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Book and Wax: Two Early American Media of Deception

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Focusing on the work of Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Patience Wright, this essay discusses the nature and function of two media of art in late eighteenth-century America: the medium of the book and the medium of wax.¹ The essay is divided into four parts. The first part engages with current scholarship on the early American novel and argues that its strong focus on the political significance of textual tensions and contradictions needs to be supplemented with an aesthetic approach. Such an approach reads early novels within the context of contemporaneous European discourses concerning the nature and function of art. From this vantage point, textual tensions and contradictions are seen less as reflections of ideological strains within late eighteenth-century society and politics than as traces of a shift in the positioning of art within the social whole. The second part argues that the systems-theoretic concept of functional differentiation provides us with an adequate intellectual framework for making sense of that shift. Drawing primarily on the work of Niklas Luhmann and Niels Werber, I argue that both early American novels and mid to late eighteenth-century aesthetic theories are caught between a pre-modern and a modern understanding of the social functions of art. The third part focuses on debates concerning the truth value of fiction in general and the U.S. anti-fiction movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in particular. Moral arbiters' concerns about the deceptiveness of novels are taken seriously insofar as deception is seen as integral to novelists' creations of fictional worlds. Accordingly, the reasons for diatribes against novels are located less in their political subversiveness than in the nature of fiction itself. The fourth and final part of this essay shifts attention from the medium of the book to the medium of wax. In related but different ways, the wax effigies of (in)famous sculptor Patience Wright raise concerns about the truth value of art and its ability to deceive the spectator. John and Abigail Adams's troubled responses to Wright's work are taken as a focal point to think about the place of both wax sculptures and fiction in a culture marked by profound anxieties concerning the possibility of deception in the sociopolitical realm. The essay concludes with a call to interpret the cultural anxieties art negotiates as well as generates in both political and aesthetic terms.

1 The Politics and Aesthetics of Early American Novels

Early American novels are strangely hybrid objects. On the one hand, books such as Susanna Rowson's sentimental *Charlotte Temple* (1791), Charles Brockden Brown's gothic *Wieland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798) and Hugh Henry Brackenridge's picaresque *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815) are firmly embedded in a pre-modern media culture that did not accord literature autonomous status. In many respects, these late eighteenth-century novels subordinate what we tend to consider the core business of fiction—to invent a good story and tell it well—to the extraliterary purpose they serve in the worlds of religion, politics or education. This pre-modern quality of early American novels is most readily apparent in characters that serve as mouthpieces for the authors' ideological convictions, in the novel's claims to truthfulness and social utility, and in their persistent didacticism, which surfaces in prefaces and in authors' willingness to embark on lengthy digressions from their main narrative to give moral advice to their implied readers.²

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

If the following tale should save one hapless fair one from the errors which ruined poor Charlotte, or rescue from impending misery the heart of one anxious parent, I shall feel a much higher gratification in reflecting on this trifling performance, than could possibly result from the applause which might attend the most elegant finished piece of literature whose tendency might deprave the heart or mislead the understanding. (Rowson 1987: 6)

To many a twenty-first-century reader, early American novels such as Rowson's will seem confined in their utilitarian straightjacket. To a large extent, these texts conform to a pre-modern understanding of literature as a medium that subordinates the right of fiction to invent new worlds to the educational and moral functions it performs for social domains other than art. On the other hand, we can detect in these novels signs of an emergent autonomy of art, even if that may not be the inference most of today's readers will draw on a first reading. Especially Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, published in seven volumes between 1792 and 1815, gestures toward a more modern model of the relationship between literature and the world.

At the heart of Brackenridge's novel is the story of the adventures of the aristocratic Captain Farrago and his Irish servant Teague O'Regan. Farrago and Teague are late eighteenth-century versions of Miguel de Cervantes's Don Quijote and Sancho Panza. At the beginning of the narrative, Farrago decides to strike out from his farm in western Pennsylvania to "ride about the world a little, with his man Teague at his heels, to see how things were going on here and there, and to observe human nature" (Brackenridge 1968: 6). Together, they roam the western parts of the new republic and along the way encounter the full diversity of frontier life: excise officers and would-be philosophers, Quakers and conjurers, colleges and brothels, Indian treaty-making and local elections. The main narrative thread recounts the illiterate but ambitious Teague's tireless efforts to improve his social standing. Teague's aspirations meet with many an office-holder's and almost all the general public's fervent support, and Teague is in turn offered the positions of state legislator, philosopher, cleric, and congressman. Farrago is appalled by the people's readiness to lift his "bog-trotter" (15 et passim) into positions for which he clearly is not qualified, and he musters all his powers of persuasion to talk Teague out of his ambitions so as not to lose his servant.

This storyline is constantly interrupted by long philosophical digressions, extensive comments on current political affairs, advice on how to interpret the text correctly, and moral instruction of the reader. Those digressions regularly take up whole chapters that are characterized by a fusion of the authorial and the narratorial voice that is so pervasive that the two can no longer be held apart with any degree of precision. Emory Elliott's choice of a hyphenated "narrator-author" to designate the novel's overt narrative voice(s) captures this doubleness well (Elliott 1982: 266).³

These digressive chapters are often entitled "Observations," "Containing Observations," "Containing Reflections" or, in the case of the ultimate volume's final chapter, "A Key to the Preceding." Even if it is, as Cathy N. Davidson and Ulla Haselstein have shown, extremely difficult to pin down the positionality of Brackenridge's text (Davidson 2004: 260-66, Haselstein 2003), one of the primary objects of its satire is clearly the excesses of America's fledgling democracy in general and "the evil of men seeking office for which they are not qualified" (Brackenridge 1968: 611) in particular.⁴ Both Farrago and Brackenridge's narrator-author consistently emphasize that "great moral of this book" (611), and the latter states the purpose of the novel in terms that are very similar to Rowson's prefatory remarks quoted earlier:

I shall have accomplished something by this book, if it shall keep some honest man from lessening his respectability by pushing himself into public trusts for which he is not qualified; or when pushed forward into a public station, if it shall contribute to keep him honest by teaching him the folly of ambition, and farther advancement. (Brackenridge 1968: 479)⁵

Still, it would be too facile to characterize *Modern Chivalry* as a didactic vehicle for the moral and political education of its readers, even if that is certainly one of the functions the book performs. Brackenridge emerges as a writer of a more modern sort when he repeatedly insists that his work is but an exercise in style devoid of ideas (Brackenridge 1968: 3, 5, 36, 77, 162), when he consistently privileges "manner" over "matter" (655), and when he satirizes the didacticism of his contemporaries. Brackenridge's introductory remarks concerning his implied readership read much like a parody of Rowson's *as well as his own* didacticism:

Being a book without thought, or the smallest degree of sense, it will be useful to young minds, not fatiguing their understandings, and easily introducing a love of reading and study. Acquiring language at first by this means, they will afterwards gain knowledge. It will be useful especially to young men of light minds intended for the bar or pulpit. By heaping too much upon them, stile and matter at once, you surfeit the stomach, and turn away the appetite from literary entertainment, to horse-racing and cock-fighting. (4)

Throughout his *opus magnum*, moreover, Brackenridge defends books that have no other object but to amuse (e.g., 405-6), and he uses notions such as "taste," "originality," "genius," and "imagination"⁶—notions that began to be theorized in new ways in French, English, and German reflections on the nature and purpose of art in the course of the eighteenth century. These and related reflections on art and beauty would gradually develop into that special branch of philosophy we now know as "aesthetics."

Brackenridge's frequent recourse to and celebration of the figure of the "genius" is particularly interesting in this context, since Brackenridge for the most part uses the term in its modern sense of a human being who possesses "Native intellectual power of an exalted type" or an "instinctive and extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery" (OED). That sense of "genius" began to emerge only in the second half of the eighteenth century and owes much to German idealism and its beginnings in the work of Immanuel Kant. More likely unwittingly than not, Brackenridge aligns himself with reflections on art that stress the originality and autonomous, natural force of the artist as genius, and which prepared the ground for early-nineteenth-century theorizations and literary celebrations of autonomous art in the Romantic era.

Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* can, then, serve us as a particularly illustrative example of the strangely hybrid nature of the early American novel because it simultaneously and paradoxically insists both on its social utility and didactic purpose *and* on its right to liberate itself from such demands. This paradox cannot be resolved, and the co-existence of these two divergent strains of *Modern Chivalry* is so pronounced that it might be more profitable to speak of the work's generic *tensions* rather than its hybridity since, as recent work in post-colonial theory has shown, the very notion of hybridity tends to sublimate difference in unity, thus downplaying conflicts and tensions.⁷

In *Modern Chivalry*, these tensions are all the more pronounced because no linear development from older to more recent conceptualizations of art can be discerned in a novel that was published over a 23-year time span. Considering the long publication history of Brackenridge's multivolume work, we may well be inclined to expect that the later volumes reflect a more modern aesthetic attitude while the earlier ones adhere to an older conception of aesthetic production as directly answerable to demands from outside the realm of art. But in fact, quite the contrary is the case: it is especially in the early volumes that Brackenridge ridicules didacticism and asserts that his work is devoid of ideas; and it is in the later volumes that he seeks to ensure most forcefully, and by way of heavily italicized passages, that the book's moral "message" gets across.⁸ In *Modern Chivalry*, the tension between literary didacticism and autonomy aesthetics remains irresolvable.

Recent scholarship on the early American novel has contributed much to our understanding of the *political* significance of such tensions. While earlier scholarship on these texts considered their inconsistencies and contradictions artistic failures of a fledgling art form,⁹ critics of the 1980s and 1990s tended to read the same formal features politically.¹⁰ In these readings, the gradual transition from a more communitarian republican culture to a more individual-oriented culture of liberalism – from "the communal and self-negating accents of eighteenth-century culture" to "an individualist aesthetics – an aesthetics predicated on the special sensibility of the artist and on the exchange value of the literary artifacts" (Gilmore 1994: 541-693) – is a major source of ideological tensions that are reflected in early American novels' textual tensions. The political meanings critics attribute to those tensions differ considerably. Generally speaking, while critics of broadly feminist persuasion such as Cathy N. Davidson and Julia A. Stern are sympathetic to the emancipatory potential of liberalism and tend to read textual inconsistencies and contradictions as subversive of rigid patriarchal social structures, critics of a roughly neo-Marxist bent such as Michael T. Gilmore, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, and Grantland Rice mourn the passing of a republican culture and its communitarian ethos and tend to argue that formal tensions in early American novels signal their complicity with an emergent liberalist-capitalist order. In a striking reassessment of republicanism as "popular," some of the latter critics go as far as asserting that "republican ideology served perhaps longer than any other dimension of American culture as a legitimization of working-class values [...] [and] a bulwark against the corrosive power of capitalism" (Frisch and Walkowitz 1983: ix-xvii).¹¹

One major impetus for expanding and revising these accounts came from Michael Warner's Habermasian *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (1990), which provoked a flurry of publications on textual production within early American civil society and the respective importance of printed texts and oral communication for the establishment of a modern public sphere.¹² Much of that work also challenged Habermas's focus on the bourgeoisie and postulated a multiplicity of smaller public spheres, most notably female ones.¹³

Since the late 1980s, a second group of scholars has begun to move away from many of these critics' focus on New England. Spearheaded by historians and spurred on by Philip Gura's repeated calls for a move away from what he calls "novanglophilia" (Gura 1988: 305-341, Gura 2000: 599-620), regions other than New England (the Middle Colonies, the Chesapeake, the Lower South, the Carribean, Nouvelle France, and Spanish America) were given increased attention in works such as Greene 1984; Greene 1988, Morgan 1998; and Mulford 1999.

While the bulk of this work continues to be done by historians, a third major development from the early 1990s onward shifted the discussion in literary studies even more decisively away from the Northeast to challenge nationalist narratives about early America more generally. In line with a broader reconfiguration of American Studies as "post-national," "transnational,"¹⁴ or "hemispheric,"¹⁵ and inspired by the work of William Spengemann, David S. Shields, José David Saldívar, Nancy Armstrong, Leonard Tennenhouse, Paul Gilroy, Edward Watts, and Ralph Bauer,¹⁶ a younger generation of scholars has begun to challenge the exceptionalist assumptions inherited from the Myth-and-Symbol School and shared by several preceding generations of early Americanists to embed American literary production in a broader geographical framework that includes not only Europe but also the Caribbean, the African continent, and the West Indies. In the process, concepts and notions from post-colonial studies such as creolity, subalternity, and hybridity were imported into Early American Studies.¹⁷

These shifts of focus from questions of artistic quality (or, rather, its absence) to questions of the political significance of literary form has reinvigorated the study of the early American novel. Unfortunately, though, they have also largely abandoned aesthetic considerations—considerations that are by no means limited to questions of artistic quality and taste. This essay seeks to redress that imbalance by situating early American art within the context of debates in the contemporaneously emerging field of aesthetics that to me seem as significant to discussions of the social function of the art of the period as more narrowly social and political configurations.

From that vantage point, an awareness of the seemingly skewed line of development within *Modern Chivalry* – from an incipient autonomy aesthetics to blatant didacticism – invites us to consider questions of art history and literary history whose relevance extends well beyond Brackenridge's novel. More specifically, it invites us to question one of the most powerful stories told about the early American novel, namely the notion that the real interest of these texts lies not so much in their own artistic merit as in their anticipation of the truly great work produced a quarter century later by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, and Hawthorne. Of course, this story owes much to F. O. Matthiessen's massively influential book *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* and its foundational myth (Matthiessen 1941). This is the story Winfried Fluck has called the "infancy thesis" (Fluck 2000: 226-32), and it is a story that informs even some of the early American novel's most sympathetic critics. Donald A. Ringe's book on Charles Brockden Brown in Twayne's United States Authors Series is a case in point. Ringe speaks of *Wieland's* "historical value" and marvels at "how much of later American fiction is foreshadowed in this novel" (Ringe 1966: 43, 44).¹⁸

Modern Chivalry does not necessarily contradict this account, and it does not necessarily contradict the story of fiction's gradual emancipation from its utilitarian straightjacket, but Brackenridge's novel certainly pinpoints the uneven, nonlinear nature of such processes. Yet how can we explain and conceptualize the paradoxical doubleness of a work such as Brackenridge's? It is, I believe, the systems-theoretic notion of functional differentiation which allows us to theorize that doubleness best.

2 The Functional Differentiation of the Literary System

In Niklas Luhmann's towering theoretical edifice, functional differentiation is the process that brings modernity into being. Luhmann defines it as the gradual differentiation of Western societies into social systems that each perform a unique function for society as a whole. Functional differentiation is a long historical process whose very first stirrings Luhmann locates in the fourteenth century and which results in functionally differentiated social systems such as religion, politics, economics, education, science, law, or art, which all operate according to their own logic and perform a social function of their own (Luhmann 1997: 707-76; Luhmann 2005).

Thus, in the wake of the reformation and the religious wars of the seventeenth century, politics and religion began to drift apart, forcing both emergent social systems to reflect on their own nature and develop their own *modus operandi*. In the case of the political system, notions such as "reason of the state" or "sovereignty" in its modern sense of "supreme controlling power in communities not under monarchical government; absolute and independent authority" (OED) only began to emerge in the second half of the sixteenth century (Quaritsch 1995; Münkler 1998), when the first stirrings of the evolution of politics into a social system whose functioning is no longer determined by (religious) forces outside itself can be discerned.¹⁹ The emergence of constitutional democracies in the wake of the American and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century mark an important second stage in the evolution of politics as an autonomous system (Luhmann 2000: 69-139, Luhmann 2002: 115-225; Stichweh 1991; Kneer 1993: 130-31).

In the process of functional differentiation, both politics and religion emerge as self-referential, organizationally closed systems that each have their own semantics and perform a specific function for the social whole that is not shared by any other system. In the case of the political system, that function is the enablement and implementation of collectively binding decisions (Luhmann 2000: 84); in the case of the religious system, it is the elimination of contingency by way of the transformation of indeterminable complexity into determinable complexity (Luhmann 1992: 26).

These may sound like both forbiddingly abstract and inexcusably reductive descriptions of the functions the religious and the political system perform. But – and this is crucial to Luhmann's account – these are abstractions and reductions the systems themselves enact as they draw borders that separate them from other systems so as to sustain their own mode of operation. Moreover, they are reductions of complexity that allow for an increase in complexity within each system (Luhmann 1986).

In analogy to the differentiation of the religious and the political system, other social systems emerge that each also perform their own specific functions: the function of the economic system is to reduce scarcity, the function of the scientific system is to produce new knowledge, and so on. Luhmann also considers the system of art a functionally differentiated social system. In Luhmann's systems theory, each social system can only perform one specific function for society as a whole. Luhmann's own version is rather close to the theory of fiction proposed by Wolfgang Iser in *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (1993). "[T]he function of art," Luhmann argues, "seems to lie in the production of world contingency. The ingrained, mundane version of the world is shown to be dissolvable and becomes a polycontextural reality that can also be read differently" (Luhmann 1986: 624; my translation).²⁰

Another systems-theoretic account of the function of art brings the subject (which Luhmann moves to the margins of his concerns) back into the discussion. For Siegfried J. Schmidt, art holds out the promise of human self-realization and identity-formation, allowing us to dress the psychological wounds the process of functional differentiation has inflicted upon us: "its function for society as a whole," Schmidt argues, "consist in [...] the suspension, by way of the communicative treatment of life world and culture, of the alienation subjects suffer as a result of social differentiation" (Schmidt 1989: 422-23; my translation). Niels Werber provides yet another systems-theoretic account of the function of art. Werber focuses on the system of literature, arguing that its function is to provide entertainment to address the modern problem of leisure time and growing demands for its structuration (Werber 1992: 27, 64, 76-77).

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

More directly relevant to our discussion of the early American novel is systems theory's insight that modernization is a process of functional differentiation that happens at specific historical moments. With respect to the differentiation of the literary system, Werber and Schmidt agree that the latter half of the eighteenth century marks a decisive shift. In Schmidt's words, "Since the second half of the eighteenth century, literary systems in the sense of self-organizing social systems have begun to emerge in Europe. This emergence occurred within the context of the gradual restructuration of European societies from stratified to functionally differentiated societies as networks made up of social systems" (Schmidt 1989: 9; my translation). This systems-theoretic account tallies with more traditional accounts of literature's gradual emancipation from church and patronage during the eighteenth century and its coming into its own as an autonomous medium of art in nineteenth-century Romantic theorizing and literary practice.

What such accounts of literary evolution help us understand is that both aesthetic and ideological tensions in works of literature do not merely reflect conflicts in the society within which they are produced, but are also signs of a shift in the positioning of literature within media culture. In the late eighteenth century, such traces are visible both in works of art and in emergent aesthetic theories.

To discuss those traces, let me briefly focus on the relation between morality and art, and on how that relation is negotiated both in literature and in aesthetics. I will focus on aesthetics first. In the late eighteenth century, it was Kant's three critiques that most strongly testified to a drifting apart of Plato's triad of "the good, the true, and the beautiful."²¹ This triad rests on the pre-modern assumption that morality, social and philosophical knowledge, and aesthetic pleasure are inextricably intertwined, and Kant's three critiques are modern in the sense that they signal (in however qualified a fashion) that the three are distinct from one another: while the *Critique of Pure Reason* probes the limits of human knowledge, the *Critique of Practical Reason* locates the moral law within subjects, and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* focuses, among other things, on the perception of artistic and natural beauty. Though the stated purpose of the third critique is to bring together the concerns of the first two critiques, to mediate between nature and freedom and "throw a bridge from one domain to the other" (Kant 2000: 81), its contention that "the beautiful, the judging of which has as its ground a merely formal purposiveness, i.e., a purposiveness without an end, is entirely independent of the representation of the good" (Kant 2000: 171) ultimately testifies to the quintessentially modern dissociation of art from morality and truth.

We may add that the drifting apart of truth, morality, and beauty that Kant's text registers also shaped the modern separation of academic philosophy into (among other branches) epistemology, moral and political philosophy, and aesthetics.

Niels Werber's reading of Kant's third critique as a theorization of art as a functionally differentiated, autonomous system is therefore certainly correct to a certain extent, and Werber's interesting aside that the phrase "l'art pour l'art" did not originate – as is commonly assumed – in the context of mid-nineteenth century French aestheticism but in a French reading of Kant performed by Benjamin Constant in 1804 (Werber 1992: 47-48), certainly lends credence to such a reading of Kant. Moreover, Kant's celebration of genius and of originality (Kant 2000: 186-89),²² and his insistence that art "pleases immediately" and "without any interest" (227) all point in the same direction.²³ Yet to read the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as a fully-fledged theory of autonomous art would not do it justice.

In discussing the sublime, Kant builds a bridge between morality and art: the experience of the sublime belongs to religious and moral experience; it is moral ideas that allow us to perceive and judge the sublime in the first place: "the judgment on the sublime [...] has its foundation in human nature, and indeed in that which can be required of everyone and demanded of him along with healthy understanding, namely in the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to that which is moral" (Kant 2000: 148-49).

Moreover, as Gottfried Boehm has shown, what is autonomous in Kant is less the work of art than our judgments of taste and the freeplay of the human imagination. Kant's notion of art remains wedded to a pre-modern notion of beauty whose supreme expression is to be found not in art but in the divine order of nature. Even genius is not an autonomous force: it is a force of nature, and nature acts through it (Boehm 1991: lxix-lxxi).²⁴ In Kant's own words, "Genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. Since the talent, as an inborn productive faculty of the artist, itself belongs to nature, this could also be expressed thus: Genius is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art" (Kant 2002: 186).

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

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

More so than most other novels of the period, *Modern Chivalry* testifies to pre-modern/modern tensions of literature at a crossroads. Yet Brackenridge is clearly not alone in this. Even in Rowson's deeply didactic, non-parodic, and unironic *Charlotte Temple* can we detect traces of a process of literary modernization. After an extended allegorical discourse on Humility, Filial Piety, Conjugal Affection, Industry, Benevolence, Content, Religion, Patience, and Hope, Rowson's narrator says, "I confess I have rambled strangely from my story" (Rowson 1987: 35). This said, she immediately justifies such digressions by re-affirming the educational value of her tale. Yet the very fact that the narrator uses the verb "to ramble" and the adverb "strangely" to describe that digression points to the fact that Rowson was aware of expectations on the part of her empirical readers that may well diverge from those of her implied readers. Rowson was, in other words, aware that many of her readers valued her book less for its moral advice than for its gripping story and its underhanded invitation to readers to sympathize with Charlotte's plight. And that awareness registers the existence of a more modern understanding of the social function of art on Rowson's part than the one her moralizing narrator adheres to.

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

This is not to deny that textual tensions and contradictions may have political significance but to insist that they need to be analyzed in aesthetic terms, i.e., in their own right, before they are correlated with social and political tensions and contradictions. For the purpose of this essay, this means that formal tensions in literary texts first need to be understood in the context of debates and reflections on art in general and literature in particular.

So far, I have focused on reflections on the nature and function of art that take place either within the artworks themselves or within treatises on art. Yet in late eighteenth-century America, such reflections were by no means confined to the practice and theory of art. The moral status and truth value of fiction were hotly contested issues that occupied not only artists and aestheticians but also politicians, clergymen, social and political arbiters of various kinds, and the general public.

3 Deception by the Book

The U.S. anti-fiction movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is a well-documented phenomenon whose spokespersons included some of the most prominent public figures of the era: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush (physician, politician, and signer of the Declaration of Independence), Jonathan Edwards, Timothy Dwight (poet, theologian, and president of Yale from 1795 to 1817), Noah Webster, and Rev. Samuel Miller (professor of church history and government at Princeton and author of the two-volume *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* [1803]).²⁵ These politicians, clergymen, and educators objected to the novel on a variety of grounds: it inflames the passions of its mostly female readers and gives them morally corrupt ideas; it distorts reality out of all proportion, thus giving its readers wrong ideas about real life; it instills in them a yearning for a life better than their own and thus undermines social hierarchies; it enfeebles their mental faculties; it serves no moral purpose and, worse, takes time away from more serious pursuits such as Bible-reading or contributing to the family income; it fosters an individualism that is at odds with republican ideals of community; it does not tell the truth.²⁶ As Terence Martin, William Charvat, Paul C. Gutjahr, and Cathy N. Davidson have pointed out, these objections to the novel rest on three major intellectual and ideological foundations. In Gutjahr's concise summary:

Religious and nonreligious antinovel writers most often grounded their arguments in two lines of deeply intertwined reasoning. Preeminent among these was a Scottish Common Sense philosophical notion of the importance of basing one's life on the truth. As one critic preached in 1807, novels removed one from the truth through their tendency to "give false notions of things, to pervert the consequences of human actions, and to misrepresent the ways of divine providence." Virtuous action, and thus the ability to lead a worthwhile life, depended on embracing what was true and avoiding even the slightest hint of dissimulation or falseness. A second line of reasoning argued that novels with their romantic and adventurous tales inflamed the imagination, and thus the passions. Awakening uncontrollable animal instincts once again worked at cross purposes with ideals of virtue, which were heavily dependent on notions of hard work, discipline, and perseverance. Finally, Protestants added a third line of reasoning to these antinovel polemics. They protested that novels were dangerous because they took time away from more worthy activities, principal among these being Bible reading and other devotional practices. Further, they feared that novels, even more dangerously, might so influence American reading tastes that the Bible would come to seem nothing more than "a wearisome book." (*Gutjahr* 2002: 211)

While the anti-fiction movement was fed by several sources and attacked novels for a variety of reasons, one charge based on Scottish Common Sense philosophy weighed heaviest: that they were inventions and lies. This is a charge that runs like a red thread through the many condemnations of the novel published in American magazines from about 1780 to 1820.²⁷ It informs one Leander's designation of novels as "chimerical works" in the *Massachusetts Magazine* of November 1791 (qtd. in *Orians* 1937: 198); it is at the heart of an article published in *The Lady's Monitor* in 1801 that contrasts novels with "whatever can awaken attention to obvious and important truths" (qtd. in *Orians* 1937: 199); and it underlies another commentator's rhetorical question in the third, 1811 volume of the *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor*: "what can be conceived more mischievous in literature, than false notions conveyed in vitious language; than things which have no existence, described in inflated bombast" (qtd. in *Charvat* 1968: 140).

A certain Alphonzo's vignette in the *American Magazine* of April 21, 1787 offers a particularly instructive case. Alphonzo tells the story of an impressionable young girl named Maria, who, having read "a thousand novels" by the age of ten, stole abroad to pursue the kinds of adventures the novels' heroines lived through. Five years later, Maria is cured of her wild fancy: "Maria's head was once turned with novels – she has now lost her relish for them. Instead of *fiction*, she wished to find *truth* and to conform to it. She wishes for instruction – young, unsuspecting, susceptible, she begs her friends to point out her faults, and she listens to advice with a lively expression of pleasure that marks the goodness of her heart" ("*Vignette in the American Magazine, April 21, 1787*" in: *Jehlen* 1997: 986).

Even if he does so in thoroughly fictional terms, Alphonzo like many of his fellow anti-fictionists decries not only the falseness of fiction but also the false ideas it imparts to innocent girls. His moral tale raises a number of crucial issues concerning the status of fiction in late eighteenth-century America: its educational value, its power to incense the imagination of young female readers, and its dubious truth value.

If novels are accused of not telling the truth, this is an indictment that applies to *all* novels, irrespective of the story they tell or their authors' real or professed intentions. Caught as they were between a pre-modern and a modern understanding of the nature and function of art, early American novelists did not have at their disposal a line of defense that later artists could take for granted: that fiction invents a world of its own which cannot be judged according to whether it truthfully represents empirical reality or imparts moral truths to its readers. Early American writers of fiction were, in other words, unable to speak for what aestheticians from Schiller to Iser have considered one of the chief strengths of fiction: its power to invent a world different from our own. Instead, they regularly insisted on the truthfulness and facticity of their tales. Indeed, by G. Harrison Orians's count, "Fully fifteen of the first hundred American novels italicized on their title pages a declaration of their foundation on truth" (Orians 1937: 204).

It was not until the early 1820s that significant changes in the public estimation of novels were registered. The author of an *American Monthly Magazine* piece entitled "On the Causes of the Present Popularity of Novel Writing" (1824) is able to consign the anti-fiction movement to the near past: "To us it appears as if it were but yesterday, that the grave, serious, the religious, and the prudent, consigned novel reading as an employment utterly beneath the dignity of the human mind; nay, in some austere corners of the world, such may be to this day the opinion" (McHenry 1824: 1). Before the third decade of the nineteenth century, however, novelists were faced with a climate of suspicion.

Yet not all of them reacted by defending the usefulness and facticity of their works. As we have seen in the case of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, some writers satirized literary didacticism even as they performed it. In *Modern Chivalry*, Brackenridge subjects the truth claims of fiction to a similar treatment. A case in point is the mock-heroic poem "Cincinnatus" (Brackenridge 1968: 173-94), which the narrator-author claims he has found in a deceased poet's home. Brackenridge here uses the topos of the found document, a time-honored strategy of asserting the facticity of fictional texts. Yet the narrator-author's attempts to preempt possible objections to such truth claims undermine those very claims in their prolixity:

as many writers of fictitious works, in order to give them an air of truth and reality; or to delight the reader by relating some accidental manner of coming at what was nearly lost, invent tales of finding shreds and scraps of compositions, and thence tracing to the source; or that by taking lodgings that had been before occupied by some poet or philosopher, they discover in an old trunk, or elsewhere, the lucubrations which they now offer to the public, so I may be suspected of adopting a common mode of introducing what I myself have written; but the fact is as I have stated. (173)

When, in the course of the poem, the "Cincinnati" – the poem's pseudo-hero and the target of its satire – calls a corporal who fulminates against his airs of superiority "a Teague O'Regan fool" (186), the narrator-author's claims to veracity and verisimilitude fully collapse as Brackenridge inserts his own fictional character, who is himself modeled on a fictional precedent (Sancho Panza), into a poem the narrator-author ostensibly seeks to pass off as 'the real thing.'

Such passages testify to Brackenridge's self-reflexive awareness of and play with readers' as well as critics' expectations concerning the truth value of fiction. Brackenridge takes this one step further when he writes, in the introduction to the third volume, that the good writer must "be able to deceive the world" (161). Rather than asserting, with whatever degree of seriousness, the truthfulness of his narrative, he here acknowledges that deception is, in a sense, the core business of fiction. Its games of make-believe invite readers to take for real persons, actions, and events that are products of the imagination. That this was by many a moral arbiter considered an act of deception in the most negative sense is testified to by the anti-fictionists discussed above.

Brackenridge's reflections on the truth value of *Modern Chivalry* in particular and fiction in general thus link up with a central topos of early American novels: deception. In early American novels, acts of counterfeiting and dissimulation abound. In Brown's *Wieland*, for instance, the mysterious stranger Carwin is the master of deception, who is capable of not only imitating the voices of others but also of projecting those voices so that listeners are deceived about their source. Not even Enlightenment rationalism protects against Carwin's deceptions. In fact, Henry Pleyel, the character who epitomizes Enlightenment rationalism in Brown's tale, is deceived precisely because he bases his judgments solely on empirically verifiable phenomena, i.e., on what is in front of his senses. Carwin's acts of deception and other characters' failure to perceive those acts for what they are play a significant role in the ultimate destruction of the Wieland family.

In Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, it is the eponymous heroine who is deceived by the insincere promises of her seducer Montraville and the machinations of his evil sidekick Belcour.

Rowson's deceivers are British officers and as if that did not constitute enough of a warning signal in post-colonial America, Rowson gives them French names to emphasize their treacherous nature.²⁸ Charlotte herself consistently misreads the intentions of those who deceive her, and she pays dearly for those misreadings.

Recent work on the early American novel has argued that its multiple stagings of acts of deception and of misreadings reflect wider cultural anxieties about the trustworthiness of appearances and the reliability of human perception. Critical consensus has it that the broadest context within which these cultural anxieties must be understood is the gradual shift in late eighteenth-century America from republicanism and its communitarian ethos to liberalism and its individualist ethos. In these readings, the con men, seducers, and deceivers of early American novels exemplify an individualism that has gone wrong, and evil literary characters are those that give free rein to their individual desires without wasting a thought on their own communal responsibility. The misreadings by the deceivers' victims are interpreted in a similar vein. They, too, testify to a cultural climate of instability and indeterminacy brought about by a shift from republican to liberal values and norms that challenged established ways of perceiving the world.²⁹

Since the 1990s, such accounts have been supplemented by readings of deception that situate it in its transnational and/or hemispheric contexts. Among other things, such re-readings of deception in early American novels from a transnational perspective have alerted us to the fact that many of the deceivers in these novels are cultural or ethnic others: Frenchmen and -women (in Charlotte Temple, Arthur Mervyn, and Sarah S. Wood's *Julia*, and the *Illuminated Baron*), Englishmen (in Charlotte Temple and Isaac Mitchell's *The Asylum*; or, *Alonzo and Melissa*), Irishmen (in *Modern Chivalry* and *Female Quixotism*), Catholic Spaniards (as is speculated of *Carwin in Wieland*), Africans and Jews (in *The Algerine Captive*). In exploring the racial, ethnic, and nationalist investments of early American writers as well as their novels' transnational dimensions, such re-reading have enriched our understanding of these texts, critically explored their ideological self-positionings, and effectively challenged exceptionalist assumptions that informed some of the earlier criticism.

What I believe is missing from such accounts, however, is an awareness that questions concerning dissimulation and the powers of human perception are also at the heart of mid to late eighteenth-century reflections on the nature and function of art taking place in a variety of venues, including magazine articles, advice literature, treatises on art, and works of art themselves. Deception, then, is as much an aesthetic as it is a moral and political category. In early American novels, this convergence is also signaled by the different uses of "art" and "arts." These words can mean anything from skill and learning, through aesthetic practice and aesthetic objects, to wile, artifice, and cunning.

As far as eighteenth-century theories of art are concerned, it is useful to recall Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's definition of *Ästhetik*. Baumgarten coined the term in his 1735 master's thesis, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Baumgarten 1954), which also contains a brief sketch of a future discipline of aesthetics. In this work, and more systematically in his two-volume *Aesthetica* of 1750 and 1758, Baumgarten defined aesthetics as the science of sensuous cognition and the art of thinking finely (Baumgarten 2007). Here is Baumgarten's most famous definition of the term from the first paragraph of *Aesthetica* together with Jeffrey Barnouw's useful glosses in square brackets: "Aesthetics, as the theory of the liberal arts, lower-level epistemology [*gnoseologia inferior*], the art of thinking finely [literally, beautifully, *ars pulchre cogitandi*], and the art of the analogy of reason [i.e., the associative or natural-sign-based capacity of empirical inference common to man and higher animals], is the science of sensuous cognition" (Barnouw 1988: 324).³⁰

From this vantage point, Baumgarten considers art a specific form of cognition or of perceiving and knowing the world. When Baumgarten formulated these thoughts in writing, it was by no means obvious that artworks, as objects related to sensuous cognition, were worthy of serious philosophical reflection. Baumgarten himself considered perception a cognitive faculty inferior to reason: while reason allows us to know things clearly and distinctly (*clara et distincta*), sense perception allows us to know things clearly but not with the distinctness of reason and therefore also confusedly (*clara et confusa*). This is so because the referents of sense perception are present merely in temporal forms. We can perceive them clearly but are unable to list all the qualities that distinguish them from other referents. Within Baumgarten's rationalist epistemology, only reason can give us access to the perfect distinctness of universal forms. It is with such doubts concerning the reliability of human perception in mind that Baumgarten's choice to accord the human senses their own place vis-à-vis rational cognition must be appreciated (Schneider 2005: 23-24; Gethmann-Siefert 1995: 44-50; Barck 2000: 322-23). To devote books to the study of sensuous cognition around 1750 is a daring project that still cannot quite shake off doubts concerning its own legitimacy.

So if early American novels almost obsessively problematize processes of perception and misperception, readings and misreadings, they do not only mirror the social and political instabilities of the new republic, but testify to anxieties within eighteenth-century media culture concerning the trustworthiness of the kind of sensible knowledge art can impart. These anxieties are negotiated not only in the practice and theory of art but also, in different form, in diatribes against the deceptiveness of fiction.

Yet in late eighteenth-century America, deception was a charge laid not solely at the door of the novel. Having visited an exhibition by one of the most intriguing early American women artists, Abigail Adams made the following observation: "There was an old clergyman sitting reading a paper in the middle of the room; and though I went prepared to see strong representations of real life, I was effectually deceived in this wax figure for ten minutes and was finally told it was only wax" (qtd. in [Rubenstein 1990: 21](#)).

4 Deception by Wax

Adams here comments on the work of Patience Lovell Wright (1725-1786), a highly popular early American wax sculptor whose work antedates Marie Tussaud's by about 30 years. Wright created wax effigies of British and American public figures ranging from King George III to Benjamin Franklin – an interesting combination in itself – and took her traveling waxwork exhibit to Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, London, and Paris. Sadly, her sculpture of the Earl of Chatham is the only surviving specimen of her art.

Wright's popularity in her time owed as much to her artistic skills as it did to her outspoken personality and her modeling technique. To keep the material warm and malleable, Wright shaped her wax busts underneath her apron between her thighs before spectacularly bringing her creations into the world. Wright was a controversial figure, who claims she addressed the British king and queen as "George" and "Charlotte" when they sat for her; who entertained pro-American activists and artists in her London workshop; and who allegedly worked as a spy in London during the War of Independence, sending – as one version of the story has it – messages hidden in wax figures back to America ([Sellers 1971: 86-87, 90, 113](#)). Wright's life and work highlight a number of important issues in early American society and politics such as the representation of power, the social status of women in general and female artists in particular, and the political relations between Britain and its American colonies. To date, though, only little has been published on this fascinating figure.³¹

Adams actively disliked Wright for her "slattern" appearance, overfamiliarity, and generally liberal manners, and referred to her as the "queen of sluts" (Sellers 1971: 209-10). Still, Adams's report on her visit to one of the artist's exhibitions testifies to an uneasiness with Wright's work that is not primarily gender specific and which links up with my discussion of early American novels above. More so than literary texts, the medium of wax by virtue of its plasticity and color allowed Wright to create works of art of supreme verisimilitude. In Adams's account, it is, perhaps paradoxically, the very truthfulness of Wright's art that renders it deceptive. Both media of art – the book and wax – trouble cultural authorities because they try to pass themselves off as something they are not: imagined worlds as real worlds; wax as flesh. In this, the argument goes, they deceive their recipients. Moreover, in their deceptiveness, they speak to anxieties concerning the reliability of perception that are registered not only by eighteenth-century European aestheticians such as Baumgarten but also, and in a much more visceral sense, by contemporaneous observers of and participants in the American Revolution – of which more below.

Wright's life and work highlight such convergences of aesthetics and politics. If she did indeed work as an American spy, her deceptions were both political and aesthetic in nature. While her biographer's assertion that the legend about Wright hiding secret messages in her wax busts is "unsubstantiated but credible" (Sellers 1971) hardly bolsters the tale's credibility,³² we can understand how enticing it is to believe in it. So let us, for a moment, imagine that Wright used her artistic medium of deception (wax) as a medium – in the sense of a channel of communication – to conceal, in an act of deception, her transmission of another medium of deception (the secret letter). Irrespective of its truth value, this thought experiment helps us understand the status of deception in the eighteenth century as not only a political and moral but also an aesthetic category. The anti-fictionists were as aware of this as contemporary commentators on Wright's sculptures.

Another letter discussing Wright's work brings out this intertwinement of aesthetic and political acts of deception with even greater clarity. That letter was sent from Philadelphia to Abigail Adams on May 10, 1777:

The Day before Yesterday, I took a Walk, with my Friend Whipple to Mrs. Wells's, the Sister of the famous Mrs. Wright, to see her Waxwork. She has two Chambers filled with it. In one, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is represented. The Prodigal is prostrate on his Knees, before his Father whose Joy and Grief, and Compassion all appear in his Eyes and Face, struggling with each other. A servant Maid, at the Fathers command, is pulling down from a Closet Shelf, the choicest Robes, to cloath the Prodigal, who is all in Rags. At an outward Door, in a Corner of the Room stands the elder Brother, chagrined at this Festivity, a Servant coaxing him to come in. A large Number of Guests are placed round the Room. In another Chamber, are the Figures of Chatham, Franklin, Sawbridge, Mrs. Maccaulay, and several others. At a Corner is a Miser, sitting at his Table, weighing his Gold, his Bag upon one Side of the Table, and a Thief behind him, endeavouring to pilfer the Bag. There is Genius, as well as Taste and Art, discovered in this Exhibition: But I must confess, the whole Scaene was disagreeable to me. The Imitation of Life was too faint, and I seemed to be walking among a Group of Corps's, standing, sitting, and walking, laughing, singing, crying, and weeping. This Art I think will make but little Progress in the World. Another Historical Piece I forgot, which is Elisha, restoring to Life the Shunamite's Son. The Joy of the Mother, upon Discerning the first Symptoms of Life in the Child, is pretty strongly expressed. Dr. Chevots Waxwork, in which all the various Parts of the human Body are represented, for the Benefit of young Students in Anatomy and of which I gave you a particular Description, a Year or two ago, were much more pleasing to me. Wax is much fitter to represent dead Bodies, than living ones. (Adams 1981b: 58-59)

The author of this letter is John Adams, Abigail Adams's husband. By May 1777, Adams had emerged as a central figure of the Second Continental Congress, which had approved the Declaration of Independence less than a year ago and was now steering America through the Revolution. The documents delegates to both Continental Congresses wrote are collected in the twenty-six-volume *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789* edited by Paul H. Smith (Smith 1976-2000) and available online via the *American Memory* site of the Library of Congress. Most of the collection consists of letters sent by delegates, but it also includes diary entries, essays, and other writings (*American Memory* 2006).

Written as they were during the American Revolution, it comes as little surprise that these documents are full of references to acts of deception of various kinds (political, military, personal) and in a variety of media (speech, newspapers, books). In the year John Adams wrote the lines quoted above to his wife, his correspondence and diary entries abound in such references. Reading some of these documents allows us to situate Abigail and John Adams's different responses to Wright's work in a cultural context in which questions concerning the truthfulness of appearances were of vital importance.

Take Adams's speculations concerning the intentions of General William Howe – the commander in chief of the British Army in North America from 1776 to 1778 – as an example. In a letter to his wife dated July 30, 1777, Adams writes:

Howes Fleet has been at Sea, these 8 days. We know not where he is gone. We are puzzling ourselves in vain, to conjecture his Intention. Some guess he is gone to Cheasapeak, to land near Susquehanna and cross over Land to Albany to meet Burgoine. But they might as well imagine them gone round Cape horn into the South Seas to land at California, and march across the Continent to attack our back settlements. Others think them gone to Rhode Island, others think they mean only a Deception and to return to the North River. A few days will reveal their Scheme. (Adams 1981a: 396)

Adams's letter testifies to the atmosphere of rumors, guesswork, and uncertainty that characterizes times of war – and which is so well captured in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (Crane 1986). Yet unlike Henry Fleming – whose various acts of self-fashioning all ultimately collapse under the horror of war – Adams fashions himself as a detached observer of such speculations.³³ For those who possess the necessary mental equilibrium – and, we may add, the necessary physical distance from the battlefield – it is idle to fret over the enemy's intentions since his deceptions will be revealed in time. This is the letter of a statesman assuring his wife that he has everything under control.

But his diary entry of September 21, 1777 speaks a different language. To his private notes, he confides his fear that the deceptions of Generals Howe and Burgoyne will be successful and put not only the delegates at Philadelphia in danger but also enable the enemy forces to capture Albany, NY:

[Howe] will wait for his Fleet in Delaware River. He will keep open his Line of Communication with Brunswick, and at last, by some Deception or other will slip unhurt into the City. Burgoine has crossed Hudsons River, by which Gen. Gates thinks, he is determined at all Hazards to push for Albany, which G. Gates says he will do all in his Power to prevent him from reaching. But I confess I am anxious for the Event, for I fear he will deceive Gates, who seems to be acting the same timorous, defensive Part, which has involved us in so many Disasters. Oh, Heaven! grant Us one great Soul! (Adams 1982: 8-9)

If we compare Adams's two letters to his wife to this diary entry, we find that the self-assured tone of the former differs markedly from the anxious mood of the latter. Even though the letters are concerned with two different social realms – art and politics – they share a similar attitude toward deception. From them, Adams emerges as a savvy and assertive man who cannot be duped easily. Appearances do not deceive an Adams, be it in art or politics.

That this was not always the case can readily be glimpsed from a later exchange of reports and letters between Adams, John Jay, Samuel Huntington, and Robert Morris concerning Adams's attempts to secure a loan from Holland to support the American war effort. The relevant documents are collected in *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, edited by Francis Wharton and also available in electronic form via *American Memory*. In a letter of December 14, 1780 to Samuel Huntington, then President of the Continental Congress, Adams expresses his frustration at having been deceived by Dutch assurances:

For some years before I came to Holland every person I saw from this place assured me that in his opinion money might be borrowed, provided application was made with proper powers directly from Congress to solid Dutch houses. After my arrival here these assurances were repeated to me by persons whose names I could mention, and who I thought could not be deceived themselves, nor deceive me. But now that powers have arrived, and application has been made to Dutch houses undoubtedly solid, these houses will not accept the business. In short, I can not refrain from saying that almost all the professions of friendship to America which have been made turn out upon trial to have been nothing more than little adulations to procure a share in our trade. (Adams 1889: 193)

Almost two years later, in a letter dated August 2, 1782, John Jay replies to Adams's report that his chances to secure the loan are now sound. Jay congratulates the younger Adams but issues a word of warning: "I congratulate you on the prospect of your loan's succeeding, and hope your expectations on that subject may be realized. I commend your prudence, however, in not relying on appearances. They deceive us sometimes in all countries" (Jay 1889: 640).

Finally, on January 19, 1783, Robert Morris, the financier of the American Revolution, sends a letter to Adams that begins as follows:

Although I have not yet been honored with any letters from your excellency, I can not omit the occasion of writing which offers itself by Mr. Jefferson. Having already congratulated you on the acknowledgment of our independence by the States-General, and on the rapid success of your labors, equally splendid and useful, I hope when this letter shall have reached your hands I may have the additional cause of congratulation that the loan you have opened in Holland shall have been completed. This is a circumstance of great importance to our country, and most particularly so to the department which I have the honor to fill. Whatever may be the success of it, whether general or partial, I pray your excellency to favor me by every conveyance with every minute detail which can tend to form my judgment or enlighten my mind. (Morris 1889: 221)

What this exchange of letters highlights is not only the utmost importance of sound finances to the revolutionary cause but also the vicissitudes of diplomacy in times of war. The negotiations about the Dutch loan took a particularly heavy toll on Adams. As his twenty-first-century biographer David McCullough notes, Adams himself "thought it unlikely that anyone would understand or appreciate the struggle and aggravation he had been through, the doubts, timidity, and hostilities he had to contend with" (McCullough 2001: 272). The slowness of communication across continents around 1780 compounded Adams's difficulties. What Morris did not know when he sent his letter is that, thanks to Adams's efforts, three Dutch banking houses already in June 1782 had agreed to loan the U.S. five million Dutch Guilders (McCullough 2001: 271-73). So while Adams's mission ultimately turned into one of the major triumphs of his diplomatic career, the way to success was fraught with numerous imponderabilities and the ever-present possibility of deception, even on the part of friendly nations.

This political context provides one important framework within which Adams's letter about Patience Wright's work must be understood. It is as if the realm of art provided for Adams a space within which judgments concerning the truth value of objects could be made with a degree of certainty that is not available in that other space of world diplomacy. Rather than letting himself be taken in and troubled by the verisimilitude of Wright's figures, as Abigail Adams evidently was, Adams postures as the distanced observer who sees through it all: "The Imitation of Life was too faint."

Moreover, by favorably comparing Dr. Abraham Chovet's anatomical wax models to Wright's creations, he assigns wax figures their proper place in the realm of science, where reason and the acquisition of useful knowledge "for the Benefit of young Students in Anatomy" rather than deception are the order of the day. In praising Chovet, Adams privileges the educational uses of wax figures over their aesthetic force, thus pressing art back into the utilitarian straightjacket that eighteenth-century aestheticians and artists ever so cautiously and inconsistently sought to emancipate it from. Thus, not unlike the anti-fictionists in their eagerness to expose the falsity of fiction, and not unlike novelists in their insistence on the social utility and truthfulness of their tales, Adams seeks to contain the potentially disturbing effects of deception by art.

Yet art cannot be tamed that easily, and the medium of wax still hovers uneasily between the worlds of art and science. From a systems-theoretic perspective, this doubleness of wax sculpture bears witness to a process of functional differentiation that was still in the making in the late eighteenth century. Like fiction, wax sculpture still had to find its place within the emerging system of art.

While the American Revolution and the ongoing process of functional differentiation certainly provide two important historical contexts for making sense of John Adams's response to Wright's work, a closer look at that response reveals anxieties that may have been triggered by the medium of wax itself. Indeed, the words Adams uses to describe his experiences in Wright's exhibition do not quite bear out the note of self-assuredness he seeks to strike. For one, the rapid shift from art to science does not erase Adams's disturbing memory of having walked "among a Group of Corps's." In fact, it reinforces it since Adams's praise of Chovet's anatomical models is based on his conviction that "Wax is much fitter to represent dead Bodies, than living ones." Ostensibly, of course, Wright's wax effigies are to Adams's mind like dead bodies because they are but imperfect copies of living ones. It is the static nature of wax effigies that makes their representation of life a copy of death. As Elisabeth Bronfen has pointed out in her seminal *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, all artistic representations of life entail the transformation of animate into inanimate matter since they arrest life in immutable form. It is in this sense that "a translation of body into image may kill" (Bronfen 1992: 117). In the case of wax, this is further underlined by the historical origins of the art form: wax sculptures "derive from the tradition in antiquity of bearing funeral effigies of deceased leaders" (Harley 1996: 3). In a sense, then, whenever Wright issues forth one of her creations from underneath her apron, she gives birth to a stillborn child.

Once we take the specificity of the medium of wax into account, another layer of complexity is added to the issues at hand since wax is, in a very real, material sense, not immutable. That wax is "solid at room temperatures" but "soften[s] or liquef[ies] at higher temperatures" (Harley 1996: 1), Wright had to experience the hardest way when, in June 1771, a fire destroyed much of her waxworks in New York (Sellers 1971: 686). Wax is, moreover, subject to a number of additional processes of deterioration:

A temperature of just 30° can cause slumping while excessive cold can lead to embrittlement and cracking. Shrinkage and eventual cracking may also occur when important plasticizers are leached out of some waxes as a result of fluctuations in temperature; these plasticizers may be seen as white crystals on the surface. In relative humidities over 65%, wax may grow mould, which also attacks important structural elements. Oxidation, catalyzed by light, causes darkening in wax and can lead to structural changes and hardening. (Harley 1996: 6)

Wright's sculpture of the Earl of Chatham, the only remaining testimony to her art, bears witness to such processes. It is now preserved in Westminster Abbey's Undercroft Museum, where many of today's visitors cast at most a furtive glance at Wright's sculpture before moving on. The earthen tones of Pitt's right hand and head – which are the only waxen parts visible to spectators; the left hand is hidden beneath the parliamentary robe – evoke less morbid an atmosphere than the deathlike paleness of the five royal wax effigies exhibited in an adjacent glass case: King William III; Queen Mary II; Queen Anne; Catherine, Duchess of Buckingham; and Robert, Marquess of Normandy. But the grey tint that has begun to cover Pitt's face since the figure's full conservation in 1992-93 (Harvey 1994: 177) shows signs of the material's deterioration that fit in with the solemnity of a dimly lit museum filled with funeral effigies.

Paradoxically, then, while the initial act of artistic creation already 'kills' life into art, the subsequent deterioration of the medium due to environmental factors loosens the deathlike stability of the artwork only to consign it to further decay. In other words, it is the dialectics of fixity and mutability played out in Wright's wax effigies that makes them doubly uncanny. The Adams's troubled responses to Wright's art may register something of that morbid doubleness, and John Adams's relegation of wax sculpture to the world of science in an ironic twist only increases its uncanniness.

John Adams's preference of Chovet over Wright, of science over art, also returns us to the question of the positioning of art within late eighteenth-century culture. Abigail's and John's divergent responses to Wright's wax effigies testify to the porous boundary between art and science. In systems-theoretic terms, their observations bear witness to the fact that art had not emerged as a fully functionally differentiated system yet. In the case of Wright's sculptures, this entails that deceptions in the realm of art are deeply intertwined with deceptions in other social realms. John Adams's now anxious, now assertive reflections on both political and aesthetic acts of deception remind us of that.

What they also remind us of, finally, is that the contradictoriness, instability, and deceptiveness of both fiction and wax sculptures generate cultural anxieties that cannot be interpreted within a narrowly political framework alone but also need to be read as signs of a specific moment in the history of art. Both the wax sculptures of the revolutionary period and the novels of the new republic belong to a time of transition in the sociopolitical as well as aesthetic domains. Few documents of late eighteenth-century America illustrate that as nicely as a letter the future President of the United States wrote to his wife: unsettled by the possibility of deception inherent to Patience Wright's sculptures, John Adams unwittingly balances his fundamentally premodern attempt to restrict art to its educational function with words that testify to the slow emergence of autonomy aesthetics: "There is Genius, as well as Taste and Art, discovered in this Exhibition."

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Notes

¹ I would like to thank Cindy Armbruster for proofreading this essay and for her many useful suggestions. A number of scholars and friends have also given me valuable feedback on earlier versions of this text. Thanks are due to Ridvan Askin, Andreas Hagler, Ulla Haselstein, Winfried Fluck, Christoph Ribbat, Matt Kimmich, Nicole Nyffenegger, Miriam Locher, Lukas Rosenberger, Anne-Françoise Baer, and Kellie Goncalves.

² Hugh Henry Brackenridge in one passage explicitly declares his character Farrago a mouthpiece when he – or the narrator, whose opinions in such passages are indistinguishable from what we may assume are Brackenridge's own – begins one of his digressions on political affairs with the following words: "As already hinted by some things put into the mouth of the Captain, I could make it a principal matter to form the heart to a republican government" (480).

³ For further discussion of the complex issue of voice in *Modern Chivalry* – which is crucially related to the difficult (and possibly unanswerable) question of where the novel's moral center lies – see Paul Gilmore's "Republican Machines and Brackenridge's Caves: Aesthetics and Models of Machinery in the Early Republic," which in its first footnote provides a concise survey of some of the contributions to the debate: "As Grantland Rice notes, 'Whether the moralizing Brackenridge lies behind the aristocratic Farrago, the bog-trotting Teague, or the unidentified narrator . . . is made laboriously unclear. . . . The moral center of the 'work' has been variously located in the voices of Farrago, Teague, Brackenridge's narrator, and in [Emory] Elliott's hyphenated narrator-author' [Rice 1997: 266]. For a reading that elides the difference between the narrator and Farrago see, for example, Lawson-Peebles [1988]: 122-34. Wendy Martin reads the narrator as 'an 'implied' version of Brackenridge' [Martin 1973: 192, n 16] and identifies Brackenridge with Farrago's politics and rationality. For a reading of the text as democratic, see Parrington. For a reading of it as critical of Jeffersonian and radical democracy, see Ferguson: 'Here, in the presumed power of law to instill virtue, is the inspiration of the lawyer-writer in American literature. The intensity of Brackenridge's belief in the integration of positive or man-made law with the principles of universal justice and moral honesty turns writing . . . into duty' [Ferguson 1984: 126]." (Gilmore 2004: 317n.1)

⁴ Note, however, that, like *Don Quijote*, *Modern Chivalry* is a picaresque novel and a satire that leaves open the question of whether Farrago or Teague is the primary object of censure and ridicule. Critics of the novel differ widely on its politics and on who the target of Brackenridge's satire actually is. For diverging assessments of such questions, see, for instance, (Fluck 1997 and Haselstein 2003).

⁵ In a later passage, the narrator-author defines the target of the novel's moral critique in much the same way: "The great moral of this book is the evil of men seeking office for which they are not qualified. The preposterous ambition of the bog-trotter, all points to this" (611). See also pages 675-76, 803, and 805-6 for slightly different outlines of "the moral of this book" (675).

⁶ In this context, see also Fluck's reflections on the ambivalent status of the imagination in *Modern Chivalry*. Fluck begins from the observation that Brackenridge in one crucial aspect reverses the relationship between the master and the servant as we find it in Cervantes's *Don Quijote*: "In *Modern Chivalry*, it is the servant, not the master, who misrecognizes reality" (1997: 53; my translation). But while Fluck considers Teague the principal target of Brackenridge's satire, he notes that the author also critiques "something that only becomes possible through democracy: in the fictional mode, he attacks elements of self-staging for which democracy provides cultural role models and modes of adaptation" (52; my translation). Fluck notes the similarity of democracy and fiction in this respect, arguing that self-staging is inherent not only to democracy understood as a "formalized process of the mediation of interests" (53; my translation) but also to fiction. From this vantage point, it is hardly surprising that Brackenridge primarily speaks to readers' moral sense rather than their powers of imagination. Brackenridge's critique of Teague's wild fancy emphasizes this: those who give free rein to their imagination (Teague) must be checked by the voice of reason (Farrago). Fluck points out that such attempts to curb the imagination in a fictional narrative are, however, haunted by a paradox: fiction must imagine that which it censures first. Thus, there is always the danger that the unruly imagination and its practitioners – in our case, Teague – are unwittingly affirmed" (53-54; my translation).

⁷ For a trenchant critique of celebratory uses of "hybridity," see Hartwig Isernhagen's "'Hybridity': The Play of Loss and Gain in (Inter)cultural Production (A Preliminary Statement)" (Isernhagen 2000).

⁸ From a historical point of view, this increase in didacticism must be understood not so much in the context of the anti-fiction movement discussed further below as the passage of the Sedition Act on July 14, 1798, which prohibited the publication of false or malicious writings against the federal government as well as agitation for opposition to any act of the President or Congress. The passing of this Act and the repressive measures it enabled at least partly account for Brackenridge's turn, in the later volumes, from the dangerous political critiques of satire to the safer ground of literary didacticism. Brackenridge himself thematizes the reigning culture of fear in his conclusion to the fifth volume (1804): "How a man feels himself cramped in such a fear, and trembling of mind! I am positively more afraid at this moment of the mistake of the honest, than I was of the resentment of the knave at a former period. During the reign of terror my strictures were very free; but I begin almost to call this a reign of fear, which is the same thing with the former reign" (Brackenridge 1968: 463).

⁹ For critical works that subscribe to such a literary-historical positioning of the early American novel, see, for instance, G. Harrison Orians's "Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines: 1789-1810" (1937) – which suggests that at least some contemporaneous detractors of the early American novel were not so much morally offended by it as appalled by its inferior quality –, Donald A. Ringe's *Charles Brockden Brown* (1966) – which by and large reads Brown as a flawed forerunner of the true greatness of a Hawthorne or Melville –, and Henri Petter's important *The Early American Novel* (Petter 1971), which in the early 1970s introduced a new seriousness into the study of early American novels despite its at times harsh judgments about the aesthetic value of many of those texts.

¹⁰ The publication of Jay Fliegelman's *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Fliegelman 1982), Emory Elliott's *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810* (1982), and Cathy N. Davidson's *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986) mark a watershed in criticism of the early American novel. Since then, discussions of these novels have shifted decisively from considerations of aesthetic quality to political readings. This is also true for scholarship of the 1990s such as Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-century America* (Warner 1990), Larzer Ziff's *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States* (Ziff 1991), Shirley Samuels's *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation* (Samuels 1996), Grantland S. Rice's *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (1997), and the relevant entries in *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (Rubin-Dorsky 1991) and in the first volume of *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1994) by Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Michael T. Gilmore, respectively. In most cases, these critics assess the political valence of American novels in decidedly less favorable terms than Davidson while remaining within the framework of political criticism. See below for a more detailed discussion of the range of assumptions these 'political critics' share.

¹¹ Winfried Fluck's survey and critique of scholarship up to 1997 in "From Aesthetics to Political Criticism: Theories of the Early American Novel" has helped me greatly in identifying the major positions in debates on these texts of the 1980s and 1990s. See also Joyce Appleby's useful and balanced account of the attractiveness of both liberal and republican ideology for the interpretation of the present (Appleby 1992: 1-23). About republicanism, Appleby writes: "Classical republicanism offers late twentieth-century men and women an attractive alternative to liberalism and socialism. Both substantively, in the recovery of a Renaissance discourse of politics, and theoretically, in the reliance on an anthropological understanding of how societies structure consciousness, the republican revision has inspired a whole generation of scholars in history, political science, literature, and law. Because it demonstrates colonial support for a political order that emphasizes virtue, participation, and deliberation, the revision has changed our perceptions about what was possible in the eighteenth century and, by inference, what might be possible today" (23).

¹² For explorations of the importance of speech and writing for the constitution of early American public spheres, see Fliegelman 1993; Looby 1996; Shields 1997; Gustafson 2000; and, more recently, Loughran 2007.

¹³ For studies that focus on the gendered nature of these processes and the roles sympathy and sentiment played in them, see Tompkins 1985; Harris 1995; Dillon 2004; Barnes 1997; Burgett 1998; Stern 1997; Burnham 1997; and Schweitzer 2006. See also Dena Goodman's review of some of the critiques made of Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere: "During the last six years there has been substantial debate about the validity of Habermas's theory: about the importance and significance of his Marxism, for example, and about the existence or sociological meaning of such central features of his theory as public opinion and even the public sphere itself. Questions have been raised about the possibility of multiple publics beyond the literate, 'bourgeois' one privileged by Habermas, about women's role in the public sphere and their relationship to it, and about the way in which the national cultures of England, France, and Germany figure in Habermas's basically Marxist chronology, which sees England as in the lead and Germany pulling up the rear" (Goodman 1996: 1-2).

¹⁴ For two succinct accounts of the "transnational turn" in American Studies, see Fishkin 2005 and Rowe 2011.

¹⁵ For developments in American Studies more generally, see Saldivar 1991; Spillers 1991; Kaplan 1993; Rowe 2000; Kaplan 2002; and Shelley Streeby's *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002).

¹⁶ A selective list of influential titles includes Spengemann 1989 and Spengemann 1994; Shields 1990; Saldivar 1991; Armstrong 1992; Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993); Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performances* (1996); Edward Watts's *Writing and Postcolonialism in the Early Republic* (1998), and Bauer 2009.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Carretta 2001; Griesz 2002; Shoemaker 2004; Brickhouse 2004; Goudie 2006; Olwell 2006; Harvey 2008; Slaughter 2008; and Bauer 2009.

¹⁸ To be fair to Ringe, it needs to be pointed out that he balances his account of Brown's novels as "structurally flawed" (Ringe 1966: 139) in anticipation of Hawthorne's, Melville's, and Cooper's work with the repeated insistence that "one would not wish by any means to suggest that Brown's importance can be completely defined by such relations" (138).

¹⁹ Herfried Münkler explains that "the term 'reason of the state' originated in the language of professionalized political personnel, in particular that of the secretaries and diplomats administering the Italian territorial states of the sixteenth century." In this modern usage, the term describes an "autonomous political rationality of action" that was first theorized in Giovanni Botero's *Della ragion di stata* of 1589 (1998: 66; my translation). "Sovereignty" is an older term whose origins date back to the monarchical contexts of thirteenth-century France and fourteenth-century England. As Helmut Quaritsch points out, the term was first theorized in its modern meaning of "the absolute and perpetual power of a republic" in French lawyer Jean Bodin's treatise *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (Quaritsch 1995: 1103).

²⁰ As an aside, there are, of course, fundamental differences between Iser's and Luhmann's reflections on the function of art, the major difference being that while Iser is crucially interested in processes taking place between human beings and the texts they read, Luhmann's nonhumanist social theory moves subjects to the margins of the discussion or, more precisely, to the environment of social systems.

²¹ See, for instance, Socrates' speech and his replies to other speakers in Plato's *Symposium* (Plato 2002: 66-121)

²² On the links Kant establishes between individuality, originality, and genius, see also Norbert Schneider's *Geschichte der Ästhetik von der Aufklärung bis zur Postmoderne* (2005: 50-53) and Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert's *Einführung in die Ästhetik* (1995: 95-102).

²³ Nick Zangwill's essay "Unkantian Notions of Disinterest" has helped me clarify my understanding of Kant's notion of disinterested pleasure (Zangwill 1992).

²⁴ To be fair to Werber, he does acknowledge that Kant's notion of the genius marks an important limit to a systems-theoretic reading of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as a theory of art as autopoietic system (Werber 1992: 44-47).

²⁵ Cathy N. Davidson has made the argument that it was no coincidence that objections to the novel came from on high: the novel was considered a threat to the moral authority of the elites since – unlike the Bible – it needed no intermediaries to interpret it (Davidson 2004: 105-6).

²⁶ For good accounts of the anti-fiction movement, see G. Harrison Orians's "Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines: 1789-1810" (1937); pp. 134-63 in William Charvat's *The Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1835* (1968); pp. 57-103 in Terence Martin's *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Martin 1969); Paul Gutjahr's essay "No Longer Left Behind: Amazon.com, Reader-Response, and the Changing Fortunes of the Christian Novel in America" (2002) and his entry on "Religion" (Gutjahr 2004) in Shirley Samuels's *Companion to American Fiction, 1780-1865* (2004); and Cathy N. Davidson's *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (2004). These texts have also provided me with most of the anti-fiction voices quoted in what follows.

²⁷ Note that 1780 and 1820 are, of course, approximate dates. The year 1780, moreover, precedes the publication of William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), which is generally considered the first American novel (Davidson 2004: 154-55), by nine years. This means that American anti-fictionists also directed their attacks against British novels imported to and read in North America.

²⁸ Note, however, that Susanna Rowson was the daughter of a loyalist whose family was punished for his political allegiance in revolutionary times. Not surprisingly, Rowson's own loyalties were torn between Britain and America (Davidson 1986: xix-xxii).

²⁹ See, for instance, Michael T. Gilmore's assertion that early American novels "encompass modernizing and residual energies: although they give implicit sanction to economic striving by endorsing the credo of self-reliant individualism, they also deplore the bounders and con-men of the new order and try to freeze mobility into stasis" (Gilmore 1994: 629). See also Cathy N. Davidson's discussion of the early gothic novel: "The Gothic exhibited a particular genius (even in those novels that fall far short of aesthetic genius) for supplying the metaphors with which to explore a transitional culture. Without, in any way, offering a full-scale critique of bourgeois ideology, the early American Gothic often provided a perturbing vision of self-made men maintaining their newfound power by resorting to the same kinds of treachery that evil aristocrats of both European and early American Gothics used to assert their own perverting authority. [...] the Gothic created its own symbolic space where the hierarchies of a traditional society and the excesses of individualism could both be called into question" (Davidson 2004: 314).

³⁰ Note that Baumgarten here presents more than one definition, and that the definitions are not equivalent. Yet it may safely be assumed that Baumgarten used several of these more traditional descriptions only to gently introduce his readers to a new science. Once one strips the definition from these, a two-part core remains: aesthetics is the science of sensuous cognition and the art of thinking finely (Barck 2000: 326).

³¹ Notable exceptions are Charles Colman Sellers's biography *Patience Wright: American Artist and Spy in George III's London* (Sellers 1976), his entry on Wright in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary* (1971), Jean Gordon's "Early American Women Artists and the Social Context in Which They Worked" (Gordon 1978), Charlotte Streifer Rubenstein's chapter on Wright in her *American Women Sculptors* (1990), and pp.84–88 in Jay Fliegelman's *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Fliegelman 1993).

³² Not surprisingly, Sellers's tendency to exaggerate Wright's role in revolutionary affairs is the main target of J. L. Bullion's otherwise sympathetic review of *Patience Wright: American Artist and Spy in George III's London* (Bullion 1978).

³³ For a discussion of *The Red Badge of Courage* that relates the breakdown of strategies of sense-making to the Civil War's acoustic turmoil, see my own *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics* (Schweighauser 2006: 51-61).