, the imaginary, and this is, or should be, capable of turning the opaque outer world into a 'bright transparency'.

Hawthorne, it seems, feels that he ought to have addressed himself to the opaque contemporary world; at the same time he makes it abundantly clear that in this case it was the inaccessible but deeply suggestive past which awakened in him that sense of romance which for him was an indispensable spur to the writing of a novel. Romance, we should remind ourselves, was a particularly slippery word in the nineteenth century; and in America at least it was used to refer, not just to an exotic story, but to the spiritual, the ideal, the imaginary, any realm not directly accessible to the senses. Taking the word romance in its widest connotations it becomes abundantly clear that much of the best of American fiction has been written out of a tension between the empirically 'real' and a sense of the romantic—a proposition which has been very profitably examined by such critics as Richard Chase and Daniel Hoffman. I want to try to approach the matter from a slightly different angle by positing a tension, felt by the novelist or artist, between an opaque and a transparent treatment of his material.

I would call it opaque treatment to stress the factuality of life. Americans are known to have a genius for respecting and mastering facts, whether in their factories or their philosophies, and it does not desert them in their fiction. However, it seems that there has always been that tug away towards that more transparent treatment of the world which went under the vague name of Romance. Melville offers a good example of this. While writing *Mardi* he wrote in a letter:

Well: proceeding in my narrative of *facts* I began to feel an incurible [*sic*] distaste for the same; & a longing to plume my pinions for a flight, & felt irked, cramped & fettered by plodding along with dull common places,—So suddenly standing [abandoning?] the thing altogether, I went to work heart & soul at a romance which is now in fair progress.

. . . It opens like a true narrative . . . & the romance & poetry of the thing thence grow continually, till it becomes a story wild enough I assure you & with a meaning too. . . . My instinct is to out with the *Romance*.

The constriction, at times the tedium of dealing with the opaque world have led many American writers to 'out with the romance' which, as I have suggested, can involve taking the liberty of dealing with things as transparencies.

When you treat a thing as transparent then it follows that you expect to see something hidden behind it, or to see something else through it. Now here I think we should make ourselves aware of different possible kinds of hidden or anterior things. You may, like the Transcendentalists, look through the visible world to see the Oversoul, or God, or some mystical revelation or metaphysical truth. Or you may look under the surface of people and things and detect all the dark propensities and deceits which may linger under a fair surface. We could perhaps differentiate here between Ascendentalists and Descendentalists, for the positional metaphors employed by writers are nearly always revealing. Emerson tends to be an Ascendentalist—'show me the highest spiritual cause lurking, as it always does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature' ('The American Scholar'). Melville is more of a Descendentalist. Thus in a letter of 1849: 'I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more . . . I'm not talking of Mr. Emerson now—but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began.' The distinction is worth making, albeit in this very crude form, because while it is one thing to claim to be able to see through objects to some higher spiritual law or principle, it is rather another to treat people as transparencies and claim to be able to detect all sorts of dark impulses swimming around well below the surface. It is quite clear that Hawthorne felt some guilt at presuming, as it were, to penetrate the inviolable and sacred interiority of other people. Perhaps people should only be transparent to God, and for a mere fellow mortal to tamper with the ultimately unknowable otherness of another individual might be a form of blasphemy. The role of the detached observer has always been potentially fraught with guilt for the American writer, just as, in another vein, Scott Fitzgerald could write 'We had run through a lot, though we had retained an almost theatrical innocence by preferring the role of the observed to that of the

observer' ('My Lost City'). Yet any novelist interested in the psychological dimension of human conduct must perforce become an observer and make this act of penetration and claim to be able to see down into his fellow men and women. Melville, Hawthorne, and James are all great 'divers' of this kind, and I shall now consider novels by each of them.

What I intend to do is offer a brief glance at six novels written between 1850 and 1915 which depict the life, and often the death, of American artists, and consider what they show of the ontogenesis of the artist, the kind of art he attempts to create, and his fate in the society of his time. From the first three, Melville, Hawthorne, and James, we might expect portraits of artists given to a more transparent treatment of the world; while from the latter three, Crane, London, and Dreiser, we might expect portraits of artists more committed to the opaque. This distinction for the most part holds, though as we shall see it is by no means an absolute one. But more interesting, I think, is to note from the outset that whatever treatment of the world these fictional artists go in for, it seems inevitably and inexorably to isolate them from society, often inducing a self-destructive drive which causes morbid illnesses and in some cases leads to a premature death. I shall start with Melville's *Pierre* (1852). Pierre Glendinning comes from an old aristocratic family. He lives very contentedly in the country with his mother—whom he calls sister—and he is set fair to inherit vast estates and marry the beautiful and pure Lucy. Nature is thus seen to smile on Pierre, but we are warned that she will prove 'ambiguous to him in the end'. In terms of the plot what happens is that he discovers that he has a real sister, Isabel, illegitimately begotten by his father, and now living in poverty and anonymity in Pierre's own neighbourhood. This discovery that the apparently secure reality of his life and social position has another level, on which illicit passions produce unacknowledged relationships suppressed to maintain the conventional structure of society, completely undermines Pierre. His world is inverted; its morality vanishes; the sanctions and ordinances prescribed by convention, principle, and propriety come to seem a tissue of shams and lies. Finding the smiling surface of life to be false, Pierre becomes a 'diver'.

He abandons his mother and Lucy, and takes his sister Isabel to the city, where he promises to maintain them by his writing. (It is notable that to maintain a certain necessary appearance of legality he calls his sister his wife—it is a 'fictitious alliance', but the fluidity and ambiguity of those relationships which society

regards as so fixed and clearly demarcated, is something that becomes clear to him. Society is maintained by 'fictitious alliances'.) They live in a run-down building called the House of the Apostles, and there Pierre embarks on what is to be his great work in which he will lay bare the truth of things. He intends to 'gospelize the world anew, and show them deeper secrets than the Apocalypse!' But as Melville wrote in a letter to Hawthorne in 1851: 'Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter.' Pierre's health is undermined, his eyesight starts to fail, and as he writes on and on Melville asks: 'Is it creation, or destruction? Builds Pierre the noble world of a new book? or does the Pale Haggardness unbuild the lungs and life in him?' Certainly his life as a writer brings him neither health nor happiness, and even though Lucy comes to join their strange ménage, Pierre is in a state of total isolation. 'Pierre, nevertheless, in his deepest, highest part, was utterly without sympathy from anything divine, human, brute, or vegetable. One in a city of hundreds of thousands of human beings, Pierre was solitary as at the Pole.' Succumbing to inanition, blindness, and vertigo, he collapses in the city streets one night. The plot terminates when his cousin Glen, having first refused to recognize him as a relation, now accuses him of seducing Lucy and attacks him. Pierre shoots him dead. In his prison cell he and Isabel commit suicide while Lucy appears to die of shock and grief. And thus, fairly gruesomely, ends the life of one of the earliest American writers in fiction.

It is the discovery of the existence of his sister Isabel which starts Pierre on the road to art—and social ruin. She comes, as it were, from the underside of society, and once perceived calls into question all surface truth and accepted names. Throughout she remains a completely mysterious ambiguous figure for Pierre, and in her person she is like Truth itself in all its ungraspable elusiveness. From the first glimpse of her face Pierre finds that the world is losing its solidity: the phenomenon is repeatedly referred to. 'On all sides, the physical world of solid objects displaced itself from around him, and he floated into an ether of visions.' Isabel herself finds that the phantasmal and the evidential, to use James's terms, do not occupy their usual separate places in her life. 'Always in me, the solidest things melt into dreams, and dreams into solidities.' She herself strikes Pierre as a 'fluid' phenomenon; she seems to his 'dilated senses' to 'swim in an electric fluid', she exists in 'an ever-creeping and condensing haze of ambiguities'. If you see Isabel

as an incarnation of the Reality under the social surface and its language, then the following two statements are important. Pierre 'strove to condense her mysterious haze into some definite and comprehensible shape'. And near the end Isabel says to him: 'Thy hand is the caster's ladle, Pierre, which holds me entirely fluid. Into thy forms and slightest moods of thought, thou pourest me; and I there solidify to that form, and take it on, and thenceforth wear it, till once more thou moulded me anew.' This is the mysterious fluid essence of life itself, telling the artist that it is up to him to attempt to arrest that fluidity into some temporary form, with the covert warning that no form *can* ever truly hold that fluidity or solidify and shape that haze. Paradoxically, Isabel draws Pierre towards serious literature at the same time as she reveals to him the invalidity of the whole naming process—she represents 'vital realness' as opposed to 'empty nominalness'. She is that which must, and cannot, be uttered.

Thus when Pierre takes to writing, and starts to rip off the layers of deceit which make up the world, he finds only 'surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies'. Writing itself, even at its most sincere, is a doomed pursuit. 'For the more and the more that he wrote, and the deeper and the deeper that he dived, Pierre saw the everlasting elusiveness of Truth; the universal lurking insincerity of even the greatest and purest written thoughts.' Pierre's attempt to write a great modern *Inferno* is rejected as a 'blasphemous parody' by his publishers, who had wanted a 'popular novel'. His writing costs Pierre his family, his happiness, his health, and he becomes a victim, alienated and despised. Nevertheless there is obviously something daring as well as doomed in Pierre's attempt to pursue Truth down to its deepest core, and write a literature which refuses to accept the comfortable surface of things. In a letter to Hawthorne Melville refers to his delight in 'ontological heroics'; in a less jocular mood his novel *Pierre* explores just where 'ontological heroics' will take the contemporary artist who insists on attempting them in his art. He becomes an exile in his own land, hemmed in by 'ambiguities' as constricting as the walls of the actual prison where Pierre ends his life, dispossessed of the solidities of life but not in possession of the fluidity of Truth.

At one point Pierre reads a strange pamphlet called 'Chronometricals and Horologicals' by an enigmatic philosopher named Plotinus Plinlimmon. Chronometrical time is always kept in

accordance with the Greenwich standard, no matter how far afield the ship travels; while Horological time is the local time scheme which varies from place to place. In terms of the pamphlet, a chronometrical soul—like Christ's—in its intuitions of right and wrong, is always in line with Heavenly truth; but by the same token, it will 'always be contradicting the mere local standards and watchmaker's brains of this earth'. The pamphlet warns that 'he who finding in himself a chronometrical soul, seeks practically to force that heavenly time upon the earth; in such an attempt he can never succeed . . . he will but array all men's earthly time-keepers against him'. The lesson seems to be 'That in things terrestrial (horological) a man must not be governed by ideas celestial (chronometrical)'. With his ontological heroics, and his 'chronometrical' attempts to reveal absolute truth on earth, Pierre it would seem fails to learn that lesson. On the other hand, for a novelist to capitulate to horological standards is to limit himself to surface appearances and become a monger of lies, as Pierre discovers by reading the popular fiction of his day. (Remember Owen Warland's indifference to his job of clock repairing.) In between the impossible chronometrical and the debased horological it would seem, from Melville's novel, that there is no satisfactory role for a novelist aiming somehow to convey truth to his contemporaries. Notice that at no time does Pierre consider writing the sort of stable analysis of society such as Stendhal or George Eliot undertook. His book, we gather, is a long soliloquy, by an 'apparent author-hero' who says such things as: 'Now I drop all humorous or indifferent disguises, and all philosophical pretensions. I own myself a brother of the clod, a child of the Primeval Gloom.' This preferred mode or genre has a prophetic aptness since American writers have shown a greater liking for the metaphysical monologue than their European counterparts.

The Marble Faun (1860) is not only Hawthorne's most ambiguous book, but one of the most problem-ridden books ever produced by an American. It reveals ambiguous attitudes towards art, nature, law, religion, passion, Europe, and America—to go no further. Here I just want to consider the uncertain attitude towards art contained in the book. It opens in a sculpture gallery and introduces the four main characters, three of whom are artists. Miriam, of some exotic European descent, is a painter whose pictures lack technical merit but are full of passion and colour. In her own person she is an ungraspable mystery, like those 'images of light' of 'apparent tangibility'

which prove to be for ever out of reach. In this she is somewhat like Melville's Isabel—the incarnation of some elusive and enigmatic essence of experience. Her works are of two kinds. Those depicting terrible female passions released—Jael driving the nail through the temples of Sisera, Judith and Holofernes, Herodias receiving the head of John the Baptist; and sketches of 'domestic and common scenes'—an infant's shoe, for instance—in all of which she has included a figure 'apart', an observer excluded from the felicity he or she gazes on. This we know to be in line with Hawthorne's own feelings about the isolating apartness of the artist. Miriam's studio is almost totally curtained off from daylight and is seen as the 'outward type of a poet's haunted imagination'. She is indeed an artist of the interiority of the human mind and heart. Hilda, an innocent young American girl, is by contrast an expert copyist. One day she shows Miriam a very felicitous copy of Guido's Beatrice Cenci. She has caught the outward expression perfectly; but Miriam says: 'if I could only get within her consciousness! if I could but clasp Beatrice Cenci's ghost, and draw it into myself!' Such an act of dangerous empathy horrifies Hilda, and this helps to explain her rather strange mid-way position between religion and art.

Hawthorne explains that when Hilda came to Europe she 'lost the impulse of original design' and 'ceased to aim at original achievement'. Hawthorne explains that this is out of a sense of reverence for the great religious paintings of the past; her copying work is thus akin to a religious activity as in all humility she attempts to recapture the religious feeling which produced the originals. But we may note that by restricting herself to copying Hilda safely removes herself from any of the possible dangers involved in the process of artistic creation. Just as she is somehow both in Rome but not touched by it, just so she wants some contact with art, without any of the contamination which to her delicate senses often seems to hover around it. In the geography of the book Rome is often associated with graves, catacombs, cellars, labyrinths, darkness, depths both of time and space, decay, a contagious mistiness, and so on, even while its great beauties are also referred to. Hilda, by contrast, is all too obviously a creature of the upper air, living at the top of a tower, associated with doves and the pure white light, a believer in 'ideality' who disdains all commerce with problematical human passions. She specifically repudiates any belief in the existence of the subterranean when they are discussing the story of Curtius, who reputedly leaped into a chasm which opened in ancient

Rome. Thus it is that she simply refuses to have any contact with Miriam after she has unintentionally glimpsed the murder committed by Donatello and Miriam. Hilda stays at the surface and thus produces no original art. If she does not produce any pictures of Judith or Jael, neither does she produce any new pictures of the Madonna or other holy figures. She maintains her 'maiden elevation' and one feels that her resolute virginity, of mind as of body, really cuts her off, or defends her—Hawthorne cannot make up his mind—from any deep appreciation of Rome. She is innocent, cold, pitiless, and to us priggish. For good or bad reasons she effectively abstains from art even while practising it. This is the significance of her being a copyist.

Kenyon may seem to be rather different and more open to Rome. He too believes in the ideality of art—for him everything is an emblem, a symbol, or contains a meaning, a moral, and so on. But the main work he is engaged on is a sculpture of Cleopatra (taken, as Hawthorne admits, from a work done by William Wetmore Story at the time), and this suggests a degree of recognition of the passionate, the carnal, the exotic in human experience. Another of his pieces is of a pearl diver who has become entangled in the weeds at the bottom of the sea, and lies dead among the rare shells he sought. Such a subject might suggest that Kenyon himself might be something of a 'diver' in Melville's terms. But Kenyon is more deceptive than Hilda. At a crucial moment Miriam comes to Kenyon's studio. Her solitude and the miserable secret of her past are weighing so heavily on her that she effectively appeals to him to act as her confidant. Arguably, the desperate act which she implicitly incites Donatello to commit might have been averted if Kenyon had agreed to listen to her, to open himself to her disburdening with full sympathy. But he draws back, and she detects this sudden contraction, his unwillingness to become implicated in her secret past. It is hard to estimate how much irony is intended, but it is fairly devastating. The American artist is there in Rome, working on a large figure of the most voluptuous, passionate, sexually wilful female in history or legend; yet when a real live passionate woman comes to him as if in request of some contact and recognition, he closes himself off. For this artist it is one thing to mould dead images of mythical, legendary, emblematical figures; it is, apparently, quite another to open himself to the disturbing complexities and intensities of actual experience. It is notable that whereas Hilda, in her time of distress, finds a sympathetic confessor in the figure of a

Catholic priest though she is not a Catholic; Miriam in her time of distress fails to find a sympathetic confessor in the figure of an American artist, although he is currently engaged in evoking an image of the serpent of old Nile. As Miriam notes, Kenyon's image of the dead pearl diver is 'cold and stern in its moral lesson', and Kenyon himself takes care not to plunge into any depths of human experience. He is no more of a diver than Hilda, and arguably as cold, as moralistic, and as much of a virgin as she. Whereas Donatello and Miriam go beyond the law, and thus enter a whole new dimension of human experience, suffering, insight, atonement, and so on; Kenyon and Hilda stay very securely within what Hawthorne himself refers to as the 'iron rules' which dominate their contemporary life. I would imagine that Kenyon's best piece might have been his bust of Milton.

And yet, of course, Hawthorne is not by any means wholly endorsing this self-protective Puritan kind of artist. He himself refers to 'those dark caverns, into which all men must descend, if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasures of existence', and clearly he seems to have felt that if an artist was to establish contact with any reality beyond the surface illusions of life he would have to become some kind of Descendentalist. But Kenyon and Hilda will finally have nothing to do with Descendentalism. They remain impermeable to Europe, to a full sense of the darker depths of human experience, and it is fitting that by the end they plan to return home and marry. On the other hand, when Hawthorne wants to justify the role of the artist he does so in terms of idealities rather than depths. 'Yet we love the artists, in every kind. . . . They were not wholly confined within the sordid compass of practical life; they had a pursuit which, if followed faithfully out, would lead them to the beautiful. . . . Their actual business . . . necessarily illuminated their conversation with something akin to the ideal.' When Hilda is going through her state of depression she all but loses faith in art altogether. The key chapter is called 'The Emptiness of Art Galleries': as she wanders through the galleries of Rome she is touched 'by the icy demon of weariness'. The great Italian religious paintings now seem to her to be repetitive and dead, a lifeless substitution of the artificial for the natural. She looks at them and sees 'but a crust of paint over an emptiness'. Interestingly, only the Flemish masters of domestic realism survive this disenchanted gaze. Their pictures of simple things, offered in all their secular opacity just as things, seem preferable

to the false transparencies of those paintings which invite the viewer to look through them to a higher, ideal, religious world. For Hawthorne this preference for the opaque over the transparent is a temporary aberration; for later realists like William Dean Howells it could be the basis of a new aesthetic.

Where Hawthorne is visibly somewhat nervous about introducing his American artists into a Europe in which it was difficult to tell the richness from the rottenness, Henry James found in the situation the perfect theme for the first full release of his genius, *Roderick Hudson* (1876). This novel traces out the short career of an American artist who opens himself up fully, indeed greedily, to European experience, with fatal results. Indeed so short is the time between Hudson's first eager impressions of Rome, and his fall, which must be considered a suicide, in the Swiss Alps, that James felt he had to apologize for the implausible rapidity of his deterioration. Hudson's 'disintegration', says James in a later preface, occurs too quickly: 'at the rate at which he falls to pieces, he seems to place himself beyond our understanding and sympathy.' Aesthetically, the point is debatable. But the picture of an American artist rather quickly 'falling to pieces' after an initial burst of great creative power is perhaps more appropriate than James realized. It was Scott Fitzgerald who said that the lives of American writers contained no second acts, and there is something almost prophetic in James's picture of an American artist moving at such a pace that he would have no energy left after the crowded first act of his artistic life.

From the beginning when he is seen as a discontented student of Law in a provincial American town, Hudson is seen as doing 'everything too fast', and he characterizes himself as being driven by a 'demon of unrest'. Upon seeing one of his statues, Rowland Mallett, a rich friend who appreciates art but cannot produce any himself, offers to take Hudson to Europe and become his patron. Mallett is one of James's 'observers' and it is worth noting that James made, thus early, a clear distinction between the artist and the observer. Roderick is depicted as having genius, 'the sacred fire', and it takes him into regions well outside the boundaries of the social law of which he was so imperfect a student. Rowland Mallett has no genius and so, while capable of appreciating art and Italy, he can remain safely within the moral law. There is no doubt that James felt that genius could take a person into dangerous areas in which all conscience might be lost. As Rowland Mallett comes to realize,

although genius is divine, it can be 'capricious, sinister, cruel'; and he comes to think of Roderick as a fairly ruthless egotist. His worry about Roderick is that 'the values in such a spirit' might not be 'much larger than the voids', and in the event in this book the voids swallow up the values. The inflamed genius who set out from America ends his life as a hollow husk, burnt out, eclipsed, in a catatonic torpor. His fall from the mountain only completes the process of dying which has completely overtaken his inner life.

To illuminate some aspects of Roderick's doomed career it is helpful to notice the changing subjects of his sculpture. His first piece seen by Rowland is of a youth, standing naked drinking deeply from a gourd, and it is called 'Thirst'. Rowland asks if the drinker represents an 'idea' or is a 'pointed symbol' and Hudson agrees that his work represents innocence, youth, curiosity, drinking deeply of knowledge, pleasure, and experience. The one thing that Roderick does not mention as being represented by his symbolic work is any actual drink, such as wine. Yet when he gets to Europe he soon discovers the pleasures of real champagne as well as the inspiration of high ideals. Indeed his downfall might be ascribed to a mixture of intoxications in which it becomes impossible for him to separate the ideal from the actual. Roderick's first successes as a sculptor in Italy are his monumental Adam and his Eve—appropriate enough for an American artist. He speaks of going on to do David and, 'a ripping Christ' who will be 'the perfection of form . . . to symbolise the perfection of spirit'. In these early days his talk is always about ideas or ideal forms, including a prospective 'magnificent image of my Native Land'. However, at this time he first sees Christina Light who is for him 'a glimpse of ideal beauty'. If such beauty is wrong, he says, then he is happy to see her as 'the incarnation of evil'. Christina, although nominally American, has been brought up in Europe, and she is another of those disturbingly ambiguous females, such as Melville's Isabel and Hawthorne's Miriam, who seem ultimately as elusive as life itself. She is a mixture of passions while presenting a totally indifferent face to the world; she may be the epitome of corruption, as she herself says, or the finest bloom of a fusion of cultures; she is capable of unpredictable metamorphoses. Roderick is 'intoxicated' by her, while Rowland Mallett thinks her 'unsafe': 'she was a complex, wilful, passionate creature who might easily draw down a too confiding spirit into some strange underworld of unworthy sacrifices, not

unfurnished with traces of others lost.' Roderick's idealizing aspirations are discussed in terms of flight and gained altitudes of spirit, but once he has been intoxicated by the sight of Christina, his movement is irreversibly downwards. Rowland sees this happening and has 'a vision of the wondrous youth, graceful and beautiful as he passed, plunging like a diver into a misty gulf. The gulf was destruction, annihilation, death . . .'

After getting to know Christina, Roderick's art changes. He does a sculpture of a woman leaning back in a languid pose. Rowland, still the good New Englander, asks 'What does it mean?' Roderick for the first time disdains the notion of some extra dimension of ideal meaning. 'Anything you please,' he says, 'a "Lady conversing affably with a Gentleman"'. It is a totally secular piece, opaque to higher meanings, and not surprisingly Rowland is not sure that he likes it. Roderick's bust of Christina Light has more depth, but it reminds another artist, the perceptive Gloriani, of Salome. Roderick's art is now penetrating into the mystery of the dangerous and destructive female. He is beginning to dive. At this point a pompous American named Mr. Leavenworth comes to him and asks him to do a representation of the idea of Intellectual Refinement. To be fair, the younger Roderick would have seen nothing ridiculous in so abstract a commission, but Mr. Leavenworth becomes for him a stifling and tedious presence chattering on about 'spiritual art'. One of Roderick's next pieces is of 'a *lazzarone* lounging in the sun' (i.e. one of the lowest class of beggars in Naples). Mr. Leavenworth happens to come in and ask if it is something in the style of the Dying Gladiator. ' "Oh no," said Roderick seriously, "he's not dying, he's only drunk." ' The righteous Mr. Leavenworth reproves him. 'Ah, but intoxication, you know . . . is not a proper subject for sculpture. Sculpture shouldn't deal with transitory attitudes.' Roderick has the better of the exchange, but a potentially serious point is being made. In a way Roderick has turned his attention from the eternal to the transitory, and the difference in his statues between the upstanding unfallen Adam, and the prone drunken beggar (even though the figure is 'subtly idealised') does offer an analogue for his own artistic life. Gloriani more than once speaks of Roderick coming down to earth, and in truth Roderick is more and more often seen lying down. More seriously, he is now totally 'intoxicated' with things of this world. His eye is no longer on Platonic ideas or eternal types; it is turned earthwards, into the bedevilling compounds of actual life. It is

perhaps this which enables him to do such a touching and truthful bust of his mother for what is his last-mentioned work. Not Adam and Eve, our biblical or mythical parents, but his actual individual parent—this again indicates the change which has come over Roderick's art.

In his feeling of adoration for Christina Roderick goes beyond socially recognized good and evil; when she withdraws from him he cannot return to a form of life governed by those categories. He can only collapse into apathy and die. Where Kenyon closed himself off to the dangers of Miriam and was able to return intact to America, Roderick opens himself up to the ambivalence of Christina and ends up dead at the bottom of a Swiss gorge. One general point made about Roderick summarizes something important about the American artist. As Rowland sees Roderick: 'the great and characteristic point with him was the perfect separateness of his sensibility. He never saw himself as part of a whole; only as the clear-cut, sharp-edged, isolated individual, rejoicing or raging, as the case might be, but needing in any case absolutely to affirm himself.' A perfectly separate sensibility is one which cannot truly be socialized; the affirmation of the artist self is inseparable from its isolation, perhaps finally from its destruction—these are two propositions which James's novel may fairly be said to bear out. The difficulty for the artist to see himself as 'part of a whole' is not restricted to Americans, but it seems to have remained for American artists a more constant problem. It is relevant to note that a perfectly separate self is unlikely to be in harmony with the democratic *en masse*.

I will mention more briefly three American artists as they are depicted by novelists associated with the decades of American realism, and in each case I want to point to the element of unease, if not sickness and self-destructiveness, that seems to be inextricably associated with the practice of their art. Stephen Crane's painter Hawker, in his slight novella *The Third Violet* (1897), is at odds with everyone and everything—himself, his friends, his art, his world. His trouble may simply be frustrated love. Still, consider this description of him painting one of his contemporary landscapes.

He seemed engaged in some kind of a duel. His hair dishevelled, his eyes gleaming, he was in a deadly scuffle. In the sketches was the landscape of heavy blue, as if seen through powder-smoke, and all the skies burned red. There was in these notes a sinister quality of hopelessness, eloquent of defeat, as if the scene represented the last hour on a field

of disastrous battle. Hawker seemed attacking with this picture something fair and beautiful of his own life, a possession of his mind, and he did it fiercely, mercilessly, formidably. His arm moved with the energy of a strange wrath. He might have been thrusting with a sword.

He paints 'like a man who is killing'. Allowing that Crane was obsessed by man's aggressive and destructive impulses, it is interesting that when he came to depict an American artist, he showed those impulses at work in and through his art.

Turning to Jack London's *Martin Eden* (1909), it is perhaps surprising to find that in London's fictionalized account of his own struggle to successful authorship and its results, we discover a conclusion quite similar to that of *Roderick Hudson*. Martin Eden is a man whose artistic aspirations are mixed up with his social aspirations. The book opens with his stumbling, awed entry into a cultured middle-class home: he longs to be admitted to this world. But at dinner his memory takes him back to the world of fighting and drinking in which he spent his youth. As Martin rises socially, he keeps 'seeing himself down all his past', a violent past of raw struggles and basic satisfactions. Believing vaguely in evolution, he regards those early days as a regression to the primordial slime in which he and his companions were 'animals, brute-beasts'. But although he enjoys the struggle to break into cultured society, once successful he finds that he has lost reality somewhere along the way and he becomes totally alienated. His vitality ebbs and, as with Roderick Hudson, a great torpor settles over him, and he commits suicide. I will just say a word about his work and his terminal sickness. 'His work was realism, though he had endeavoured to fuse it with the fancies and beauties of imagination. What he sought was an impassioned realism, shot through with human aspiration and faith. What he wanted was life as it was, with all its spirit-groping and soul-searching left in.' He starts by writing about his own experience of whaling, and interestingly enough he does a piece on 'pearl diving'. In his essay on the theory of the novel entitled 'God and Clod' he attacks the God school of writers for denying man's earthly origin, and the Clod school for denying man's 'heaven-sent dreams and divine possibilities'. He himself attempts to combine these extremes in a new form of realism—another version of the attempt to mediate between the romantic and the real, the transparent and the opaque. If some of his writing is clumsy then it is 'the clumsiness of too great strength'. A lot of this immense personal strength goes into his art, but a lot also goes

into his ferocious 'individualism'. This fierce individuality, like Roderick Hudson's, produces the need 'absolutely to affirm himself', and it brings him social success: but it also finally brings him isolation and alienation from everything. At the end he knows he is 'sick', mentally not physically. 'All the life that was in him was fading, fainting, making towards death.' Finding himself increasingly desirous of sleep, he takes one more sea voyage in an attempt to bestir himself. However, his great will-power, which had been the driving force behind his artistic and social success, now turns on itself: 'he had will,—ay, will strong enough that with one last exertion it could destroy itself and cease to be'. His values have become voids, and, having spent a life aspiring in art and climbing in society, he suddenly reverses the whole process by jumping overboard and swimming downwards to his death—another ambiguous and fatal dive by an American artist.

Theodore Dreiser's Eugene Witla in *The Genius* (1915) also struggles to escape or avoid the limitations of society and the circumscriptions of convention. 'For a given order of society no doubt he was out of place—for life in general, he could not say.' Like Martin Eden, he has a boundless energy which struggles to break out of a narrow social background and achieve success through art. For Eugene, artistic, sexual, and business success are all intertwined and confused. Different periods of success in each activity alternate with periods of failure and sickness, nervous breakdowns and torpor being the other side of his determined energy of expansion and achievement. One result of the energy of expansion he possesses is that he feels that he is somehow beyond, or exempt from, the common versions of values and ideas. 'With Eugene convention meant nothing at all, and his sense of evil and good was something which the ordinary person would not have comprehended.' 'He was always thinking in his private conscience that life was somehow bigger and subtler and darker than any given theory or order of living.' In his art this takes him forward to a vivid appreciation of the hidden beauty and power of apparent urban ugliness. One of his early successes is a brutal picture of an ugly negro emptying garbage into an ash cart (probably an allusion to the so-called Ash Can School of painting), and his pictures seem positively to attack conventional people with the realities they have ignored. Thus another of his pictures 'fairly shouted its facts. . . . And there was no apologising for anything in it, no glossing anything over. Bang! Smash! Crack! came the facts one after another,

with a bitter brutal insistence on their so-ness.' This is opaque art at its most extreme, and yet even here we read that 'everything he touched seemed to have romance and beauty, and yet it was real and mostly grim and shabby'. The Clod school will not renounce all dealings with the God outlook. In his life this energy to drive beyond conventions and accepted structures takes Eugene, after many affairs, the death of his wife, business failures, and bouts of morbidity and sickness, to a final isolation—seemingly beyond all his earlier heated engagements with society. He is finally recognized as a great artist, though considered strange and eccentric. In the last scene he is brooding over a passage in Herbert Spencer about the overwhelming thought of 'infinite space'. After seeing his little daughter to bed, he goes outside and gazes up into 'the sparkling deeps of space'. It is an appropriate posture for the American artist, even one who is nominally a social realist. For the American artist has ever felt more at home in unsocialized space than within any social order, just as he has usually preferred to feel himself to be working according to chronometrical rather than horological time.

This has been of necessity only a preliminary exploration and, as such, it will hardly justify any grand generalized conclusions. It does seem, going by the American novelist's own fictional version of the situation of the American artist, that whether the artist embarks on romantic or realistic work, he inevitably ends up isolated; any pursuit of reality and truth through art seems inexorably to take him beyond the laws and conventions of his contemporaries and forces him to abandon the communal structure of consciousness. It seems that from the start the American novelist has betrayed an instinct that there can finally be no such thing as socialized art, and thus perhaps no such person as a socialized artist. At the same time there is no sign from his fictional artists that the practice of their art affords any lasting compensatory consolations or confidence. To conclude we may return to Hawthorne. At the end of the 'Custom-House' chapter, Hawthorne, ever defensive, leaves the reader with this rather odd speculation. 'It may be, however,—O, transporting and triumphant thought!—that the great-grand-children of the present race may sometimes think kindly of the scribbler of bygone days, when the antiquary of days to come, among the sites memorable in the town's history, shall point out the locality of THE TOWN-PUMP.' When Mark Twain was at his most popular he wrote to William Dean Howells: 'Yes, high

and fine literature is wine, and mine is only water; but everybody likes water.' Yet there is strong evidence that he disliked the public which applauded him and required him, as he said, 'to paint himself striped and stand on his head every fifteen minutes'. By the end of his life this one-time demotic hero had become a bitter misanthropist, as alienated from his society as many of the fictional artists we have considered. Looking at the solitude and fate of figures like Pierre Glendinning, Roderick Hudson, Martin Eden, Eugene Witla, we may perhaps feel that the American novelist has often wondered whether the American artist can ever be so socially central, so obviously indispensable, as the town pump; or whether, scorning to be simply a supplier of popular water, his own higher outpourings will make him for ever 'a citizen of somewhere else'.