

Steamy Dreams – Or Merely Dreams of Steam? Carsten Hauch's America in His Novel *Robert Fulton* (1853)¹

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I

The 1850s in Danish literature mark an interregnum. They represent the aftermath of the Romantic golden age, and the emergence of the modern realistic breakthrough in Nordic letters is yet to happen. Still, it is a decade graced with novels – so-called *dannelsesromaner* – in which Romantic tradition and realistic ambition have relatively successful encounters. Goldschmidt's principal novel *Hjemløst* and Egede Schack's classic *Phantasterne* are but two cases in point.

In many ways even more remarkable is the novel *Robert Fulton* (*RF*), published in 1853 by the 63-year-old Carsten Hauch. For here is an arch-Romantic poet, who was also a devoted natural scientist (and who was later to recommend Georg Brandes, the leading spokesman of the modern breakthrough, as his successor to the chair of aesthetics at Copenhagen University), committing a historical work of fiction about an early 19th-century fledgling artist turned preeminent technological inventor, Robert Fulton, and his uniquely inventive nation: the new world, as it were, with its unfettered dreams of expansion and opportunity. If there was ever an apt setting for a wrestling match between past and future, Carsten Hauch

1. An oral version of this essay was presented in Minneapolis on May 3, 2003, at the 93rd annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study.

had spotted it, and his protagonist and title figure epitomizes the dual inclinations that went with this entrepreneurial territory.

As the putative inventor of the steamboat, Fulton had dreams that were indeed dreams of steam, grounded in science and guided by practical utility. At the same time, these dreams were as overlaid with transcendental aspirations as were the practical dreams of his young nation – with its lofty objectives of manifest destiny, westward expansion, and industrial potential. Divorced from almost any other concerns than those of a wayward Romantic genius in radical pursuit of his own creative agenda, these were dreams of steam, no doubt, but steamy dreams no less. So, the question pertaining to Hauch's *Fulton* and this *Fulton's America* is this: How are these – realistic and romantic – dispositions interrelated, and what can their interrelationship tell us about Hauch's artistic project and the American reality embedded in it? Is there a lesson to be learned here, and if so, is it of current interest?

II

Like other novels by Hauch, *RF* has been criticized for lack of compositional acumen and inner necessity – and for allegedly resting on historical-biographical crutches in a vain attempt to compensate for its artistic inadequacy. On the latter score, Jørgen Breitenstein in an article about “Carsten Hauchs romaner” calls *RF* “a step backward compared to the earlier novels, and it is easy to see why. The reason is simply that Hauch sticks too closely to his sources,” whose employment in *RF* is said to be radically different from previous cases. Hence, the best and most vivid parts of this novel are those where the author “goes beyond the facts and adds his own creations.”²

Poul Schjærff in his introduction to Holbergselskabets edition of *RF* is of a different opinion, though, and actually points to affinities between the author and his protagonist – two idealistic natural scientists³ – that are at once evident in the historical records of both individuals and yet too

2. Jørgen Breitenstein, “Carsten Hauchs romaner,” *Danske Studier* 64 (1969), 40; translations mine.

3. Poul Schjærff, “Indledning” to C. Hauch, *Udvalgte Skrifter II*. Ed. Schjærff (*Robert Fulton I-II*) (Copenhagen: Holbergselskabet af 23. September, 1928), vi; referenced as *RF* with pagination in text.

fundamental to be reduced to specific biographical data. Even so, while Hauch arguably takes liberties that are insufficiently acknowledged in Breitenstein's characterization, the outcome depends less on his exercise of poetic license than on the insufficiency of the sources at his disposal.

As one can conclude from Kirkpatrick Sale's recent *The Fire of His Genius: Robert Fulton and the American Dream*, an 1817 Fulton biography by Cadwallader Colden, a friend of Hauch's subject, was basically all the Danish author would have had on hand when he wrote his novel, save for perhaps Joseph Delaplaine's Fulton portrait in his 1816 or 1818 *Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters*, which, as Sale points out, is about as "sparse and unrevealing" as Colden's volume, with little to add but "a few specifics about Fulton's brief time as an apprentice in Philadelphia, where Delaplaine lived and might have been able to consult city directories for accuracy."⁴

Given what we know about Fulton today, the verifiable contingencies of his life and work, as presented by Sale, make for a narrative no less improbable than Hauch's account, even when the latter makes no claim to historical verisimilitude. In light of current knowledge, *RF* as a historical novel proves about as fictitious when it relies on its sources as when it elaborates its imagination. The difference between its factual discourse and creative poetics is simply dwarfed by the degree to which each of these modes differs from prominent conceptions/constructions of historical reality here 150 years later. Hauch's *Bildungsroman*, while outdated in one sense, predates modern narrativization of history in another sense.

As for the nexus between the lives of Fulton and Hauch as philosophized by the latter's novelistic narrator, Schjærff is right in setting its stage by drawing a line from Hauch's cosmopolitan and universal Romanticism à la Jena in the Polish and Goldmaker novels from the 1830s to his later and more time-and-place-specific coloration of texts from the 1840s and onto the markedly postromantic *RF* from 1853.⁵ Throughout his career – and regardless of his occasional flirtation with national and poetic realism – Hauch circumvented local subjects and scenarios as they were conceived by both the Heidelberg school of National

4. Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Fire of His Genius: Robert Fulton and the American Dream* (2001; New York et al.: A Touchstone Book/Simon & Schuster, 2002), 41.

5. Hauch published *Guldageren* and *En Polsk Familie* in 1836 and 1839, respectively, and *Saga om Thorvald Vidførte* in 1849.

Romanticism and his fellow Danish competitor Ingemann. Undiminished over time, his bent for “interesting” Romanticist detail and characterization meanwhile finds its echo in a growing attraction to a Romantic sensibility on the part of such practical realists as Robert Fulton and Laura, the exotic childhood acquaintance and later femme fatale of the American inventor.

Spiritual insight remaining a priority in spite of Hauch’s increasingly worldly observations, the novelist’s need for ultimate harmonization within a universalist Romantic paradigm remains undiminished. As a consequence, the apparent shift of narrative emphasis from European characters and locales to American types is not accidental but rather evidence of authorial urges to negotiate, if not resolve, disturbing biographical dichotomies on more durable terms. Dreams of America have been the source of boundless spiritual purification ever since the new world entered the pre-Romantic and Romantic visions of Rousseau and Goethe, among others, as gospels of nature deserving of *encomia*. And when the American Romantic Joel Barlow treats the new world to two whole versions of a rhetorical poem about Columbus, and has his product(s) eulogized in Hauch’s poem about Barlow’s poem about America, the sum total of these poetic endeavors exceeds by far the predictable wisdom and spirit contributed by either.

In fact, while set in the mode of Novalis and other arch-Romantic bards, the confluence of Barlow’s and Hauch’s poetic interests produced less than conventional artistic pursuits, and fewer harmonious concords than were customary inside literary officialdom. The Romantic nature of Hauch’s realistic concerns made his artistic efforts poor alternatives to prevalent Romantic idioms. Rather, the author’s attempts at fictional realism should be seen as efforts – most likely vain ones – at tempering his incorrigible and exasperating spiritual proclivities. Small wonder that the implicit inconsistencies in such a strained artistic project tend to undercut its formal design and disclose more tacit agendas.

The source of the latter is a conflict on every conceivable level between art and natural science (and technology), and perhaps because the attendant drama seems self-perpetuating (333) with no immediate end in sight (330), signs of reconciliation – specifically between Fulton and his implacable father and generally between the different formative principles of life – take on downright divine and eternal proportions. In a

letter to Barlow (439 f.), Fulton the busy realist typically begs his friend to assure him that dreams of a Paradise of solitude removed from reality's conflicts and shortcomings are legitimate regardless of how little time reality leaves for such dreams to be articulated. It stands to reason that such an ambitiously cumbersome scheme fails to uphold itself and needs now poetic, now discursive support from anachronistic narrative techniques at considerable odds with fictional illusion. Typically these techniques involve direct addresses to the reader, sometimes with pedagogical panoramas illustrating the spiritual superstructure claimed to vouchsafe factual occurrences; at other times the narrator explicitly intervenes in favor or disfavor of particular characters' sentiments and values. Add to these strenuous maneuvers the familiar weakness in Hauch's works for Germanisms and typological abstractions, and the outline of a tellingly self-contradictory narrative process is all but complete.

Beginning with its prologue, *RF* advances inner and spiritual preferences over materialist conditions (vii, 1), such as greed and money, personified in Laura (308) as well as her future husband, attorney Gray (146 f.), and her stepfather, Mr. Greenwood (145). These spiritual preferences, whose source is said to be poetic and not historical, are buttressed in numerous ways. Like Laura, Fulton suffers from having been brought up by a rich and selfish substitute father figure, Mr. Gehlmuyden, but unlike the tragic corruption such conditions inflicted upon Laura, Robert enjoys the privilege of being molded in the spirit of Benjamin Franklin, the epitome of moral virtue and enlightened utility, of readiness for confident self-education, and of an ethics of persistence and work, willingly serving universal causes like communication and commerce and the freeing of slaves.⁶ While Laura ends up squandering *her* spiritual potentials in favor of an exploitative and immoral aesthetic demeanor, Fulton's devotion to mechanical arts and purposeful humaneness, safely removed from similar aestheticism (51), is entirely in line with Franklin's outlook. Significantly, the end of Franklin's life marks the true beginning of his young protégé's career (223).

But while Franklin sets a *historical* benchmark, *RF*'s conforming with the norms this benchmark stipulates is *poetic* to the core. Both Laura and one Mr. Baxter, who appears to be young Robert's true father figure and

6. For these attributes see *RF*, 22, 24, 36, 169, 197, 201, 203.

benevolent spirit – in contrast to both his biological father and the said Mr. Gehlmuyden – are Utopian figments of Hauch's imagination. So is Abigail, Fulton's future wife and the mother of his children, an allegedly serene and innocent Quaker with a dog named Trusty, who proves perfectly suited to bestow the most loving blessings and faith in divine sanctity on her husband's more recent and tenuous inclinations towards earthly happiness grounded in ethereal experiences.⁷ The real Mrs. Fulton, according to Sales, was apparently quite a different breed. A cousin of the future inventor's wealthy partner, Harriet Livingstone came into Fulton's eyesight much later in life, head over heels, it seems, and with no love lost between the two beyond the minimal demonstrations of affection required in a marriage of convenience. No Quaker offspring – of higher faith and patriarchal innocence – issued from this marriage arrangement in real life, as the novel claims happened in connection with the fictive Abigail; nor any deadly grieving on the part of the later widow – soon to leave this life herself for a new existence in eternal love (446-447). The grief to be faced by Harriet before she died – a decade and another marriage after the passing of her first and highly forgettable inventor-husband – was chiefly financial in nature.

Given the sparse nature of Hauch's biographical sources, the degree of his fictional departure from verisimilitude may in this instance have escaped his attention. But that said, his poetic stance is normally not inconsistent with the clearly deliberate stylizations he employs to fill the lacunae of his sources and on which he even comments in narrative self-reflections and explicit appeals to his reader's collaboration. As he contrasts Fulton's calling and spiritual reach for Laura with her self-absorbed, manipulative, and vindictive reciprocation, his point is at once to demonstrate her betrayal of both Robert and herself as sides of the same coin, and to set her vanity and celebrity apart from her suitor's dual commitments to himself and the common weal. And when later in the narrative this incongruity between the former sweethearts is brought to a close, even the resulting harmony admits an element of noteworthy discord.

Laura, at the bottom of her disillusionment as wife and performing artist, has disguised herself as a passionate gypsy with whom Fulton

7. For this (sub)plot summary see *RF*, 43, 103, 105, 115, 342, 423, 425, 444.

becomes infatuated and begets an illicit child, Adele, who later dies a symbolic death (378-80). While the clandestine and perilous liaison between these tragically incompatible adults in Hauch's artistic execution brings both romantic climax and a measure of mutual and spiritual understanding to bear on both, it also leaves the protagonist and the reader with the experience that *reason* remains a potentially hapless victim to permanently menacing *passions*.

As an intended admission, this conclusion nevertheless pales in comparison with the revelations of real illicitness uncovered by Sale in his biography. As Hauch presents it, Fulton's sinful fling with Laura is muffled by the intimation that on his deathbed he confided his sidestep to Abigail and received her forgiveness. If indeed this was the secret both took with them to their graves, it strengthens Abigail's view – as well as Hauch's – that a higher inner reality had always soared over Robert's mundane feats, be they legitimate by popular standards or not. But precisely this sanctification was denied the historical Fulton in his marriage as well as in the "extracurricular" activities with which he surrounded it. The fact that the spiritual inwardness which the fictional Fulton espouses hinges on his wedding to a fictive Quaker, illustrates just how unsubstantial the artistic synthesis had become for Hauch. His narrative's mixture of liberal and cautious source interpretation and its many explicit impositions upon the reader also testify to this predicament (330-31, 334).

As for the real Fulton's "extracurricular" proclivities, they consisted in a long-lasting *ménage à trois* between himself, Joel Barlow, and Ms. Ruth Barlow, while the three of them all resided in Europe. Upon their respective returns to America, and Robert's marriage to Harriet, the newlywed husband apparently suggested, albeit in vain, a continuation of the idyllic arrangement as a *ménage à quatre* with his wife and the Barlows in Washington, D.C. And this is but one instance – admittedly of minor import – where attempted harmonies around Fulton were lost in translocations or otherwise shattered in real life, whereas in Hauch's imagination and novel it was, conversely, the sense of reality that tended to get lost in pursuit of harmonies.

In Hauch's rendition, Fulton's inner conflicts were largely limited to the Late-Romantic dichotomy between dream and reality, and his external conflicts to difficulties with defining the calling and purpose of his life, and with setting priorities for competing vocational inclinations.

Few of these inconsistencies were serious enough for Hauch to call into question the *Bildungsroman* as the appropriate laboratory and genre for their successful mediation, and what did extend beyond the genre's boundaries as the protagonist's irreconcilable motivations appears to be mostly a residual of indigestible food for thought, left over from an incompletely processed novelistic integration. It is typical of this inaccessible domain that it stands out in the form of verbal abstractions at odds with both substance of plot and nuance of character. Irrespective of its obvious affinity to cerebral approaches, however, even closure in the most tenuous sense of the word tends to elude the reader who heeds this linkage. For evidence, suffice it to consider a few of the most pivotal elusive points on display:

Fulton as a practical daydreamer (182), who dreams about reality (49, 80), is made the poster boy for the view that realists who are not dreamers may be out of touch with reality (254). The artistic and inventive/pragmatic aspects of his genius are interrelated in a similarly conciliatory manner (with his sentiments of love disguised as enjoyment of art), although the accomplished harmony between spiritual and material properties remains disquieting and leaves open the question of whether actual experiences are instantiated by destiny and providence or by accident and coincidence.⁸ Time and again such central and barely controllable patterns of *Bildung* are found to be bordering on truly disorderly margins of aporia.

Thrown into the undecidable equilibrium are even arguments from secondary characters on the sidelines, witness Mr. Gray's pro-Hobbesian/anti-Benthamian celebration of vice over virtue, of nature at the expense of human individuality and freedom (165-166), and of the supremacy of the idea of art for the public's sake and in disregard of the idea of art for morality's sake, without regard for public tastes (163). These views amount to a misanthropic indifferentism and cold aestheticism⁹ well suited to throwing Fulton's moral calling into relief (241). To further complicate matters and impede their harmonization – without precluding every sense of concord entirely – Gray's brutal realism and one intolerant Mr. Kemp's fundamentalism are both counterpoised with Joel

8. For evidence of this string of dichotomies see *RF*, 123, 168 f., 183, 185, 242 f., 330.

9. Variations on the theme can be found with a certain regularity in *RF*, 167, 174, 204, 316, 372.

Barlow so as to highlight the latter's poetic values (58, 161), which in turn come as close to caricature as do their utilitarian counterparts (152 f.).

This all contributes to positioning Robert Fulton within an irreducible American dualism, and enables him to productively internalize its components as parts of a chosen course of action. On the one hand, there is America's still unspoiled nature, the stuff that dreams and poetry, and Barlow's spiritual distractions and restlessness, are made of (67, 69). On the other hand, there is culture and civilization, goal-orientation and progress, *Zweckraum* and conquest of the future. But then in between, physically and mentally, there is Fulton, traversing the border between nature and culture, acknowledging nature's wonders but even more so its potential for cultural exploitation. As industrious newcomers begin to push the colonial frontiers and to take possession of the American wilderness, the wild turkey population once singing here at dawn gradually yields the right of way, almost as an emblem of nature's overall decline (71, 77, 122).

Like Fulton's marriage, this is a nexus awaiting artistic consolidation. First, it is paralleled in Hauch's narrative with images of Columbus, who was both a dreamer and a realist (69). Second, while the subject of Barlow's Romantic dreams, Columbus is also in Fulton's dreams associated with a practical American federalism (121-122). Finally, Barlow, well nigh Romanticism's proverbial poet laureate, yet a realistic dreamer in his own right – never a sucker for pie in the sky, yet always traveling with an eye on the high (92) – is made to burst into unconditional praise of Fulton as the greatest artist and man: visionary inventor and utilitarian, peaceful and rational victor over the forces of wild nature (408, 410). Eventually, he dedicates his final *Columbiade* to Fulton, and so the stage is formally set for even the leaders of the New Republic to recognize this self-proclaimed steamboat inventor and pronounce him a second Columbus. A holistic image has finally emerged from a virtual barrage of complementary, if not conflicting, figurations.¹⁰

10. The most salient of these appear in *RF*, 170, 365, 382.

III

With his reference to Barlow as a worshipper of stars and constellations, the Danish poet makes an unmistakable projection of his own outlook concerning his American subject. And as Gustav Albeck has noted,¹¹ Hauch's conception in *RF* of Barlow's poem about America does little to preserve the impression of a transcontinental statesman, a semi-European cosmopolitan with American colonial roots and a vision of an independent America as the site of an ideal political harmony for mankind to behold. Rather, this Danish Barlow is the mouthpiece of an aging Scandinavian aesthetics professor whose interest in America was basically a Romantic and idealistic dream of paradise on earth, cast in an uncivilized wilderness safely removed from old Europe's intricacies.

Meanwhile, reality in this noble wilderness had gradually surpassed the dreamer's wildest expectations, and with Fulton's steamboats its colonization and civilization had accelerated dramatically and become de facto unstoppable. For all his interest in the natural sciences, Hauch rather intuited that an overwhelming development was underway that had less to do with Barlow and a good deal more with Fulton – hence the latter's name on the title page of the novel. His take on Barlow's poem about America is then yet another means by which he seeks to accommodate an increasingly material reality without losing his moorings in a spiritual paradigm.

Still, and thanks to the scant information at his disposal, he had no idea, when he wrote his book, how disconcerting the reality was that he sought to incorporate into his *Bildungsroman*, or how it was posed by its very nature to resist aestheticizing endeavors. Yes, there are hints in the novel at Fulton's experimental failures with various boat types, at his restless commuting between different projects – from floating mines to torpedoes to submarines to panorama shows in Paris, and much more – and at populist envy and mob mentality (402). Indeed, there are heydays for turncoats and crackpots (419, 424) and discrimination and harassment of Laura (as an American in Europe and a Latino in America) and her black servant, to say nothing of Yankee go-getter mentality at the expense of human safety (419). For good measure there are even repeated accusa-

11. Gustav Albeck, "Carsten Hauch og Joel Barlow," in *Festskrift til Paul V. Rubow*, ed. Henning Fenger (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1956), 149 f.

tions directed against Fulton of insanity and acts of conspiracy, Luddism, and sheer sabotage directed against his boats. But even so, there is little in this motley assembly that completely defies the synthetic project of Hauch's epic narrative.

In the factual records, as Sale presents them,¹² there is an entirely different scenario, however. Not only was the historical Robert Fulton an inventor; he was a schemer who was willing to offer his most deadly inventions to whoever would pay him nicely. Enjoying extensive hospitality and residence in England, France, and America, who then were mutual foes rather than friends, did not prevent him from playing any one of the three against the other two in his own self-interest. His pretext for seeking to sell his potentially lethal arms for deployment in every harbor was that an omnipresence of submarines and torpedoes allegedly would prevent all warfare at sea and thus be a boon to free international trade. This peaceful end was to serve as justification for the unpeaceful means.

In reality Fulton was as thoroughly engaged in double-dealings here as he was when he edited the records of his often failing experiments for likely customers' consumption. And as for his indisputable entrepreneurship, he was dauntless, bordering on shamelessness, in his failure to recognize precursors, as well as in his conduct of business with contemporaries. Politically – and legally – he was probably engaged in blackmail and treason, and financially his affairs were old-fashioned as he rested them heavily on his own aristocratic taste for monopoly assurances instead of on free competition in the anonymous modern capitalist marketplace. And for all his technological vision and practicality, on several occasions he actually caused delays for his technical successes on account of an overriding personal interest in accumulating riches and fame. That said, as Sales terms it, "like a true American, he had done everything, at least in his perception, on his own, with his own skill and pluck and perseverance. The American dream."¹³ But whatever that means, it does not mean *Bildung* as Carsten Hauch conceived of the term. It may be no wonder to witness a modern American reality surpass, if not transgress, the imagination of an elderly European aestheticist; but it is

12. For this and the following paragraph, see especially Sale, 6, 46, 48, 72, 81, 90, 93, 97, 98, 104, 105, 107, 113, 141, 142, 143, 144, 149.

13. Sale, 145.

still worth pondering that the latter after all had the artistic wherewithal to unmask his tacit misgivings about this reality so constructively as to enable his “othering” thereof to transgress the confines of the appropriated artistic paradigm. How come? Divergent dreams – or ideologies – seem here curiously to converge. The American dream and the European *Bildungsroman* are both totalizing categories and in that sense ideological conceptions of experience. But at the same time, they both refuse to totalize at the *expense* of experience, and are therefore also *anti*-ideological.¹⁴ The indelible ambiguity of the vision at issue can be said to occasion a division of labor between an American dream that erases this vision’s boundaries and a *Bildungsroman* that respects them. America’s Robert Fulton is Danish Carsten Hauch’s indispensable Other: all but impossible for the aestheticist to be without, all but impossible for him to represent – from within.

14. For elaborations on ideology along these lines see, e.g., Alain Finkielkraut, *In the Name of Humanity: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (1996; New York: Columbia UP, 2000). The totalizing aspect of ideology is attributed to Hannah Arendt’s criticism of “this way of thinking, which is emancipated from all experience by its power to explain everything” (60). By contrast, ideology as a concern for the integrity of experience, according to Finkielkraut, is espoused by Roland Barthes as “the recognition of an irreducible excess of being in thought, the affirmation of the noncoincidence of the real and the rational and the renunciation by humanity of having complete control over its destiny” (61).