George Thompson's "Romance of the Real": Transgression and Taboo in American Sensation Fiction

In the opening lines of one of his less distinguished novels, the talented and prolific American sensation novelist George Thompson carefully distanced himself from "that portion of the authors and authoresses of the present day whose particular and peculiar province lies in the field of romance and imaginative story." Most of these romance writers, in Thompson's account, prefer idealized stories "presenting only to the eye of the imagination, forms beautiful and lovely, minds pure and uninvited, nought offensive, or imperfect, being seen, in either body or soul." There might be a very few writers, Thompson allowed, who instead of such "a mess of trashy nonsense" offer their readers the better alternative of "true pictures of everyday life"; like the works of that distinct literary minority, the present story, Thompson averred, would be one "not of fiction, but of fact" (C, 7). Thompson specialized in the opposite of ideality, purity, and perfection: his novels are replete with the disgusting, the corrupt, and the damaged, which in his text carry the burden of producing the reality-effect he counterposed to the phoniness of conventional literary romance.

The distinction between romance and the real—between "dreamy figments of the imagination" and "fact, uncontradictable and solid fact" (C, 7–8)—is, of course, one that circulated widely in the critical discourse of the mid-nineteenth century and one that has continued to be conspicuous and influential in American literary history. And Thompson, like others after him, suggested that romance of the kind he deprecated was politically suspect: in its appeal to "a vitiated literary desire" (C, 7), in its elision of everything "offensive" or "imperfect" in the real social world, and in its substitution of "forms beautiful and lovely," it performed an
almost total evasion of the dire facts of rampant criminality, massive social and economic inequality, and moral corruption that would be the chief objects of his own literary attention. Thompson's novels—in the mode of such urban sensation fictions as Eugène Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* or, in the United States, George Lippard's *The Quaker City*—exemplified a particular international literary formation in the mid-nineteenth century that is sometimes referred to as city-mysteries fiction but might perhaps more aptly be called urban porno-gothic. But while Thompson credited and relied upon the received antimony of romance and reality, he also collapsed it in claiming that his "true pictures of everyday life," his representations of "uncontradictable and solid fact," were in effect another kind of romance, what he called, paradoxically, "the romance of the real" (C, 8).

Because other writers' "dreamy figments of the imagination" had been "palmed upon a credulous and unsuspecting public as fact," Thompson's "simple and plain narration of facts" could, it seems, qualify as a different form of romance (C, 7–8). A "truthful delineation of fact," in Thompson's view, would exceed in its strangeness even the most fantastic fiction: "it is beyond the power of the mind to imagine more than is really performed at times" in the subcultures of criminality and debasement, great wealth and libertinism, of which Thompson characteristically wrote (C, 8). But while the bad romances Thompson scorned substituted an idealized realm for ordinary reality, his "romance of the real" was a de-idealizing one, a writing that showed that reality was worse than anything one might have imagined: historical reality was, in his account, exceedingly, unimaginably unfair, offensive, and abject. His "romance" thus corresponded to that of the public investigators into slum conditions who reported in 1857 that upon encountering the poverty, vice, and ignorance in one poor district they realized they "had not yet formed an adequate conception of the extremes to which each and all of these evils could reach," and that these extremities, "if portrayed in the pages of romance, might be regarded as creations of diseased fancy."4

This brief discussion of Thompson's highly self-conscious placement of his own fiction on the contemporaneous map of competing literary formations may serve to make a number of points. First, Thompson is a writer who, despite other artistic faults, is usually to be found intervening in highly deliberate ways in the charged critical debates of his own time; his novels frequently contain self-justifying polemics in anticipation of the snobbish criticism that he expects will greet their publication. Second,
Thompson is acutely aware of the variety of ways in which his novels stand in determinate relationship to social structures: they depict aspects of the social world occluded in other forms of writing, and they interpellate their readers as acutely socially inscribed members of groups (classes, genders, races) that will inevitably have differently charged receptive encounters with these books. Finally, Thompson is remarkably aware of the allegorical relationships between the formal features of his novels (dictional registers, generic conventions, and so on) and the social structures around him. Characteristically, Thompson's rejection of "romance" in favor of the "real" is followed by his claim that he can have it both ways in his "romance of the real." Likewise, as the following analysis will try to show, he wants both to mount a powerful critique of the status quo and to endorse some of its fundamental values; he wants to affirm sentimental domestic norms even as he violates them, expose moral hypocrisy even as his fiction succumbs to it.

Behind or beneath the mundane appearances of the social world in Thompson's novels are countless forms of violence, suffering, sexual excess, intoxication, and so forth. His texts are full of examples of his most characteristic trope—the unveiling or revealing of an ugly truth hidden by sham surfaces—as when he promises, in opening one of his best novels, to "draw the curtain, and unfold the opening scene" of "the romance of reality—the details of common, every day life—the history of things hidden from the public gaze." Thompson's putative intention was to destroy, by this literary revelation, the false consciousness that romance writers had helped to create, the very distortions that made the real seem to be a form of romance. But his attempted appropriation of the term "romance" for his depiction of the unromantic real betrays the basic contradiction in his own practice as a writer: the extraordinary representations of the social misery and transgression that fascinated him (and, we can infer, fascinated his readers) are addressed ultimately to a different type of "vitiating literary desire," a wish not to confront the ordinary systemic injustices of the social world but instead to attend obsessively to spectacular excesses (both sexual and criminal) that evoke in readers a response combining futile moral indignation, class resentment, and scandalized voyeurism. In the guise of an unblinkered attention to awful social realities—and it should be noted that Thompson does, in fact, offer a remarkable mapping of a newly complex urban world of drastic spatial separations, class antagonisms, and rampant displacements of customary social statuses—Thompson presents enchanting visions of
erotic and criminal excess that may arouse resentment, envy, and even a proto-political understanding of structured social inequity, public moral hypocrisy, and legal corruption. Yet eventually he circumscribes and diffuses that understanding by always concluding with narrative restorations of sentimental domestic norms and de facto endorsements of present social and political arrangements.

Recently it has been claimed that the American sensation fiction of the 1840s and 1850s—the dime novels that have been described as existing “beneath” the American Renaissance—constituted a cultural formation that was in fundamental ideological opposition to the domestic sentimental fiction of the same decades. This is not quite true. I want to begin to support my assertion by looking in some detail at what I take to be a wholly representative example of this genre, a novel by Thompson called The House Breaker; or The Mysteries of Crime, published under the pen name “Greenhorn” in 1848. As the resonant title indicates, this work is about breaking into houses—violating sacred domestic spaces—but in this novel, as in others like it, one breaks into a house not in order to unmake but rather to remake it, not to destroy or even contest the domestic but rather to restore it.

In arguing for works of popular literature as oppositional, many critics contend that, far from being pure products of a culture industry devoted to promulgating forms of false consciousness, such paraliterary genres as sensation fiction are often vessels for genuine utopian hopes and wishes and that the utopian moment in such texts is theoretically recoverable by critical analysis. The critical redemption of such popular genres, while it has certainly led to more informed and subtle readings of mass-culture texts, nevertheless sometimes overlooks what might be called the general or predominant effect of such literary forms. The House Breaker, I believe, despite its evident internal discordances, is far from being the subversive text that we might wish it to be: it contains moments of authentic protest against the kinds of social injustices that were visible to radical critics in 1848, but in the end it is an efficient machine for redirecting such protest into innocuous channels. My aim is to describe how this supposedly oppositional work of popular art—which on the surface violates the norms of bourgeois domestic ideology—is, in fact, precisely because of its appearance of negation, more slavishly affirmative of the
values of sentimental domestic culture in its most politically regressive form than many of the well-known sentimental novels of the day.3

The boundaries between sectors of the literary field and their attendant cultural formations were of course permeable—then as always—and there are many interesting texts and writers that resist categorization. Melville’s Pierre might be taken as an attempt to work out a hybrid genre: the domestic and the sensational together. Louisa May Alcott is now known to have written many blood-and-thunder novellas (published mostly pseudonymously) in addition to fictions like Little Women for which she is famous. Recent critical attention to Alcott’s sensation fiction has found them, incorrectly I believe, to be radically subversive of the norms of sentimental femininity;10 in truth, Little Women mounts a much more powerful critique of those norms than Behind a Mask does. The latter, like Thompson’s The House Breaker, powerfully restores sentimental domestic ideology even as it provides a fantasy of escape from it.11

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The House Breaker is the story of Henry Stuart, a young gentleman who has been cheated out of his wealth, property, and social standing by an unscrupulous lawyer who was appointed his guardian upon his parents’ death. The shyster, “William Roberts, Esquire, Attorney and Counsellor at Law,”12 has thrown Stuart out without a penny and taken his lovely younger sister hostage, keeping her as his unwilling common-law wife (although she manages to evade his sexual advances even while she shares his bed). Five years after these outrages, the penniless Stuart has become a burglar, the house breaker of the novel’s title. “Captain” of a band of thieves whom he has organized communistically—they pool their loot and divide it equally (II, 15)—he plans to take revenge on lawyer Roberts, rescue his captive sister, and regain his entitlement.13

These are the basic circumstances of the story, and they set the scene and position the characters for an examination of the legitimation deficit of the social and legal order of the urban United States in 1848.14 Industrialization, urbanization, and class polarization in the antebellum years had created a stressed social order that corresponded only in the feeblest manner to the Jeffersonian/Jacksonian image of a virtuous agrarian republic and that threatened to engender the revolutionary unrest that convulsed European nations in 1847 and 1848. The diarist Philip Hone observed in 1847: “Our good city of New York has already arrived at the
state of society to be found in the large cities of Europe; overburdened with population, and where the two extremes of costly luxury in living, expensive establishments, and improvident waste are presented in daily and hourly contrast with squalid misery and hopeless destitution." 16 This "state of society" is manifestly the central object of Thompson's representational practice. 16 His examination of it, however, regularly veers off into various forms of voyeurism, resentment, sentimentalism, and craven awe of gentility.

The novel begins in a fetid tavern in one of Thompson's usual locales and a favorite setting for many city-mystery fictions—Murderer's Alley in the Five Points area of Manhattan, 17 which "was considered by a wide range of observers to be the most notorious slum in the Western Hemisphere." 18 A pathetic beggar named John Carr, a quadruple amputee, is about to prostitute his fourteen-year-old daughter Jane to a "black and hellish ruffian" named Guinea Bill—an infernal "black viper" with a "baboon skull" (H, 6)—for his sexual use. This father and daughter are the novel's obscene parody of the happy family. The black man will appear again late in the story as the antithesis of and threat to the sentimental family. (Thompson's casual racism makes his observation in his autobiography that "many have insanely supposed me to be George Thompson, the celebrated English abolitionist," quite supererogatory.) 19 The daughter dearly loves her vicious alcoholic father—"that bloated thing beside her was her father—a holy link that bound her to him through all the horrors of his loathsome career" (H, 3), and she takes good care of him as she tows his old armless and legless body around the streets on a cart, begging for alms. He exercises his paternal authority in an unusual manner necessitated by his limblessness: by beckoning her to lean near him so that he can whisper to her, then biting her ear "until the blood came"—"ha! ha! although I cannot beat you, I can bite you," he crows (H, 5). She endures such abuse with saintly patience. When he sells her to Guinea Bill, he receives the black man's coins into his mouth—the only place he can hold them (H, 5).

Just when the Negro is about to rape the girl, she is rescued by Henry Stuart, whom we thereby know to be our hero. A few days later, Stuart encounters Jane while she is "weeping over something in a small wagon," which turns out to be her grotesque father, frozen to death (H, 9). While the "ghastly freight" in the wagon is disposed of, an onlooker—"a holy man, wearing broadcloth, and a white neckcloth"—suggests that Jane be imprisoned as a vagrant. A poor workman, denouncing the minister's
heartless suggestion, volunteers to take Jane into his modest home with his own children; Stuart is moved to give the honest man a five-dollar gold piece, while the cleric struts off “muttering something about the impudence of the lower orders” (H, 10). Thus Stuart is aligned with the honest, virtuous, and unfairly maligned working class, while the religious profession is added to the legal profession as a locus of social corruption. A few days later, Stuart visits the laborer’s home, rewards him with an additional fifty dollars, and admires the way Jane’s appearance has been improved by food and rest—whereupon he removes her to his own household, the dubious home he shares with his preternaturally voluptuous mistress Anna Mowbray. Just as Stuart here rescues this excruciatingly sentimentalized orphan from a dangerously uncertain fate, so the narrative will eventually perform a rescue operation on a social order deep in legitimation crisis by re-attaching its rebel protagonist to that order via a conventional domestic resolution.

The whole delightfully unlikely and intricate plot cannot be summarized here. Suffice it to say that once Jane Carr is established in the home of her rescuer and his mistress, she mostly sits and waits for the sentimental denouement while Stuart’s revenge plot rapidly unfolds. Stuart, “whose entire appearance was that of a gentleman” (H, 6), and his “first lieutenant” Tom Maddox, disguise themselves as “ordinary laboring men” (H, 9) and break into the mansion that lawyer Roberts stole from Stuart. While Stuart is busy finding documents that will help to prove his claim on the property, Tom gets busy too, stealing sexual favors from the butler’s wife by crawling into her bed while her husband is relieving his bladder outdoors (the author is here performing his own literary theft, probably borrowing from Boccaccio). The wife, Bridget Tubbs, has momentary doubts as to the identity of her unusually amorous bed partner, but her unaccustomed pleasure induces her to quash all suspicions. Tom then “earn[s] for the butler a reputation for qualities which the last-named gentleman never enjoyed” (H, 11). Clearly this is a violation of the marriage bed and hence a transgression against the sentimental family, but the narrative soon turns it into a sentimental affirmation.

Some time later, Stuart and his mistress Anna attend an orgy at a local house of pleasure, where a lavish meal is served by naked adolescent servants of both sexes; there is nude dancing; and when the lights go down the bodies, with “no vexatious garments encumbering their supple and agile limbs,” form “prostrate groups of an exceedingly picturesque and primitive description” (H, 21). One of the places where Thompson
thematizes the relation of his own writing to the genteel norm is here, at the orgy scene:

With much haste on one side, and affected coyness on the other, the process was gone through, that converted the hostess and every guest into a representative of a classic model! What limbs—what forms—what graces, and what unspeakable beauties! Alas, for the stiff, cold, senseless conventional prejudices of society, that prevent us from indulging the reader in a minute description! Our ready pen longs—yea, longs to glide off into the most delicious details—our ample sheet of foolscap invites us to inscribe upon its unsullied surface the glowing particulars; but Society, like a grim and harsh pedagogue, flourishes its rattan of Censure above our devoted pate, and talks of "morality," and "propriety." Yes, forsooth! and this Mr. Society is the greatest libertine we know of, the old rogue! notwithstanding he recoils with such virtuous horror from a description of actual realities.*

*Such "parties" as the writer here describes, are known to have taken place in New-York, frequently. (H, 20–21)

The hypocrisy ascribed to "Mr. Society" has its counterpart in the writer's desire to write freely of illicit sex and yet censure the erotic freedom of those present as libertinism and roguery.

At the orgy Stuart and Anna encounter lawyer Roberts. Anna permits "that aged and extremely skinny old model (of a rat) to encircle her charming form with his palsied arms" (H, 21), but when she repulses his further familiarities he obtains instead some unspecified sensual gratification from one of the pretty children (H, 22). Roberts does not, after the lapse of five years, recognize Stuart as the young man he has swindled; Stuart, thus unrecognized, sets his revenge plot in motion. He draws Roberts out on the subject of Henry Stuart and finds that Roberts—who enjoys the reputation of a "legal practitioner of high eminence and respectability" (H, 39) and is considered "the model of virtue, honesty and goodness" (H, 41)—is profoundly afraid that Stuart will expose him as a swindler and a moral reprobate. He therefore wishes to be rid of Stuart, and the unrecognized Stuart volunteers to murder himself, extracting from Roberts (whose lawyerly caution inexplicably fails him for a moment) a written order to do so—evidence that will be crucial in the trial that is to come.

The morning after the orgy Stuart is bold enough to accept lawyer
Roberts’s invitation to breakfast, where he sits unrecognized across from his sister but is identified by the butler Tubbs. Tubbs is too terrified to reveal Stuart’s identity (and to accuse him of the recent robbery) until Stuart has left the house. When Tubbs does identify the just-departed guest, Roberts realizes that he has been outwitted and decides under the circumstances to report the robbery to the police and “thus have [Stuart] put out of the way for a time, at least” (H, 27). Stuart is soon imprisoned in the Tombs—the legendary Manhattan prison that figures with such symbolic prominence not only in much of the popular sensation literature of the time but in Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” and Pierre as well—but not before sharing a sumptuous feast at the Astor House with his mistress Anna, and a little afternoon sex as well. In the Tombs he awaits the trial at which he plans to expose lawyer Roberts as a cheat, a hypocrite, and a sexual reprobate.

One of the novel’s crucial episodes, Stuart’s stay in prison re-inscribes the domestic in the space of its apparent negation. Stuart’s cell in the Tombs is cold, bare, and ugly; the women take it upon themselves to domesticate it by bringing furniture and other amenities and by carrying delicious food to him every day (H, 43). Innocent Jane, dressed as a boy but “actuated by no impure or unworthy motive” (H, 37), contrives to move into this domesticated cell with him merely to provide company for the lonely prisoner. It is here, where they share a narrow bed—chastely, of course—that Stuart’s romantic desire for this waif and the reader’s desire for the most conventional of possible sentimental endings awaken.

David Reynolds, the most recent and thorough critic of the class of novels to which The House Breaker belongs, argues that this story and its genre are indeed subversive because, written by “radical democrats,” the tales are filled with “vitriolic bitterness against perceived inequities in nineteenth-century American society, which [the authors] regarded as a nightmarish realm of upper-class charlatans and political oppressors described in highly sensational images.”[21] This is accurate enough as a description of the content and tone of the writing, but the conclusion doesn’t follow: The House Breaker, like others of these texts, systematically deflects this “bitterness” away from political critique and toward voyeurism. A potentially political understanding of the visible “social inequities” always turns into an exposé of the seamy private vices of the privileged classes: it is not, we are to understand, general political or economic oppression but aristocratic moral vice that indelibly marks the upper classes.
It is possible to locate precisely the passage in *The House Breaker* where this deflection takes place. Here is the paragraph:

Midnight came—the hour when Toil slumbers, when Licentiousness is most wakeful, and when Crime is abroad, in great cities. Twelve! peals forth from the deep-toned bell of the City Hall;—and the solitary watchman who keeps his lonely vigil upon the vast roof of that stately pile, hoarsely proclaims that "All's well," and the solemn Lie dies away in many echoes through the vast corridors and gloomy arches. "ALL'S WELL!"—The words penetrate, in hollow mockery, the abode of squalid Poverty, where gaunt famine crouches amid rags and straw. "All's well!" while Lust is rioting in high places—while Villainy holds its ghastly revels in subterranean dens, and red-handed Murder steals thro' the dark, deserted streets! (*H*, 44)

The claim that "All's well" in this city is powerfully rebutted here; its hollowness is exposed, and poverty and famine are named as the social ills that make it hollow. At the same time, these political-economic ills are almost imperceptibly displaced from attention by another set of terms for representing the ills of society; "Licentiousness," "Lust," and "Villainy"—the private vices of those "in high places" rather than their systematic economic domination—occupy the readers' attention and are construed as the proper objects of their anger. Lawyer Roberts's transgressions against the family and the home become his paramount offenses, and Stuart's quest to redress his wrongs turns out to be not a campaign against economic inequity but merely the righting of a wrong suffered by his family honor. He breaks into the house only to take it back: what he steals turns out to be what he rightfully owns. At his trial he conducts his own defense before throngs of "the wealthy and aristocratic class" who remember that "his father had been a rich and respectable man, and once a Member of Congress" (*H*, 39). Stuart effectively exposes Roberts and gets his house and fortune back; Roberts is taken to the Tombs, to the very same cell lately occupied by Stuart, there "to await his trial for fraud, forgery, and conspiracy against life!" (*H*, 42).

Thus Stuart's plot succeeds perfectly: his social standing is restored, the idea of social standing is affirmed (the very name Stuart, of course, brings into the text a whole set of historical associations having to do with legitimacy and restoration), the legal system does the right thing, and Stuart himself accomplishes what now seems to be the inevitable. He leaves his mistress (who afterwards, we are told, pursues a stage career
and plays Lady Macbeth ([I], 48)) and marries young Jane Carr, whose perfunctory hesitation in the face of Stuart's existing sexual involvement is quickly overcome by her lover's rationale. "My connection to [Anna Mowbray]," he argues, "has been founded on passion, not on true affection. The love I feel for you, my Jane, is based on admiration of your purity and worth" ([I], 43). Admiration and affection triumph over passion, just as family honor and social deference displace extralegal camaraderie and economic equality.

Stuart's trial and acquittal is the second of three scenes of criminal justice in the novel. The House Breaker is a rather polished performance for Thompson, whose writing often has a formal incoherence that is sometimes charming but just as often merely sloppy; here the succession of parallel scenes of the ceremonial meting-out of legal judgment gives the narrative a unified quality that is reinforced by the way each of the scenes repeats, develops, and complicates the prior one(s). The legitimacy of the legal system is thus progressively more deeply investigated, and the narrative's own alternate investment in and indifference to legality grow more pronounced. The possible illegitimacy of the criminal justice system is initially represented, among other ways, by the undecidability of the character of the police: once Roberts charges Stuart with theft, the latter is apprehended during an elegant promenade on Broadway by "two men, of the shabby genteel order, who from their appearance might have been either pick-pockets or police officers." They turn out to be officers of the law, although Stuart's familiarity with one of them leads us to guess what we are soon told, that the constable "had once been a member of Stuart's gang of house-breakers himself" ([I], 27). The porousness of the boundary between the law-enforcer and the law-breaker will again be thematized, symmetrically, when the law-breaker Stuart himself becomes a "self-constituted Judge" in an unofficial legal proceeding ([I], 47).

In the first of the parallel scenes of criminal justice, Stuart observes through a small fissure in the floor of his cell the anxious vigil of a condemned murderer in the cell directly below his own. The murderer feels "sure of a pardon from the Governor" ([I], 32), and—while carpenters noisily construct a gallows in the prison-yard—he awaits the response to his plea for mercy. At ten a.m. the Governor comes to the condemned man's cell: "It was a curious scene. There stood the prisoner, a large, powerfully built young man, trembling before that little, withered old
man, whose lips were about to pronounce the words that would restore him to life and liberty, or consign him to death and the scaffold! There was Crime, in the person of that strong ruffian, trembling before the power and majesty of the Law, vested in that feeble old man, who represented the Voice and Will of the Sovereign People!” The stern Governor in this tableau of justice joins legal inflexibility to the sentimental exaltation of female purity: “you have been convicted, on the clearest of evidence, of one of the most flagrant outrages against the laws of God and man, that ever stained the annals of crime in this state. To foulest outrage upon a helpless woman, you added the crime of murder” (H, 33). Murder figures as an afterthought, as it were, to the fouler crime of rape—a ranking of offenses that had been codified by the sentimental novel of seduction.

The night after Stuart witnesses the hanging of the murderer, and while the “principle of honor within him” keeps him from seeking “sensual gratification” (H, 38) with Jane (who now shares his cell), he looks again through the hole in his floor:

on looking down, to his horror he saw stretched upon the bed the ghastly form of the murderer’s corpse!—There it lay, in its shroud, its jaws distended, its black, swollen tongue protruding, its white eyes starting from their sockets, its neck fearfully stretched! It was not alone: near it sat a motionless form, scarcely less rigid and distorted than the dead—this was an old woman, a convict, who had been appointed to watch with the corpse during the night, and preserve it from the rats. Crime watching by the corpse of Murder! (H, 38)

Perhaps nowhere in the text is what Georges Bataille has called “the profound complicity of law and the violation of law” more fully thematized. Transgression “suspects a taboo without suppressing it,” in Bataille’s account; only when the law is respected does its violation have the delicious character of transgression.23 If the law’s legitimacy were utterly rejected, behavior that the law proscribed would no longer carry with it a transgressive thrill.

The profound excitement of Thompson’s style of urban porno-gothic thus depends constitutively upon its fundamental endorsement of the taboos it violates. The conjunction in this scene of our voyeuristic pleasure in the suggestion of illicit erotic possibility and our conventional respect for Stuart’s “principle of honor” is not accidental. And the proximity in the narrative (and in the fictive space of the prison) of this inextricable linking of taboo and transgression to the murderer’s corpse is not for-
tuitous either: the horrible decaying corpse is a symbol of violence and the social threat of violent contagion. The ceremonial watching of the corpse, its protection from voracious animals until safely buried, enacts the containment of the further violence that the decaying corpse signifies.24 This containment is mirrored in Stuart’s containment of his lust in the cell above. And it is mirrored on a larger scale by Thompson’s fiction as a whole and by the genre to which The House Breaker belongs: the narrative representation of erotic and violent transgressions, by virtue of their presentation as transgressive, offers implicit obeisance to the Law of which they are violations.

Henry Stuart and Jane Carr’s eventual marriage is paralleled by that of Tom Maddox and Bridget Tubbs, the butler’s wife whose bed he invaded earlier: her eroticly unsatisfying and evidently sterile husband “dies with joy, upon the occasion of his wife’s presenting him with a fine son; the child, strange to say, bore an extraordinary resemblance to TOM MADDOX” (H, 48). The ensuing marriage of Bridget and Tom makes the child legitimate and recreates the domestic norm his violation had threatened shortly before. We need to conclude, then, that whatever transgressive acts have taken place, and whatever narrative chaos has resulted, the denouement nonetheless restores a whole nexus of social norms; rather than the redistribution of wealth or the access to erotic freedom that the novel’s putative critique might have promised, we get the re-inscription of the law, the proper distribution of marriage partners, the re-establishment of the sentimental family, class deference, and so on.

One fascinating digression in the novel foregrounds somewhat differently the complicitous tension between transgression and norm that I am trying to describe. While Stuart is in jail, the narrative turns to “a more agreeable scene” (H, 34) in which Anna Mowbray takes Jane to an expensive jewelry store, where Anna swindles the head clerk—“a fashionable, foppish looking fellow,” a “dandy clerk,” an “exquisite” named “Mr. P. Pettigrew Primrose” whose twirling moustache and “perfumed top-knot” mark him as something other than a conventionally masculine heterosexual (H, 34–35). Mr. Primrose even lisps. Anna, through an elaborate ruse, obtains some real diamond jewels by substituting imitation ones in their stead. This theft has no other motive than simple greed; unlike Stuart’s thieving reclamation of his stolen birthright, Anna’s theft redresses no prior wrong. Yet the reader is asked to take pleasure in the turn of events because the socially pretentious and scandalously effemi-
nate clerk, who is given to gloating over his “superiaw success” before the “inferiaw fellows” with whom he works (H, 35), deserved what he got. A transgressor of class lines, gender boundaries, and, I think, distinctions between faintly emerging sexual identities, he is punished by the narrative at the hands of a woman who at least knows her place—that is, knows she is a woman and knows she cannot expect Stuart to marry a whore.

When Stuart’s sentimental domestic idyll is restored at the end, it must survive one further violation, which provides the occasion for the last of the three parallel scenes of criminal judgment. A former criminal accomplice, William Wilkes (alias Flash Bill), and the huge black man whose contemplated rape of Jane Carr had earlier been thwarted by Stuart together seek their revenge upon him. They break into his restored home, and while Guinea Bill searches for Stuart’s bedroom with the purpose of murdering him, Flash Bill finds Stuart’s beloved sister’s bed. She fights back violently against his attempted ravishment, but he “drew from his breast a heavy sting-shot, and struck at her head fiercely and repeatedly; the terrible weapon crushed the skull of the unfortunate woman with the force of a sledge-hammer; the first blow must have killed her instantly—the blows that followed bedewed the bed and pillow with her blood and brains!” As if this were not vivid enough, we are told that Flash Bill “paused in his awful work; he felt for the head of his victim—he found it beaten in, crushed; his hand was moistened with her blood” (H, 45). Her cries wake her brother just in time for him to avoid a similar fate: he manages to take away Guinea Bill’s knife, and then nearly severs his head.

Seeking retribution for the wanton murder of his sister, Stuart then conducts a midnight trial of Flash Bill, mimicking the ceremonial protocols of the legal system—borrowing its legitimacy—despite proclaiming his lack of faith in its ability to enforce justice. The first of the three scenes of juridical punishment, the rapist-murderer in the Tombs, was simple: officially sanctioned law punished undoubtedly crime. Narratively, however, we were distanced from it: the hanging took place quickly with a minimum of description. The third and final scene of punishment is ideologically more complex and narratively more vivid. “I dare not trust you in the hands of the law,” Stuart says to Flash Bill, “for who knows by what quibble in form, or negligence of jailers, or ingenuity of your own, you might escape?” Stuart’s distrust of the legal system seems insufficiently motivated in the wake of its recent restoration of his property and its
perfectly just treatment of lawyer Roberts. But Stuart’s doubt is only partial. With respect to his own pending vigilante execution of Flash Bill, he feels confident that “the law will hold me guiltless, and men will applaud me” (H, 47). The law can’t be trusted; the law can be trusted. The law, Stuart expects, will endorse, will retroactively legalize, this extralegal procedure, just as the novel’s scenes of transgression will be justified by its eventual restoration of the sentimental family. Stuart’s punishment of Flash Bill for murdering his sister is a nasty one: he beats an iron rod to white heat, then passes it near the face of his victim until the skin peels off, the flesh blackens, and blood pours out of his mouth, nostrils, ears and eyes. Following this “operation of intense torture,” during which Flash Bill “writhe with agony,” the rod is thrust through his cheek and left there for a while. Finally, molten lead is poured into his ear to rush “hissing to his brain” (H, 48) and kill him dead.

Yet, we are assured, this exotic violence of retribution will be endorsed—legitimated after the fact—by the legal order. Sensationally violent and (from the point of view of legal nicety) transgressive as it is, it is nevertheless performed in the service of the same values that the legal system upholds. The crime for which Stuart punishes Flash Bill is the same crime for which the Governor refused to pardon the unnamed murderer in the Tombs: Stuart says that Flash Bill not only committed “a barbarous murder” but that he also “had made preparations for a crime of a blacker hue than murder—outrage upon a helpless woman.” Vowing to “take his punishment into my own hands,” Stuart assembles all the men in the household as witnesses, summons his own self-possession, and conducts a mock trial. His calm voice and appearance lead Flash Bill “to hope that mercy would be shown him” by the “self-constituted Judge” he addresses as “your honor” (H, 47)—but, continuing the exact repetition of the earlier scene, Stuart shows no mercy.

Unlike that earlier scene, in which we were allowed a definite narrative distance from the infliction of punishment, in this scene the gory depiction of Stuart’s sadistic torture of his victim enlists the reader—who by now has learned to derive pleasure from such pornography of violence—in the vicarious satisfaction of the imaginary infliction of bodily pain. Precisely by deploying such extreme literary effects, this fiction works in the interest of the domestic norm that it ostensibly violates. Both the sensational violence of the plot and the violent sensationalism of the literary effect send a direct message to the brain of the reader: your enemy is not the class that exploits your labor and keeps you in poverty
but the dirty old man and the poor, vicious (sometimes black) criminal who violate your home.

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Lest my argument succumb to the danger of calculating the text’s political effects from an analysis of its formal operations, let me say that in the absence of a sociology of reception of this kind of sensation fiction a multiplicity of possible reader responses must be assumed. My intuition is that the likeliest way for a reader to resist what I see as the general or predominant effect of this fiction—its seduction of the reader away from the political critique it pretends to offer—would be to interpret the violent and erotic excess of the text as an extravagant protest against the economy of production and its attendant ethos of hard work and the deferral of pleasure. Having conceded such a possibility, however, I still want to question our wish to find “subversion” in this text and others like it. This reading of The House Breaker has shown how relentlessly its plot and rhetoric operate to domesticate and sublimate rebellious and transgressive desires; that is, how powerfully it converts political critique into Police Gazette-style voyeurism. Andrew Ross has written recently of the way intellectuals, when they go slumming in popular culture, carry with them the categories that make the pleasure they take in such cultural forms respectable. One of those prophylactic categories is “subversion.” This sort of intellectual safe sex ought to be abandoned. The pleasure of popular culture for marginalized critical intellectuals and academics consists largely in the occasion it provides for an imaginary identification with the social norm. It fantasmatically constructs the professional intellectual reader as a normal American. This is a form of pleasure that should certainly be enjoyed but just as certainly not made safe or respectable.

George Thompson’s “romance of the real” is not the radical critique it pretends to be, and to assume that its readers would have privileged its insurrectionary and transgressive elements over its reactionary telos is wishfully optimistic. I am not interested in merely inverting such a wish by insisting that The House Breaker is in any simple and unified sense a work of sentimental ideology. The complicitous tensions between transgression and taboo are of its essence. But these tensions are not suspended in perfect textual equilibrium: it is not enough to say of this work or any other that it is partly subversive and partly hegemonic, with the relative proportions undecidable. Thompson’s radical moments are not just re-contained or nullified by the plot’s inexorable movement toward eventual
affirmation of domestic and political norms; rather, their uncontainable violence and scandalous threat operate to make the plot's restoration of normality all the more urgent. The inexhaustible transgressivity of the plot lends its juice to the taboo.

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Notes

Bill Brown read an early version of this essay and gave me useful suggestions, while Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky has more recently provided tactful assistance both intellectually and editorially. The members of my seminar on Popular Literature and the American Renaissance, especially David Stewart and Frank Lortscher, challenged my reading in provocative ways.

1 [George Thompson], *The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure* (Boston: Berry & Wright, 1849), 7. Further references to this work will be designated C and cited parenthetically within the text.

2 Thompson's definition of "romance" is vague, and his deployment of the term loose and opportunistic. For an account of the range of meanings of "romance" in nineteenth-century critical parlance, see Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 7-35. Thompson's use of the term appears to correspond roughly to what Bell identifies as the "primary meaning" in circulation at the time: "'romance' meant, first of all, fiction as opposed to fact, the spurious and possibly dangerous as opposed to the genuine" (9). It is clear, however, that Thompson is thinking not of Hawthorne or any of the subsequently canonized writers labeled romancers but of his competitors in the field of popular writing, and chiefly of the "authoresses." The gendered character of "romance" appears in Thompson's claim that "romance reading, is very well for cross peevish old maids, and romping school girls," who like to read, respectively, of the "happy moments" the spinsters have irretrievably lost and the young girls may happily anticipate. The gender of "romance" is evident also in Thompson's usual address to an imaginary male readership for his own stories, men who might ask, "why should not the women of America, who have by their deep laid plots and wary nets, rendered themselves infamous, have a place in the literature of our country" (C, 8)—a place, that is, as subjects of male-authored and male-addressed fiction like Thompson's own.

3 Joseph Ridgely coined the term "American Porno-Gothic" to classify George Lippard's combination of "febrile social critique, horrific melodrama, low comedy, [and] post-adolescent's sex dream" in *The Quaker City* ("George Lippard's *The Quaker City: The World of the American Porno-Gothic,*, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 7 [1974]: 77-94). Adrienne Siegel docu-
ments the prominence in nineteenth-century American popular literature of the urban setting with its massive social disorganization in *The Image of the American City in Popular Literature, 1820–1870* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1981). Even in the absence of any archival sources on the sales or readership of this literature, it nevertheless seems obvious that it addressed urban readers for whom the various salient forms of social displacement—widening class differences, increasing ethnic heterogeneity, and other forms of demographic dislocation—constituted persistent and disturbing "mysteries." Thompson wrote a novel called *Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia* and other writers offered *Mysteries* of Lowell, Troy, New York, New Orleans, San Francisco, Worcester, and Springfield (among others).


Greenhorn [George Thompson], *Venus in Boston: A Romance of City Life* (New York: Printed for the Publisher, 1849), 7.

I refer to David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988). Reynolds's work is invaluable for its archival retrieval. From the title on down, however, it aims to enforce invidious distinctions between literary genres and, more generally, cultural formations. These distinctions seem to me to be of scant use for critical understanding. I wish, rather, to follow Tony Bennett's suggestion, "to construe the internal economy of the field of writing in terms which by-pass the distinctions posited by the concept of Literature"—the concept, that is, of "the canonized tradition" ("Marxism and Popular Fiction," in *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History*, ed. Peter Hurmm, Paul Stigant, and Peter Widdowson [New York: Methuen, 1986], 239, 238). The internal economy of the field of fiction-writing in nineteenth-century America has yet to be mapped exhaustively, but it is clear that understanding it will require not transhistorical categories of Literature and Popular Culture but historically specific forms of imbrication between what were then conceived to be relatively distinct cultural formations. (Thompson's work, for instance, frequently thematicizes its own subversive or renegade difference from mainstream culture, yet at the same time it is full of pretentious Spenserian and Shakespearean allusion.) The present essay seeks to take Bennett's advice to produce "criticism which focuses on the specifically formal properties of different types of popular fiction, and which does so at the level of specific texts rather than at the level of genre or period studies" (261).

According to the account in his probably unreliable autobiography, Thompson was christened "Greenhorn" on first acquaintance with a cigar-smoking, brandy-drinking, brothel-haunting twelve-year-old pickpocket named Jack Slack. After running away from a wretchedly unsentimental home, Thompson, also twelve, landed in a tavern in New York City, where, after casually witnessing the murder of one officer of a Spanish vessel by another, he fell
in with this "cakhish looking youth, quite handsome withal," who "displayed an assurance, a self-possession, an elegant melancholy, that were far beyond his years" (My Life; or The Adventures of George Thompson, Being the Autobiography of an Author [Boston: Federhen, 1854], 11, 12). The moniker "Greenhorn," bestowed by Slack in virtue of Thompson's naiveté, when adopted later as a pen name, registered both the writer's initiation into the corruption and mysteries of city life and his distance from and unfamiliarity with them. It is thus an appropriate marker of his ambivalent narrative position with respect to his subject matter.

Much of the work that I am lumping together under this description cites as its authority Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," Social Text 1 (1979): 130–48. Jameson is revising Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry as outlined in 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944; rpt., New York: Continuum, 1986), 120–67. As Michael Denning has pointed out, Jameson's essay—along with Stuart Hall's perhaps equally influential "Notes on Deconstructing The Popular" in People's History and Socialist Theory, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981), 227–40—provided "the opening moves in many recent discussions of popular culture" by arguing "that popular culture is neither simply a form of social control nor a form of class expression, but a contested terrain" (Denning, "The End of Mass Culture," in Modernity and Mass Culture, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991], 253). For the kind of fiction I am discussing here, produced as it was in what Denning elsewhere has aptly called the "fiction factory," Horkheimer and Adorno's less optimistic model seems closer to the truth. See Denning, Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America (London: Verso, 1987), especially Chapter 2, "Fiction Factories: The Production of Dime Novels," 17–26. Denning claims that despite the evident intentions of the producers of these books, they were sometimes read against the grain or subversively by working-class consumers. But, as Jochen Schulte-Sasse has noted in a pertinent critique, Denning presents no empirical evidence that readers interpreted these novels in any oppositional way (Schulte-Sasse, "Can the Disempowered Read Mass-Produced Narratives in their Own Voice?" Cultural Critique 10 [1988]: 172).

count of domestic fiction's own internal incoherences—for instance, its affirmation of virginal purity and its concurrent fascination with incestuous sex—came to my attention too late to affect the present discussion very extensively; see To Kiss the Chastening Rod: Domestic Fiction and Sexual Ideology in the American Renaissance (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992).

Judith Fetterley claims that "Behind a Mask" is Alcott's most radical text," and that in it she tells "her true story" ("Impersonating 'Little Women': The Radicalism of Alcott's Behind a Mask," Women's Studies 10 [1983]: 2, 14).

While Behind a Mask ruthlessly exposes the coercions of Victorian society's ideology of pure womanhood, its protagonist Jean Muir achieves her ends not by opposing or even eluding those coercions but by paying them hypocritical homage: she perfectly simulates the ideal of womanly submission. Jo March, on the other hand, while she certainly compromises with the dominant ideology of womanhood, makes a highly unconventional marriage that leaves her considerable room to maneuver within the boundaries she accepts. And while Jo gives up writing sensation fiction (a sacrifice lamented by critics who consider Alcott's sensation stories, like Jo's, to register her feminist protest most authentically), if her blood-and-thunder stories are, like Alcott's own, complicitous with the cultural norms they claim to reject, then the sacrifice is an honest one. See Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power, in Alternative Alcott, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1988), 95–202.

Greenhorn [George Thompson], The House Breaker; or, The Mysteries of Crime (Boston: W. L. Bradbury, 1848), 26. Further references to this work will be designated H and cited parenthetically within the text.

Despite being part of a professional urban underworld of robbers rather than a peasant society undergoing modernization and the delegitimization of customary rural norms, Stuart could certainly trace one kind of genealogy to the social bandits of whom Eric J. Hobsbawm has written. Stuart belongs, in particular, to the type of "noble robber" who "begins his career of outlawry not by crime, but as the victim of injustice" and who, of all kinds of social bandits, "represents an extremely primitive form of social protest, perhaps the most primitive there is. He is an individual who refuses to bend his back, that is all." Stuart fits the model best in that "he returns to his people as an honourable citizen and member of the community. Indeed, he never actually leaves the community" (Hobsbawm, Bandits, rev. ed. [New York: Pantheon, 1981], 42, 56, 42–43).

Jürgen Habermas attributes the "legitimation deficit" of advanced capitalist societies to a "class structure" that is "kept latent," i.e., denied or obscured (Legitimation Crisis, trans. Thomas McCarthy [Boston: Beacon, 1975], 73). In this account, legitimation crisis, to which class-structured societies are inevitably prone, is averted when the inequitable distribution of wealth is offered the ideological protection of counterfactual worldviews: for instance, class exploitation is mystified as traditional social deference.
When the counterfactuality of the ideological legitimation is exposed, crisis ensues. One potentially powerful way to manage such a crisis would be to appear to expose such counterfactuality while simultaneously instituting a new obscurity; such, I am arguing, is Thompson’s method.


20 In a scene that is typical of Thompson’s penchant for teasing representations of female nudity, he has Roberts humiliate his nominal wife by forcibly tearing open her dress to expose her “most enticing pair of breasts” to her brother at breakfast (H, 25). The scene of the exposure of the female body to the male gaze is obsessively repeated in Thompson’s works. Usually presented en déshabillé (partly exposed, partly veiled) and often metaphorized as a “classic model” (H, 20) or “statue-like form” (H, 34), the female body visualized in these scenes seems always to allude to Hiram Powers’s *The Greek Slave*, a controversial nude sculpture widely exhibited following its creation in 1844. According to Joy S. Kasson, some viewers, faced with the statue’s erotic potential, claimed the female figure was actually clothed—in morality, purity, or chastity. See her *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), 61. In some exhibitions *The Greek Slave* was curtained (see the illustration in *Marble Queens*, 70).

21 Reynolds, 184.
Thompson later published a novel called *Anna Mowbray*, which survives only in a fragmentary copy. Such a title would seem to promise a continuation of the story begun in *The House Breaker*, an attempt to imagine the rejected Anna's subsequent career. In fact, the extant sixteen pages are only a feebly disguised rewrite of *The House Breaker* with a brief new introduction claiming that "imagination has had but very little to do in the composition of this work—a somewhat extended knowledge of the world, and an intimate acquaintance with real life as it is, having enabled the author to produce a Tale of considerable interest, without any great departure from the actual truth" (Greenhorn [George Thompson], *Anna Mowbray; or, Tales of the Harem* [New York: Henry R. J. Barkley, n.d.], 7).


Bataille, 45–47.
