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Contextualizing American literature: Narrative progression and the rhetoric of reference

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The Ohio State University, 1992
CONTEXTUALIZING AMERICAN LITERATURE: NARRATIVE PROGRESSION
AND THE RHETORIC OF REFERENCE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

The Ohio State University

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td></td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETING REFERENTIAL FICTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fictional Rhetoric and the Interpretive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Horizon</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fictional Rhetoric and Referentiality</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>&quot;BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER&quot; AND LITERARY REFERENCE</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Referential Tension and &quot;Bartleby&quot;</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Bartleby&quot; and the Implied Author</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>RELOCATING THE SCENE OF POE'S &quot;USHER&quot;</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Rhetorical Situation of &quot;Usher&quot;</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Dialectic and the Scene of &quot;Usher&quot;</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>HISTORY AND DIFFERENCE IN LITERARY INTERPRETATION</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encountering Historical Difference in Literature</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historicism and the &quot;Social Text&quot;</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literary Rhetoric and Historical Difference</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>AMERICA AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Diversity Critique</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Historicism Critique</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Rhetorical Critique</td>
<td>194</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America the Future/America the Past</td>
<td>203</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Works Cited</td>
<td>210</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

Interpreting Referential Fiction: Toward a Dialogic Historicism

Ever since literary interpretation became a central institutional practice of university literature departments, it has tended to define itself in reaction to other practices characterized, in one way or another, by inattention to the meanings of individual literary works. Whether this "other" has been textual scholarship, or "extrinsic" criticism, or literary theory, the impulse toward criticism has always been back to the "text itself." At the same time, however, the methods of criticism have invariably tended to generate corresponding impulses toward synthesis with "scholarship" or "theory," in search of an adequate approach to such issues as the interrelationships between text and context or the subjective elements of interpretation.

American literary study has represented one such synthesis. In the words of Gerald Graff, American literature "from its inception was peculiarly tied to the project of overcoming the gulf between literature and its sociohistorical contexts" (210-11).1 This synthesis was

achieved by connecting "the literary with the social organism. The theorists of American literature conceived the organic structure of a literary work as a microcosm of collective psychology or myth and thus made New Criticism into a method of cultural analysis" (Graff 217).

The social and methodological motivations for this attempted synthesis are still valid, although the synthesis itself has been largely discredited. Among other problems, American literary scholarship has come under attack for its efforts to subsume literary works into some unified conception of America or American literature. Most frequently such criticism has been directed at the implicit cultural imperialism of these scholarly efforts. But such critiques also raise with some urgency the hermeneutic question of how and whether the institutional conception of a field of inquiry like that of "American literature" should enter into the way that individual literary works are interpreted. I believe that the field of American literature still holds promise as a productive methodological synthesis. But to do so it will need to rethink both its critical methodologies and its self-understanding as an interpretive paradigm.

Traditionally, critical approaches favoring "the work itself" have assumed that such institutional paradigms should come into play only after the meanings of literary works have been determined in isolation from the field of
inquiry or significance within which their relevance is to be considered. Yet even if this were possible as an interpretive practice, it would fail to engage the issues that have motivated critics to form and maintain the field of American literature. As an institutional and pedagogical practice it would likely result in something like a historical methodology described by Gerald Graff as teaching literary works "new critically in chronological order" (171). As Graff points out,

Though sweeping assertions about loss of innocence and the machine in the garden can become examination cliches just as cheaply arrived at as any close reading of isolated works, some cliches are more productive than others, particularly when the alternative to a simplistic overview is no overview at all. (224)

For Americanist literary criticism to focus upon "close reading of isolated works" is to lose the promise of "cultural history" upon which the institutional field was built.

On the other hand, however frequently the teaching practices of American literature might collapse into a focus upon "isolated works," clearly the norm of Americanist scholarship has been a continued focus on various sorts of cultural/historical "overviews." But turning attention away from the "isolated text" has its dangers as well. As Hans Robert Jauss has warned, "If one first begins the reconstruction of the social situation using only knowledge borrowed from historical and economic sources, one readily
arrives at the point where whatever one had already ascertained historically is confirmed by the mirror of literary testimony" (229).2

What is needed, then, is way of giving individual literary works a voice, without sacrificing the capacity for assimilating those works within a knowledge framework of American cultural history and analysis. Jauss promotes a "dialogic" model of literary interpretation, by which both text and critic participate and have a voice. For Jauss,

Literary interpretation first becomes dialogic when the alterity of the text is sought out and acknowledged before the horizon of one's own expectations--with the result that instead of attempting a naive fusion of horizons, one's own expectations will be corrected and expanded through the experience of the other. (208)

Following Bakhtin, Jauss asserts that "identification" with the otherness of the text in its alterity and alienness is "a necessary intermediary step" in this dialogic process, though it is "not the goal of aesthetic experience" (214). That goal is rather an "enriched" and expanded experience of the self, resulting not only from this "identification," but from "an appropriating understanding that mediates between the other's horizon and one's own" (213).

Jauss' model suggests, albeit in very general terms, a model of literary criticism that could address many of the dilemmas faced by Americanist criticism--and, by extension,

by any interpretive institution or paradigm which seeks both to engage with literary texts in their full uniqueness, yet still assimilate the knowledge of those texts into a present-day field of relevance. It suggests a way between a debilitating focus upon "isolated texts" and an equally debilitating focus upon "overviews" which threaten to turn individual texts into little more than "mirrors" for assumptions which come from other sources.

A dialogic model of criticism agrees with the critical consensus that a literary work does not have a single meaning, which it is the business of professional critics simply to reconstruct. For Jauss, the "truth embodied in the text" can only be comprehended "as an onmoving, and always partial, concretization of meaning" (201). Unfortunately, the practical results of this admission have not always been any more productive than those of the objectivist fallacies that this pluralistic confession has put to rest. But dialogic criticism is equally insistent that the work itself be granted a genuine voice in literary criticism, an insistence which can address two unsatisfying responses to this admission of critical pluralism.

On one hand, acknowledging critical subjectivity has sometimes resulted in a confused and debilitating brand of pluralism which finds it nearly impossible to make alternative readings of literary works speak to each other at all. Critics defer uneasily to the validity of
alternative readings, as when Americanist Michael Gilmore, working toward an interpretation of "Rappaccini's Daughter," quotes Nina Baym as summing up the critical consensus of the story as 'an allegory of faith, an allegory of science, and an allegory of sex all at once'" (53).3 Gilmore agrees that it "is all of these things, but something more as well" (53)—namely, an allegory of Hawthorne's struggles in the literary marketplace. Here the relationships among such coexistent readings and their implicit analytical frameworks remain problematically unspecified, particularly given the kinds of historical questions that Gilmore is asking of these works.

Another response to this acknowledgement of critical subjectivity has been to transfer the grounds by which an interpretation can claim priority from intrinsic to extrinsic criteria. A particular analytical framework might be asserted as furnishing the right perspective on largely extra-textual grounds, as in critic William Hildebrand's claim that a "religious" perspective is required to address the "universal, radical concerns" of "Bartleby," or in any number of claims by sociohistorical critics that their perspective is either more fundamental or more ethical than other approaches. Such claims tend to divide critical inquiry into intractable "camps" grounded upon differing

ethical or metaphysical assumptions that cannot be mediated by attention to anything intrinsic to the objects of their study.

A dialogic model of criticism, however, asserts that the literary text, too, can have a substantial voice in critical dialog. In fact, both rhetorical criticism and social/historical criticism—the two critical "camps" with which I will be chiefly concerned—depend upon the claim that they are saying something about the text as a created work, and not merely creating a new text by imposing their own interpretive meanings. What this claim suggests is that for dialogic criticism to be possible there need to be some stable properties of literary texts which can constitute their voice in the dialog between text and critic.

I will explore this possibility by first engaging with that critical tradition which understands literary texts as communicative acts between authors and readers. Of course, as much as the "death of the author" has been an issue in the upper reaches of critical theory, some notion of authorial intention has continued to inform most essays of critical interpretation. Competing interpretations have characteristically continued to claim that the author is, is some sense or another, "showing" us the interpretation that the critic has arrived at, even if the critic maintains an ambiguous relationship with the authorial intentions uncovered by other critics.
The concept of authorial intention could perhaps be meaningfully defined to include such diversity. But it is a central postulate of this study that a recoverable conception of authorial intention can be found not on the level of propositional meaning, but in the rhetorical dynamics of literary narratives, in the ways that they structure the temporal dynamics of reading. The propositional meanings of fiction can only be articulated within the interpretive horizon; they necessarily borrow interpretive concepts from and take their significance within the world of the critic. The structured responses of an implied audience, however, do not depend upon the articulation of meaning, although at times they may invite such articulation. They provide a way of defining the narrative text that is relatively stable from one interpretive horizon to another. Attention to authorial intention at this level can, I will try to show, liberate texts from premature appropriation by readers and facilitate literary encounters with difference, without neglecting the role of the reader in literary interpretation.

In this dissertation, I will explore the rhetorical dynamics of literary reference, working to allow literary texts to establish the terms of their own referentiality. It is crucial that critical attention to reference signal more than just the will of the critic to seek and find a
predetermined relationship between text and context. "Bartleby" and "Usher" embody very different such relationships, and I will work from detailed analyses of the rhetorical dynamics of these two stories to develop an approach to fictional reference and context that is sensitive to such differences.

At the same time, a rhetorical approach to literary reference will need to face the problem posed by literary referents which are remote from the world of the interpreter. I show that systematic attention to the ways that critics overcome this remoteness reveals both the necessity of trans-cultural or trans-historical elements for even historicist interpretation, and the necessity of sociohistorical theories even for critics interested in narrative communication. In this respect the methodological gap between rhetorical and historicist approaches to interpretation need not be as great as is sometimes imagined.

After discussing some important ways that literary works inscribe their contexts, and the ways interpreters deal with those inscriptions, I will turn to the interpretive horizon to consider the function of an institutional paradigm like "American literature." I argue that American literature and study maintains an interpretive relevance that belies recent historicist attempts to deconstruct "Americanness" as a vestige of metaphysical
idealism. Such confusion dissipates when "America" is understood more as a present-day field of interpretive significance than as a coherent national culture, heritage, or body of canonical texts. "America" is important not because of its ideal reality or its motivating significance for certain canonical authors, but because our dialog with literary fictions will necessarily be shaped by the social contingencies of the present, and we continue to experience much of this contingency on a national level.

Most fundamentally, this project is motivated by the challenges of teaching literature, American literature in particular. When confused students vacillate between wanting teachers of literature to "just tell us what it means," and insisting that any opinion is as good as another, it seems to me crucial that teachers have a firm grasp of the boundaries among text, context, and interpreter in the production of literary meaning, if students are to understand their roles and responsibilities as readers and interpreters. These boundaries become complex for an intrinsically sociohistorical interpretive field like "America," but I will try to show that careful attention to the rhetorical dynamics of literary works can make productive sense of those boundaries.
Fictional Rhetoric and the Interpretive Horizon

A helpful method of analyzing the way narratives structure the dynamics of reading is developed by James Phelan in *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*. Phelan does not give due consideration to the interpretive horizon, so some aspects of his critical methodologies and assumptions will need to be rethought if they are to anchor a truly dialogic approach to rhetorical criticism. Even so, however, his account of narrative dynamics is a useful starting point.

Phelan concerns himself with narrative progression, with the way "authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interests in narrative." These dynamics are "given shape and direction by the way in which an author introduces, complicates, and resolves (or fails to resolve) certain instabilities which are the developing focus of the authorial audience's interest in the narrative" (15). Phelan calls "instabilities" any "unstable relations within the story," and "tensions" any "instabilities--of value, belief, opinion, knowledge, expectation--between authors and/or narrators, on one hand, and the authorial audience on the other" (15). To analyze the establishment, development,

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and resolution of all the instabilities in a work is to do a complete rhetorical analysis, according to this model.

Phelan approaches narrative by considering the makeup of fictional character, and for him "the fundamental unit of character is . . . the attribute, something that participates at least in potential form in the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic spheres of meaning simultaneously" (9). This principle enables Phelan to distinguish between a "dimension," an "attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work in which he or she appears," and a "function," a "particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure" (9). Mimetic dimensions are "a character's attributes considered as traits" (11), while thematic dimensions are attributes "viewed as vehicles to express ideas or as representative of a class larger than the individual character" (12). Attributes take on synthetic functions as they "play a role in the construction of the work" (14).

Phelan's model does have some limitations. Phelan follows Rabinowitz and other rhetorical critics in positing an "ideal reader" or "authorial audience," one that "an author implicitly posits in constructing her text, the one which will pick up on all the signals in the appropriate way" (Phelan 5). What Phelan does not consider are the limits to the control that an author can exercise over an
actual reading experience, even over the experience of a reader who matches this criterion for an "authorial audience." Implicitly, Phelan claims that attributes of fictional constructs are products of authorial intention and are largely recoverable through rhetorical analysis. This important claim is valid up to a point, but it is important to look more closely at the role that critical vocabulary plays in any attempt to name these attributes. Such attention will suggest a more dialogic model of criticism than what Phelan implies.

Phelan himself, of course, uses words to name the attributes of fictional characters, but as is often the case when literary works are interpreted primarily as illustrations of theoretical principles, he seldom uses those words in a way that generates true interpretive meaning. Words derive specific meaning from their discursive contexts, and the words Phelan uses to describe the attributes of the characters he analyzes derive their specific meanings from the contexts created by the locations within a narrative at which he assigns them. Those words refer, in the first instance, not so much to any prior definition as to the concrete dynamics of the narrative text. When Phelan, analyzing Ring Lardner's short story "Haircut," assigns to Whitey the attribute "morally obtuse," or when he notes that John Marcher in Henry James' "The Beast in the Jungle" is characterized by an "obsession with
being singled out" (68), he is not so much pronouncing his own judgment on the being and behavior of these characters as he is attaching labels to the concrete behavior of those characters at points in their respective narratives which are pivotal to the establishment, refinement, and resolution of instabilities and tensions within those narratives.

In this respect, the status of thematizing in Phelan's theory is more austere than it might initially seem. For fictional themes to be "portable," to be "about" anything outside the work itself, the fictional dimensions which take on "thematic functions" need to connect not just with the concrete particulars of the text, but also with the reader's or critic's own language and fields of significance. Thus the language used to label narrative dimensions or attributes needs to serve not just as a convenient label for the concrete dimensions of the text, but as a bridge between those dimensions and the language and frameworks by which a flesh and blood reader might find them meaningful. This is not to say that the subjectivity of the critic creates narrative functions--those functions are established by the concrete dynamics of the text itself--just that this subjectivity controls the process by which narrative functions are named, and become meaningful and "portable." Phelan's own textual analyses usually remain very close to the concrete dynamics of the literary texts he analyzes. Consequently, while these analyses do a good deal to
illuminate the narrative progression of those texts, they do very little to generate meaning from them, except implicitly through the ethical vocabulary with which he labels most character attributes. However, the thematic movement toward "portable" knowledge which I describe here operates more vigorously and overtly in his chapter on ethical resistance and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

Phelan's analysis of the novel's progression demonstrates that much of what Judith Fetterly objects to in Hemingway's characterization of Catherine serves the synthetic function of creating a context for Frederic's growth and development, and in doing so Phelan complicates the charge of sexism levied by Fetterly. He still concludes, however, that Catherine's portrayal is "hopelessly sexist" (180). For Phelan, the Switzerland scene of the novel confirms that "To enter the authorial audience, we are asked to agree, and thereby to assent to a definition of the fine life in which the female is endlessly self-effacing, tirelessly available, and continually sacrificing" (180). As a result, Phelan justifiably asserts that what he labels "Catherine's constant desire to serve Frederic, and his contentment in having her serve" is given a thematic function by the implied author, and this thematic function is Phelan's basis for resistance.

Concretely, the label "desire to serve Frederic" refers only to specific episodes of Catherine's behavior and characterization in the text. Yet at some unspecified point, Catherine's character dimension "desire to serve" becomes more than just a convenient label for concrete dynamics within the text. This dimension label becomes an abstraction that connects Catherine's concrete characterization with the ethical category of "sexist." In fact, for any thematic function to become "portable" from the text it necessarily draws from the interpretive horizon in this fashion.

Like Fetterly's, Phelan's is a "resistant reading," one that, in Phelan's terms, "overstands" the novel and steps outside the authorial audience. Yet the steps by which this move is made are not peculiar only to resistant reading. When sociohistorical critics like Michael Gilmore and Robert Shulman label thematic functions of characters in "Bartleby" according to their "social class," those labels mediate between the concrete dynamics of the story and the Marxist frameworks within which those critics find the story meaningful. When critic Evan Carton labels Roderick Usher as the "consummation of a Hegelian dialectic," that designation mediates between the dynamics of the story and the terms of a metanarrative of intellectual history within which Carton finds the story meaningful. Thematic criticism that generates meaning from fiction is necessarily dialogic
in this way, a necessity that Phelan's analyses tend to obscure.

Phelan is usually more interested in tracing the narrative dynamics of the works he analyzes than in articulating their thematic meanings with respect to any larger fields of relevance. But no matter how sensitive a reading of a narrative theme is to the concrete dynamics of a text, any movement away from those dynamics, any attempt to bring "portable knowledge" away from a fictional text, will automatically involve the interpretive horizon of the critic. Thus the concept of "authorial audience" that I am borrowing from Phelan and others refers not only to an ideal reader who is more astute and sensitive than any real reader; the authorial audience also constitutes something less than a real reader because he or she will not have an independent subjectivity to bring to bear on the text. Only real readers can engage in the dialogic process by which the thematic functions of a fiction become occasions for the production of thematic meaning.

Other critics, of course, have questioned how possible and even how desirable it is for any flesh and blood reader to entirely bracket his or her own life experiences while participating in the world of the text, although such critics do not always balance this observation with an adequate understanding of the rhetorical power of that text. According to Barbara Hernstein Smith, "the activity of
interpreting poetry often becomes the occasion for our recognition and acknowledgment of otherwise inaccessible feelings and, in a sense, our own otherwise unknowable knowledge" (36). A fictive utterance helps our own prior experiences "become available to us" (145). Similarly, Wolfgang Iser claims that the "implications" of a literary text are "worked out by the reader's imagination," as they "set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own" (Iser 276). Both Smith and Iser affirm the importance of working to recover the authorial design of the text as a condition for engagement with it, but they rightly affirm a role for the reader's subjectivity in any meaningful engagement with a literary text.

Even so, there are problems with the static metaphors these two critics use for a reader's encounter with a text, and those problems help illustrate the usefulness and importance of Phelan's focus on the rhetorical dynamics of reading. For Smith, the text is imaged as a "puzzle" for the reader to solve. For Iser, the text presents us with "data." Readers (in Iser's model), prompted by the texts themselves, then draw upon their own thought frameworks to


impose "consistency" upon the literary text by means of "illusions." It is by these illusions that we absorb "an unfamiliar experience into our personal world" (288). Yet these illusions of reading are temporary, as they are constantly confronted with "alien" elements of the text, and are hence subject to revision. And "What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation" (290).

Iser's model calls attention to some important dynamics in the overall response of reader to text, but in some respects it misrepresents the temporal experience of reading. According to Iser, the literary text gives us a kind of skeleton world which we first flesh out with our imaginations, and then try to make sense of as we would a non-literary experience. Yet readers do not simply flesh out what the text describes in limited detail; the text controls (insofar as we enter the authorial audience) much of our response to the phenomena it represents; it controls both perspective and attitude. The words out of which fictions are constructed are not so much bones to be fleshed out by the reader as they are indicators of the perspective of the text's representations. The classifications and connotations of language perform the abstractions by which the concrete representations of the text are constructed.
Moreover, the phenomena of the text don't wait passively to be processed and reprocessed like unfolding data from a scientific experiment. Iser implies that the reader's desire in encountering a literary text (at least a literary narrative) is merely the generalized cognitive urge that brings the reader to the text in the first place. Yet this ignores the considerable ability that literary texts have to control the particular desires that drive a reader's experience with a narrative text.

One consequence of this control is that resistance is a strong possibility for a textual encounter, and not just the generalized cognitive resistance that Iser's model allows for. Phelan's analysis of Judith Fetterly's interpretation of *A Farewell to Arms* does a nice job of dramatizing some of the limits of Iser's approach. Clearly Fetterly's resistance to the text is not merely a matter of cognitive dissonance, but a response to the control of attitude, perspective, and desire by the implied author of the novel. As Phelan puts it, "for readers who are concerned both with entering the authorial audience and holding on to a belief in the equality of the sexes, Hemingway's treatment of Catherine makes the experience of reading *A Farewell to Arms* almost dizzying in its complexity and contradictions" (182), precisely because of the specific ways that authorial control is built into the temporal dynamics of reading.
Phelan is exploring the consequences of Fetterly's failure to analyze the "overt text"—the experience of the text by the authorial audience—in her formulation of what she calls the work's "covert text." In some respects, her response to the text confirms Iser's model for textual engagement, especially if the "illusions" by which a reader tries to make sense of a text are extended to include not only the positive belief systems of the reader, but also to what psychologist Milton Rokeach has called "disbelief structures." By this model, Fetterly is aggressively appropriating the text by means of a negative belief structure that posits a pervasive sexism or hostility toward women. While no finished interpretation shows all the traces of the reading process that Iser describes, we may assume that by Iser's model this interpretation represents the most successful "illusion" by which Fetterly was able to impose "consistency" upon the text (although the term "illusion" sounds rather dubious in this context).

What Iser's model misses is the force of Fetterly's initial resistance to the text, which prompted her to read the novel against itself in the first place. In Phelan's rhetorical model this kind of response is accounted for, because the reader is being asked to assume the perspectives, attitudes, and desires of an authorial audience which might be alien to the reader's own values or beliefs. But Phelan's analysis also furnishes a specific
example of how attention to rhetorical dynamics can give the
text a voice in the encounter between text and critic, as he
demonstrates how Fetterly’s negative appropriation of the
novel can be complicated by giving closer attention to its
dynamic progression.

In general, critical methodologies which approach texts
"spatially" as static objects awaiting critical processing
or explication will be less capable of empowering them to
"fight back" against critical appropriation than will
approaches which engage with rhetorical progression. As
long as a rhetorical critic like Phelan sticks to analyzing
narrative progression, to charting the establishment and
development of instabilities and the mimetic, thematic, and
synthetic functions of character dimensions, the dialogic
nature of criticism is obscured precisely because that sort
of analysis is able to focus upon properties of the text,
bracketing for a moment the appropriative vocabularies by
which a critic would create thematic meaning. The
vocabularies by which Phelan labels character dimensions are
not meaning-producing as long as they are merely labels for
the concrete rhetorical dynamics of a given text, but the
rhetorical dynamics which he is able to analyze are very
capable of entering into dialog with and complicating any
effort to appropriate a text thematically.
Fictional Rhetoric and Referentiality

If the methodologies of rhetorical criticism are to inform Americanist literary studies, they will have to do more than account for the participation of the interpretive horizon in literary criticism. American literature is, by its very conception, a sociohistorical field of inquiry. The question a rhetorical methodology must address is this: if literary works really do refer to anything outside themselves, as sociohistorical critics must affirm at some level, then how do such references enter into the rhetorical dynamics of the text, and how does a critic "get them out" of the text? One important way is attending to the methods by which fictional narratives represent things, and signal their intention to tell their readers something about that which they represent.

This goal, however, will again highlight an important limitation of traditional rhetorical theory. Of the many distinctions that a neo-Aristotelian heritage has bequeathed to rhetorical criticism, two can be especially debilitating for an adequate consideration of literary reference. The first is that between mimetic and didactic works. By this distinction, didactic works illustrate ideas, but "mimetic" works do not, and any attempt to abstract "some particular components" of a mimetic work into "representatives or exemplars of the general class" (Levin 23, quoted in Phelan

46) constitutes a critical fallacy. From the perspective of sociohistorical criticism, however, such an injunction against thematic abstraction would entirely close off the text to anything outside itself, whether to ideas or to social referents.

By opening up rhetorical criticism to the possibility that literary narratives can offer portable thematic knowledge to their readers, Phelan's model offers a promising starting point for recovering a more adequate rhetorical approach to literary reference. Phelan's theory allows that even characters of high mimetic interest and complexity might develop thematic functions as well as mimetic functions in the course of a narrative, suggesting cause-effect relationships which invite thematic abstraction on the part of an authorial audience.

A second debilitating distinction is that between mimetic works and "satire." In Fiction and the Shape of Belief, Sheldon Sacks classifies fiction into three distinct types: apologue, satire, and "represented action," each with mutually exclusive generic conventions. Apologue roughly corresponds to "didactic" narratives, those which exemplify abstract ideas. A "satire is a work organized so that it ridicules objects external to the fictional world created in it." A represented action "is a work so organized that it

9. Sheldon Sacks, Fiction and the Shape of Belief (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1964)
introduces characters, about whose fates we are made to care, in unstable relationships which are then further complicated until the complication is finally resolved by the removal of the represented instability" (26).

Though elements from the "external world" will inevitably be represented in an apologue or a represented action, Sacks claims that "every element" in a narrative "is subordinate to the artistic end" (15) appropriate to its fictional type. A satire is directly "about" the world external to the narrative in a way that a "represented action" is not. Representations of elements external to a narrative might be the raw building materials out of which represented actions are constructed, but the point of such narratives is not to turn a reader's attention toward their referents or to suggest abstract, thematic relationships between those referents.

On the face of it, Phelan's theory seems once again to point a way beyond this distinction, since thematic dimensions of narratives can certainly be "social" dimensions, and such dimensions can take on thematic functions just as well as any other dimension. As Phelan notes, creators of literary characters "are likely to be increasing the population in order to show us something about the segment of the population to which the created member belongs" (14). Presumably external references in a narrative will show up as "attributes" of characters--or of
non-characters, to extend this theory of character to the functioning of any constructed entity in a narrative, whether person, place, or thing.

In practice, Phelan's methodology shares with Sacks a tendency to treat literary narratives as self-contained and, in a peculiar way, self-referential. As I tried to show earlier, most of Phelan's thematic labels function primarily as labels for the concrete development of thematic functions within a narrative. As tags for what is internal to a narrative, such labels do not refer directly to anything external to a narrative. The external world may well be represented within a narrative--arguably there can be no other ultimate source of literary representations--but with Phelan as with Sacks, representations of the external world are merely the raw material out of which an action may be constructed. Such a methodology will necessarily result in literary themes which mediate between the internal representations of the text and the interpretive horizon of the critic, leaving out any direct consideration of a text's original referential intent.

One result of this limitation is that any attempt to use this methodology to consider what narratives say about entities outside themselves ends in a kind of tautology. The progression of a narrative may develop some kind of thematic function for an attribute which is a representation of something external to the text, but the "thing
represented" ends up being conflated with its representation within the narrative. By this means rhetorical critics can avoid the messy subjectivities involved in trying to name the external referents of literary narratives, but the price that they pay for such avoidance might be too high, particularly if authors themselves at least sometimes understand themselves to writing about that which they represent. Critics may merely be grappling with the text when an author is asking an implied audience to grapple with the world.

Granted, there may well be an implicit understanding between author and authorial reader about things external to the text. Phelan points out that it seems "necessary to know something about the psychoanalytic understanding of character to enter the authorial audience of Light in August" (12). Similarly, an authorial audience might be expected to know something about a locale in which a narrative is set, or about an occupational stereotype, or about another literary work, for instance. But granting the importance of this kind of "coded" knowledge for understanding a narrative does not necessarily lead to an understanding of theme that can refer outside the narrative. Such coded knowledge really refers not to that which is represented in the text, but to that which is not represented in the text, because it does not need to be.
In those aspects of Phelan's theory which have been discussed so far, then, and in the neo-Aristotelian heritage upon which he draws, there is not enough on which to build an adequate rhetorical approach to external reference, though his discussion of thematic functions could serve as a step in that direction. It is with some justification that sociohistorical critics have widely considered this sort of rhetorical criticism to be a species of critical formalism, a rival to social, political, and historical criticism. Yet considering the diverse social and political interests of literary authors themselves, it is ironic that a school of critical thought which has proposed to treat literary texts as communicative acts by authors should be seen as a rival to sociohistorical criticism. I believe that a greater synthesis between the methodologies of rhetorical and sociohistorical criticism could benefit both approaches, and perhaps challenge some of the supposed metaphysical boundaries which have tended to characterize these approaches as critical camps.

Sociohistorical criticism is often distinguished from formalist "ahistorical" criticism on grounds that are ultimately metaphysical or ethical. Different approaches to criticism are grounded in different understandings of what is ultimately most real and foundational in human experience, or of what are the most significant ethical or social issues upon which literature should be brought to
bear. Both the "social" and the "historical" aspects of sociohistorical criticism can be interpolated into metaphysical—and perhaps ultimately ethical—stances.

Sociohistorical criticism as a theoretical camp has strong tendencies toward two metaphysical principles. Fredric Jameson's exhortation to "Always historicize" suggests a kind of metaphysics of historicism. In its extreme form, this might mean that everything that matters about human existence is perpetually at issue, that there are no "timeless truths" on either the personal or societal levels. No vision of human possibility or fallibility, no transcendent or theological reality, no formulation of the existential issues facing humankind could be said to lie beyond the processes of history, though people might try to "naturalize" such things and deny their historicity. Everything ultimately is said to relate to its own historical moment, and not beyond it. From such a perspective, literary criticism that neglects to give primary consideration of the historical moment and context of a literary work is bound to "naturalize" its values and ideas, to falsely attribute some kind of timeless validity to them.

The social realm can take on metaphysical dimensions as well, when human existence is said to take place most

fundamentally on the social, rather than the individual level. Many of the recent attempts to deconstruct the autonomous human individual have instead understood the individual as a function of more fundamental processes or structures existing on the social level. From such a perspective, criticism which fails to consider both the author and his or her characters and creations in relation to appropriate social structures or processes will necessarily lack the tools for arriving at an adequate understanding of a literary work.

Rhetorical criticism has traditionally been associated with ethical and metaphysical groundings which are in considerable conflict with those of the sociohistorical camp. As a distinct critical camp, it has usually been closely associated with liberal humanism and philosophical pragmatism by spokesmen like Wayne Booth. It is true that differing critical schools can frequently be traced to different ethical/metaphysical assumptions that undergird them, and many of the interpretive issues on which critics are divided are ultimately traceable to assumptions which are unlikely to be mediated by anything that could be called the literary "work itself." But in this case it is curious that rhetorical criticism, which purports to serve, in effect, as a midwife for the diverse efforts of literary authors, should be associated with a particular ethical or metaphysical position. It could well be that rhetorical
criticism has been characterized as the expression of a particular ethical/metaphysical stance in part because it has failed adequately to consider sociohistorical reference as an issue of authorial intention.

The practical inter-relationships between rhetorical and sociohistorical criticism are often troublesome. Sociohistorical critics often make claims about the communicative rhetoric of literary works, but the readings they produce usually have problematic relationships both with their own theoretical frameworks and with rival interpretations. And while rhetorical critics sometimes manage to uncover social dynamics or themes, their approaches still tend to lead to formalized and ahistorical results.

Jonathan Arac, responding to Fredric Jameson's focus on the "political unconscious" of literary authors, points out that such a focus should not lead to a neglect of the "political conscious" of those same authors. Arac's proposal suggests a rhetorical approach of sorts, or at least a closer working relationship between the aims of rhetorical and sociohistorical criticism. But for this to happen, rhetorical approaches to literary criticism need to become better equipped to handle the social references of literary works, as well as the concerns for relevance on the interpretive horizon that motivate sociohistorical approaches. Only a rhetorical approach that can deal more
effectively with these issues will have the tools to speak to the often confusing and ambiguous rhetorical elements of sociohistorical criticism. At the same time, a rhetorical approach that better captures the social or political dimensions of literary works promises to further the traditional aim of rhetorical criticism to better understand the literary text as a communication between author and reader.

In large measure, such an approach is successfully developed by Barbara Foley in *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*. For Foley, fiction is synonymous with mimesis, and mimesis is "first and foremost a mode of cognition, enacted through a generic contract of which the purpose is to interpret and evaluate past or present historical actuality" (64). Prose fiction represents this "actuality" by the referential mode she terms "analogous configuration," a "process of mediation, through which the universal aspects of the referent are replicated in the individual features of the mimetic text" (65). This "view of mimesis as analogous configuration enables us to see fiction as a qualitatively defined mode of discourse, characterized not by language, ontology, or reader response but by its own distinct mode of conveying cognition" (83). It provides an approach to understanding  

the techniques of fictional reference, although not, I will claim, an approach capable of distinguishing among the referential intentions of authors.

While for Phelan, only "theme" is treated as a mode of cognition, Foley conflates Phelan's thematic and mimetic categories under the category of mimesis. And for her, all mimesis is a mode of cognition. Moreover, "All fictions . . . operate according to the strategy of analogous configuration" (68), so all fiction is intrinsically referential. Mimesis is not merely a fictional strategy or effect which subordinates the raw materials it finds in the external world to the internal integrity of a "represented action"; it is most fundamentally a form of propositional knowledge about the external world which it represents. This is not to say that the meaning of a fiction is confined to its referentiality, but rather that its referentiality needs to be established "in such a way that its meaning can be more fully understood" (73-74).

Fictions offer knowledge about "historical actualities" in Foley's theory, but that does not mean "that the poet can directly and unproblematically render the essential configuration of the social world" (76). All fiction is ideological even as it is referential, by Foley's definition of ideology as "the nexus of concepts by which individuals represent to themselves their situation in the social world" (87). Since "analogous configuration is a procedure not
only of replication but also of abstraction," and "abstraction is a quintessentially ideological activity" (84), literary reference is inherently ideological. Much of the second half of Foley's book, in fact, is devoted to placing the development of analogous configuration as a mode of cognition and reference within the wider historical framework of the progression of capitalism. But although "the overall configuration of the mode of production" of an author's society determines the "range of conceptual abstractions available" to that author (91), this does not mean that fiction is incapable of representing reality. This is because, following Alfred Sohn-Rethel, she holds that "abstraction" is "a feature both of social synthesis and of the ideas people develop to understand the social synthesis" (101). What fictional knowledge conveys, then, "is the knowledge of the contradictory subjective appropriation of an objective social reality" (96).

That literary reference is an inherently subjective and "ideological" process of abstraction actually gives credence to Foley's claim that reference itself can be propositional, that the very "mimetic" act of representing something external to a fictional text can be assertive in a way more akin to what Phelan calls a thematic function than to what he allows for a mimetic function. Her theory of analogous configuration provides a rhetorical vocabulary for dealing
with the referential intentions of authors and fictions that is unavailable in Phelan's model. Even so, her model has two important shortcomings that need to be examined.

The first of these shortcomings seems to stem from her conflation of what Phelan calls mimetic and thematic functions within literary works. As we have already seen, this conflation is productive in that it enables her to demonstrate the propositional and assertive potential of fictional mimesis. In many respects, however, Phelan's distinction is useful, and her theory could benefit from it. For one, Foley's convictions about the nature of the historical processes that fiction should be understood to represent leads to some confusion between referencing various "subjective appropriations of objective reality," and referencing "historical processes" themselves. In Phelan's vocabulary, the first of these would correspond to mimesis while the second would likely develop within a fictional work as a thematic function.

This conflation of mimetic and thematic functions also leads to a too-rigid view of the relationship between text and referent. Because she insists that "all fictions operate according to the strategy of analogous configuration" (68), and that all fictional modes are "equally assertive" (72), Foley is not able to distinguish among different ways that referential "raw materials" might function within a narrative. While Phelan's model follows
Sacks' conception of a "represented action" by not assigning propositional status to literary reference, Foley could be seen as following Sacks' conception of "satire" by insisting that every literary representation is intended as a propositional assertion about its referent. Neither theory is well equipped to make the distinction that, while it may well be that every element of a fiction in some way corresponds to something outside of that fiction, a work might be "about" some of those referents in ways that it is not about others.

Phelan's notion of "cognitive tension" suggests a way of extending his theory to encompass the kind of propositional literary reference explored by Foley. In Phelan's theory, cognitive tension--as contrasted with ethical tension--refers to a gap in knowledge, between, for instance, the narrative audience and the authorial audience, or between the authorial and narrative audiences and the implied author. Cognitive tension "orients us toward the acquisition of information that will influence our judgements, expectations, desires and attitudes about the characters and the instabilities they face" (29).

In this form, the notion of cognitive tension refers only to the internal dynamics of the narrative. But it suggests the possibility of a different kind of knowledge expectation, one that establishes an expectation for knowledge about some entity external to a narrative. Such
an expectation might be called a "referential tension," because it points to something outside the narrative text and establishes the expectation that the narrative is to be understood as providing some sort of commentary on this external entity.

A simple example of such a referential tension might be found by looking at a story I will analyze later, Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street." Here the subtitle already suggests that the narrative which follows is to be considered in reference to the Wall Street which exists external to the story. It establishes an expectation that what is to follow will claim to provide knowledge about an external Wall Street known to both author and authorial audience. It indicates that the story's "mimetic" references to Wall Street will themselves be, in some sense, propositional. Of course, one brief suggestion in the title is not really sufficient to establish this tension once and for all; it remains to be seen how the tension is reinforced and given focus by the ensuing story.

A referential tension signals an invitation to make a connection between the progression of the narrative and some external entity. It asks a reader not merely to suspend disbelief and accept a representation for the sake of the story, but to come to a new understanding of that to which the story is making reference. Referential tensions serve on a localized scale the function that Sack's genre
conventions of satire serve on the level of an entire work; they signal an external connection. Yet because they can often be ignored by substituting fictional representations for their original referents, and perhaps because they raise messy problems for the analysis of historically remote literary works, referential tensions are frequently ignored by rhetorical critics unless, like Barbara Foley, their overall project is motivated by sociohistorical interests. References which are meant to offer such propositional knowledge are instead discussed only with respect to their function within the internal progression of a narrative.

I believe that the concept of referential tension could make the "political conscious" of a literary author much more accessible to rhetorical criticism than now seems to be the case. No matter how socially or politically motivated a literary narrative might be, this motivation cannot adequately be addressed by a rhetorical approach that is not equipped to explore the connections of such a work with its external referents.

I have already tried to show how Phelan's theory does an inadequate job of factoring the interpretive horizon into rhetorical interpretation. Foley's methodology is similarly inadequate, with one additional complication. For Phelan, naming attributes within the text might involve dialog with the interpretive horizon, but at least those attributes are assumed to be fully represented within the text. When the
concept of referential tension is introduced, however, the remoteness—historical or otherwise—of those referents becomes an issue. How is a critic to deal with aspects of literary works which are about things which no longer have a place on the interpretive horizon? The only methods that do justice to the original intentions of authors will, I will argue, involve even rhetorical critics in sociohistorical theorizing.

Foley admits that "multiple interpretive analogies" (73) can be drawn from particular fictional characters and relationships. In the process of illustrating the referential strategy of analogous configuration, she does make an attempt to name character dimensions for several fictional characters. For The Scarlet Letter, Hester represents "Female exemplar of acknowledged sin in Puritan New England," while Dimmesdale represents "Male exemplar of hidden sin in Puritan New England" (69). In Studs Lonigan, Studs represents "Catholic Irish-American worker possessing false consciousness," while Danny represents "Ex-Catholic Irish-American proletarian intellectual possessing class consciousness" (68). Her analogies "are not intended to be exhaustive or exclusionary descriptions"; her only point is that these interpretive analogies "are contingent upon a specifically referential analogy that affixes them in a particular historical actuality" (73).
Her point, I believe, is valid. Still, her attempts to name "referential" character dimensions help highlight the complexity of the way the interpretive horizon functions. Although, by her own theory, these characters are conceived as "analogous configurations" of "historical actualities," she concedes that her attempts to name character attributes are actually her own constructs. Granted, Foley's labelings are not, in this instance, true attempts to articulate meaning out of her encounters with these texts; they are only isolated illustrations of a theoretical point she is making. In such a context, these labels could easily be understood, as were Phelan's, merely as tags for the concrete dynamics of their respective narratives, and the subjectivity of her interpretive constructs would not matter. But should she choose to consider these fictions as sources of portable knowledge, rather than as mere theoretical illustrations, her labels would begin to mediate her subjectivity by the same process we observed in Phelan's interpretations.

What is different here is that the referential nature of these attributes introduces a third term into the equation. A critic, in this instance, is not simply trying to assimilate the rhetorical dynamics of the text; he or she is challenged by the text to assimilate its representation of its referents into his or her understanding of the history or the dynamics of the world external to the text.
To do so is to engage the critic not merely as a rhetorical analyst, but also as a student of what Foley calls "historical actualities." Any attempt to articulate the thematic knowledge of referential fiction, then, will involve the critic in trying to in some sense articulate the world as well.

The problems posed by works with dated or remote external referents are most obvious for the reader of a non-contemporary satire, for which a referential tension is built into the generic conventions. For a satire, at least, it is usually clear that its fictional representations are directly about something on its original horizon which is external to the text. Granted, a critic like Sheldon Sacks does not worry a great deal about the contemporary relevance of Gulliver's Travels, which he calls "one of the great satires of all time" (32), largely because in such a case he is simply willing to defer to the empirically observable enjoyment that present-day readers continue to derive from the book. Yet it will be worth examining in more detail just how it is that a satire over 250 years old continues to connect with present-day readers, when many of the immediate objects of the satire are either dated or gone.

Undoubtedly some of the pleasure that readers still derive from Gulliver is sheer aesthetic pleasure directed at the skill with which Swift carries out his assaults. Yet I do not believe that this factor can entirely account for the
continuing life of the book; most readers who enjoy Gulliver still react positively to the "rightness" of his attacks, even when the objects of those attacks may be quite remote. From what does this sense of rightness derive?

No doubt one reason for the continued life of the book is that the target of so many of its assaults is the human species, broadly conceived. But other, more specific attacks continue to succeed with present-day readers as well. Consider, for instance, the episode in which Gulliver is informed that the empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu have been involved in a great war over the proper end at which to break open an egg. He learns moreover that this controversy has enlarged into a religious dispute concerning the "fundamental doctrine of our great prophet Lustrog" (40)12 concerning the proper end at which "true believers" shall break their eggs. Even lacking any footnote suggesting a contemporary target for this satirical episode, a present-day reader has little trouble making connections with it. Such a connection is not achieved by reference to the concrete representation of this target within the text; this referent is not represented in the text. It may rather be achieved by the ease with which an analogy can be drawn between whatever specific situation or behavior Swift was ridiculing, and present-day situations and behaviors on the reader's own horizon. When readers make such a connection,

they are simply responding to the generic convention of satire that it refers to entities which are external to the text.

In the case of referential tensions within a "represented action," it is much easier for readers and critics to neglect the external reference. The concrete progression of the text will rarely depend upon resolving such tensions, and the attributes of entities which refer outside the narrative can usually be referred to their corresponding concrete representations within the text. In this way, rhetorical critics have a tendency to socially sanitize the external references of novelistic narratives, and avoid the historical problems that are unavoidably faced by dated satires.

Actually, although there are at least four different ways that critics might deal with the problems posed by dated external reference, only two of them represent serious solutions. First, in a novelistic narrative, critics might simply disregard those references, turning the text into a closed system of reference. Second, they might disregard the distance between the referent and the contemporary horizon, choosing to deal with just those external references which can be construed to apply directly to some present-day external referent. Third, they might take the distance between original referent and potential present-day referent seriously, and try to construct an analogy that
will in some way bridge the gap between the two. Fourth, they might settle for discussing the external referent of the text in connection with its antiquated referent, and then seek to connect this referent to the present by means of a historical narrative. Of the four, the first is a frequent habit of rhetorical critics, while the second might typify the untutored present-day reader of Gulliver.

For a sociohistorical critic interested in uncovering the "political conscious" of a dated literary work, only the last two of these approaches are viable choices. Indeed, any rhetorical critic who aims for as full an account of the authorial intention of a literary work as possible cannot be satisfied with either of the first two approaches. Yet rhetorical critics faced with referential tensions in literary works might find that the goals of their analyses take them beyond their tools of analysis. And what they will be lacking is not merely the kind of historical contextualizing that could be easily handled with a timely footnote or a little background information. Such information can help with the kind of "code knowledge" that helps a reader enter more fully into the authorial audience of a work. Such information can even help describe the external referent to which a satiric element in a work might point. But such information cannot recover the immediacy of the external referent for the reader, and it cannot restore the relevance of an external reference without making
connections with present-day referents, either by analogy or by historical narrative.

The very idea that social theories might sometimes be necessary tools for rhetorical criticism might seem paradoxical at best. After all, in the typical case of a historically remote narrative, the author's work pre-dates any analytical categories by which a present-day sociohistorical critic might try to understand it. In such cases, the literary work clearly could not have been informed by the analytical framework being brought to the text by the critic. When this is the case, how can it be that critics interested in authorial intention should have any use for such social theories?

When, however, the idea of authorial intention is extended to consideration of the referential intentions of authors, the need for such theories becomes apparent. Invariably the grounds for drawing upon a particular analogy or historical narrative that bridges the gap between a remote or dated referent and a present-day situation or field of relevance will imply some kind of sociohistorical framework. In chapter two I will discuss this process in more detail for Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," exploring the way a "referential tension" functions in the rhetorical dynamics of the story, and looking in detail at some processes by which critics have made connections with its now-remote referents. In chapter three I turn to Poe's
"Fall of the House of Usher," here extending the concept of authorial audience to encompass the rhetorical "scene" or situation addressed by a literary work. I will show how a dated or remote rhetorical scene demands critical strategies similar to those necessitated by remote references.

Chapter four will consider more systematically the way attention to narrative dynamics can serve the needs of sociohistorical criticism by preserving a voice for the text in the dialogic encounter between a critic and a historically remote literary work. In chapter five I consider the role rhetorical criticism might play in American literary studies. It is my conviction that the rhetorical methodology I am developing here can address key difficulties in the way the field of American literature is conceived as an institution, in the scholarly uses it makes of literary works, and in the way it is taught.
CHAPTER II
Bartleby the Scrivener and Literary Reference

What might a referential tension look like, and how should literary criticism respond to one? In this chapter I will analyze the rhetorical dynamics of one short story, in order to explore more concretely the development of a referential tension, and to evaluate critical strategies for incorporating such a tension. I will argue that critics interested in articulating the authorial intention of such a work must, in specific ways, move beyond formalism and make use of frameworks for sociohistorical analysis. Even so, however, fictional texts maintain the power to interrogate such frameworks when their rhetorical dynamics are carefully considered.

"Bartleby" provides a good test case for the concept of referential tension for at least two reasons. First, the many published interpretations of this story have, if nothing else, demonstrated that the story is capable of supporting a bewildering diversity of more or less intentionalist readings. The relationships among formal and sociohistorical readings are rich because the story seems to encourage all parties to search for author-sanctioned
meaning. Also, the setting of this "Story of Wall Street" is more directly linked to the author's immediate external world than are most fictional works of the American Renaissance era. Other works with settings corresponding less overtly to the immediate social world of the author might well prove to have just as strongly referential elements, but Melville's setting promises to make the issues that much clearer.

Referential Tension and "Bartleby"

Does "Bartleby" establish a referential tension, an expectation that some aspect of the story is to be considered as a commentary upon something external to the text? The first such indication is found in the subtitle: "A Story of Wall Street." Many critics have pointed out the pun in the title and setting of the story, as the term "Wall Street" refers both to the actual street and to the symbolic dimensions of the "walls" within the story. But by the time this symbolism is sufficiently developed to give shape to this pun, the subtitle has already begun to establish a referential tension for the story's setting. The many factual details included in the fictional setting--J. J. Astor, the Tombs, the Directory, Trinity Church, the various suburbs, the office of Master of Chancery and the abolition of the office--emphasize the correspondence between fictional setting and real-world referent, between
the story and Wall Street. They further the expectation that the story is to be considered in reference to the external Wall Street, not just to the fictional Wall Street setting established within the story.

More significantly, the story's characters represent types within this Wall Street, most obviously the occupational types of lawyer and scrivener. These interconnections between occupation and character extend the referential tensions established by the title and setting, reinforcing the expectation that the story is to be in some way "about" what it represents, although there is some complexity in the relationships among individual characters and the occupational types that the story represents through those characters.

Some character dimensions are direct representations of social types. A significant portion of the lawyer's characterization, for instance, is directly tied to the duties, "assumptions," and values of his profession. He assumes the rights to "strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents" (16).1 He also assumes his authority over the physical arrangement and work distribution of his office, and that his scriveners

have standard duties to perform according to "common usage and common sense" (22). All of these "assumptions" are such that the lawyer equates them with "reasonableness" itself.

Even many of the lawyer's personal values and virtues are tied to his professional identity. He shows, for example, a personal investment in the status of his profession when he refers to Nippers' position as that of "mere copyist" (16), or actually feels "unmanned" when ordered off his own premises by a "hired clerk" (27). The financial status associated with his position also enters into his personal value system, as evidenced when he chaffs at being "ignominiously repulsed by this lean, penniless wight" (25). Even some of the more particular traits by which he characterizes himself are tied to his profession; he explicitly links his virtues of "safety" and "prudence" with his professional life.

All in all, the characterizations of the lawyer and his scriveners cannot be separated from their occupations, and these occupations are representations of real-world occupations. Still, each of these characters has traits which are not directly linked to the discourse and duties of his occupation. The lawyer, for instance, is partially constituted by at least two additional social identities, namely his self-understanding as a "gentleman" and his particular brand of Christianity. And some critics have pointed to a deeper uneasiness that Bartleby produces in the
lawyer, beneath even these more overt conflicts of identity and value. Here, too, the lawyer is not narrowly contained by his profession.

Like the lawyer, his scriveners neither transcend nor are entirely contained by their occupations. They seem, more than anything, to be trying to resist their occupational status, with limited success. Nippers searches for alternative identities, such as those offered by the status of "ward-politician" and his "little business at the Justices' courts" (17). Turkey invests his monotonous work with fantasies of self-importance, even as he vacillates between exaggerated deference and "insolence" in his responses to the authority of the lawyer. Bartleby, who's life evidently consists of nothing but scrivening, eventually seems to develop a purely negative and reactionary self-identity in response to his occupational role.

The lawyer, in fact, has traits which not only escape his occupational position, but which in some important ways contrast with those of other lawyers and professionals in the story, such as his lack of "ambition" and his benevolence. Clearly the narrator does not himself constitute a single, consistent portrayal of a "lawyer-type." For similar reasons, neither Bartleby, Turkey, nor Nippers represent a coherent "scrivener-type" when considered individually. The narrator of "Bartleby" is more
good-natured and less narrowly constrained by his occupational identity than are the other lawyers and professionals in the story. Bartleby is obviously more hopeless than his fellow scriveners. These particular characteristics of Bartleby and the lawyer perform the synthetic function of creating the entire premise for the plot.

Even so, the characterization of the lawyer contributes to a coherent mimetic reference, not just to a collection of unrelated referential attributes. The story's representation of the occupations of lawyer and scrivener do not entirely reside in any one of the characters who inhabit those occupations. The existence in the story of lawyers other than the narrator and scriveners other than Bartleby helps extend the way these occupations are represented. The occupation of scrivener is defined not by the particular traits of any one scrivener, but by the composite set of duties and frustrations to which each scrivener in the story responds in his own way. Similarly, the social station attached to the lawyer's occupation is represented as including, to varying degrees, certain "humanizing" influences and tendencies which do not originate from the occupation itself. And the uneasiness with their occupations and corresponding social identities shown at times by both the lawyer and the scriveners is not a limit
to their referential status, but part of the story's representation of those occupations.

These referential tensions are established early in the story, and the characterizations of the narrator and his scriveners need to be considered in relation to the occupations they represent. But in order to investigate the thematic role these tensions play in the story, it will be useful to isolate an important narrative instability, tracing the role that these referential character dimensions play in the narrative progression. I will eventually argue that there are two major instabilities which drive the interest of the authorial audience in the progression of "Bartleby." The first of these follows the struggles of the narrator to understand Bartleby. Although I will not be able to address the critical perplexities that have surrounded the story's ending until later in this chapter, after tracing the development of a second instability, this initial focus will suffice to observe the way that literary reference participates in the dynamics of "Bartleby" and in its invitations to thematic knowledge.

This "opacity" instability (actually a "tension" in Phelan's terminology) is established in the first paragraph of "Bartleby," when the narrator notes that he cannot write "the complete life" of Bartleby. Moreover, this "strangeness" is what chiefly distinguishes Bartleby from the many other scriveners the narrator has "known"; though
the narrator is confident of his ability to relate the "biographies" of the other scriveners, with Bartleby he can only relate "What my astonished eyes saw." This opacity has been widely noted by critics. Leo Marx claims that the Lawyer "does not understand Bartleby . . . at any point until their difficult relationship ends" (14).2 R. Bruce Bickley notes that "The lawyer's character sketch is, in effect, a series of attempts to align or harmonize his clerk with something he himself knows or can respond to, and these attempts continually fail" (30).3 Critics disagree whether the lawyer ever finally comes to understand Bartleby in the story, but they agree that Bartleby's opacity is an important narrative issue.

This instability is sharpened and extended through the first part of the story, as the interpretive habits of the narrator are revealed and a degree of distance is established between the narrator and the authorial audience. Before Bartleby appears in the story, the authorial reader is given several illuminating examples of the narrator's habits as a biographer. Among them is his first description of Turkey, in which he alludes to Turkey's drinking habits.


The narrator handles this issue with expansive rhetoric, humor, and deference. In fact, it is not until later that he even directly acknowledges Turkey's penchant for "red ink." This deference begins a pattern in which the narrator often shows reluctance to deal directly with certain vices or shortcomings in his employees.

In his description of Nippers, the narrator uses two terms to interpret the younger scrivener's behavior and "brandy-like" disposition: "ambition" and "indigestion." The term "indigestion" seems to be employed only to explain the "irritability" of Nippers, perhaps to furnish a physical and forgivable cause for an attitude which might otherwise be difficult to treat with gentlemanly benevolence.

Actually, the narrator's use of the term "indigestion" here is very much in keeping with his later dubious conclusion that Bartleby has stopped writing because of "temporarily impaired" vision (32), or his surmise that Bartleby has transferred his proofreading duties to the other scriveners "out of compliment doubtless to their superior acuteness" (25), or his conscious effort to "drown my exasperated feelings towards the scrivener by benevolently construing his conduct" (36) when he is alarmed at his own feelings of hostility.

Nippers' "ambition," however, the lawyer speaks of and admonishes quite candidly, as it is evidenced in such behaviors as "an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly
professional affairs" (16). Here there is none of the delicacy or self-conscious benevolence that the lawyer has exhibited elsewhere; his judgement is direct and specific. Later on, the narrator expresses in candid detail his displeasure with Turkey's reproachful way of dressing, though he generously concludes that Turkey is simply unable to afford better clothes. And Turkey's drinking, a subject euphemistically alluded to when discussing his work and character, is here mentioned more directly, as a means of excusing a different vice.

In general, the lawyer shows that he has clear and specific expectations for his professional life and perogatives while, at the same time, he is determined to construe the overall lives of his employees favorably. When the lawyer evaluates a situation according to his professional "assumptions," he makes quick and concise judgements about the appropriateness of the behavior of his employees. He begins exhibiting the interpretive principles of a "good-natured gentleman" whenever his employees violate the "assumptions" of his professional arrangement. In this latter mode, he seems determined to interpret his employees in a way that will enable him to maintain a tolerant and good-natured demeanor, to "smile" at their quirks and concentrate on what is good about them. This gentleman persona seems closely associated with the lawyer's narrative audience of "good-natured gentlemen" and "sentimental
souls," as he makes it clear that he anticipates the approval of his reader whenever he recounts responding to his employees in such a fashion.

The shortcomings of the narrator's interpretive principles are evident in his discussions of Ginger Nut and Nippers, but they are most clearly illustrated in his later characterizations of Turkey, and in the conflicting feedback Turkey gives to the narrator's explanations of his "eccentricities." The narrator is completely at a loss to account for Turkey's reaction to his charitable gift of a "highly-respectable looking coat" (17), beyond drawing a weak analogy with horses and oats. Turkey's own description of his attitude toward his "afternoon devotions" comes to the reader as a surprise, as something significant about the scrivener not captured in the characterization by the narrator.

Moreover, the narrator's descriptions of Turkey reveal an obvious dynamic of authority and resentment, of "submission" and "insolence," which the narrator does not seem entirely to grasp. This dynamic also resonates with the need Nippers evidently feels to show off his alleged "clients" to the narrator with "a grand air" (17). All in all, the narrative does not make it difficult to piece together a more coherent explanation for the attitudes and behaviors of the two scriveners than what the narrator is able to provide, an explanation closely tied to the
occupational differences between lawyer and scrivener, specifically to the authority structure of the office and to the uninspiring duties of "mere copyists." This is the early picture the story gives us of the interpretive habits of the narrator. They are the same habits that will fail him when he confronts Bartleby, and they have not been very effective tools for understanding his other employees, either.

The dynamics of the story establish a thematic connection between the inability of the lawyer to understand his employees and their differing occupations. The troubled relationships of Nippers and Turkey to their occupation are static, yet they provide a backdrop against which Bartleby and the lawyer contend with their own problematic situations. All the elements of his scriveners' behaviors that the narrator cannot understand—Turkey's drinking and ingratitude, Nippers' bad attitude and diseased ambition, Bartleby's eventual refusal to work—can be understood as the narrator's failure to grasp the dynamics of the struggles that the scriveners carry on with their occupation. Moreover, there is no evidence that the lawyer has any difficulty interpreting the behavior of his gentlemen or professional acquaintances, and he is quite articulate about his own struggles, even if he never arrives at an understanding of them by which he can transcend them. It follows that the lawyer fails to understand his
scriveners in specific ways for reasons relating to his differing occupation.

These occupations represent the Wall Street world external to the story, and they have been given thematic functions by the progression of the story's "opacity" instability. In fact, the story's referentiality needs to be extended to include not only the occupations of lawyer and scrivener, but also the relationships the story establishes between those occupations. The opacity of Bartleby and the other scriveners to the narrator is a propositional representation of real-world interrelationships between the occupations that these characters represent by analogous configuration. Any thematic articulation that would respond to the referential tensions in the story must attempt to understand these dynamics not just as self-contained "social" themes, but as a propositional representation of Melville's immediate social world.

By and large, the diverse army of interpreters which has labored to understand "Bartleby" has not responded adequately to its referential tensions, and it is worth considering some of the methodological reasons for this neglect. Critics have come up with a wide variety of thematic reasons why the narrator fails to comprehend his silent scrivener: Bartleby represents a "nihilism" that
threatens the narrator, or Bartleby represents the self-absorption of Melville the artist, or Bartleby and the narrator are separated by the limitations of language. Many critics treat Bartleby as a purely synthetic fictional construct designed to test or expose some ethical or "human" limitation on the part of the narrator. Yet as interesting as these interpretations often are, they have in common a failure to "grapple with the world" to which the story refers and which it is, in a central way, about.

The social causes of the scriveners' opacity are inscribed in the narrative text, and the text is no less readable in the present-day absence of its original referents. Yet given this absence, such a referential theme becomes correspondingly less relevant. Perhaps understandably, critics tend to subordinate these referential elements to thematic concerns derived from other aspects of the story which promise to be more directly significant. A number of critics make passing reference to the referential dimensions of the story, only to subordinate them to a thematic concern derived from some other aspect of the story. Peter E. Firchow, for instance, cites the last two paragraphs to demonstrate that "Bartleby is basically a story about the human and not the social condition . . . less a social indictment and more a symbolic account of the isolation of man" (348). Walter Anderson claims that "The

lawyer's Wall Street world does not so much give us a clue to the cause of his limitation as express the general—and natural—condition of which he is an exponent" (386).5

Even critics who focus primarily upon the opacity instability often look for a more immediately-relevant interpretive key. A good example of this is Sanford Pinsker, who interprets "Bartleby" as a story about the "walls of language which make human understanding impossible" (17).6 Bartleby represents the "darker realities" of a "nihilism so complete that normal life—with its normal illusions and vanities—is no longer possible" (23). The story provides "a carefully paced account of the lawyer's reluctant initiation into these dark realities" (22). Bartleby stirs the lawyer's "deepest fears . . . of having to confront the isolation and loneliness which result when language itself disintegrates" (21-22). But the lawyer, accustomed to using "words—names labels, etc." to bring "erratic behavior within the bounds" (19), manages to provide for Bartleby a "missing rationale posthumously," and his "rhetoric falsifies not only the strange compulsions which drive a Bartleby, but which continue to affect him as well" (26).

Pinsker's interpretation is interesting in part because he makes a number of observations upon which a "social" interpretation of the story might be based. The lawyer is attempting, for instance, through his "falsifying" rhetoric, to bring Bartleby "into that circle of human beings defined by pragmatism and the preservation of the status quo" (25). The lawyer provides, in his description of his office, "a model of the bureaucratic mind at its most functional" (19). Yet Pinsker concludes that while the "physical walls which separate employer and scrivener operate at one level of reality; the walls of language operate, more insidiously, at a deeper one" (19). "Deeper" here seems to refer more to hierarchies within the interpretive framework of the critic than to the rhetorical dynamics of the story. Yet given the datedness of the story's immediate referents, it is not surprising that critics like Pinsker look elsewhere for a thematic key which promises to be more relevant. For Pinsker, "walls of language" fills this role and leads him away from an interpretation that would do better justice to the narrative progression.

Since critics invariably seek to capture the relevance of a story for present-day readers, formalist critics naturally tend to gloss over aspects of the story which no longer seem directly relevant. Surely the "business" persona of the lawyer resonates strongly with our own era, and this resonance undoubtedly accounts for the occasional
violently negative critical response to the lawyer. But neither the narrator's gentleman persona nor his particular brand of Christianity has the same cultural currency in our own day as it did in Melville's day. Wall Street itself has taken on greater symbolic resonance than ever, but the particular Wall Street of Melville's story and the particular configuration of roles inhabited by the lawyer are now dated and remote.

For sociohistorical critics, of course, these historical particulars might take on considerable interest.

Robert Shulman, in *Social Criticism and Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, uses Marxist theory to draw an analogy between the social referents of Melville's story and Shulman's own social concerns. For Shulman, the lawyer and the scrivener represent different social classes. The lawyer is a "gentry version of the dominant class" (9) and Bartleby, as an "urban office worker" (12), is a member of a subordinate class. The lawyer's discourse and self-understanding are representative of the "dominant-class hegemony of America's emerging capitalism" (9). When Bartleby comes to "reject the theoretical foundations of capitalism" by refusing to "alienate" himself and sell his labor "on the market" (15), the lawyer can no longer either understand or control Bartleby, though by his language and

rhetoric he constantly tries to do both. Moreover, Bartleby's behavior "applies pressure along a central fault line of [Melville's] society," exposing "a basic contradiction between religious transcendence and urban capitalism" (11). The lawyer's need "to see himself as a humane Christian" is "an integral part of his dominant-class hegemony" (22), but in his Wall Street culture this Christianity is a residual cultural element which is put under extreme pressure by the marketplace values and practices of Wall Street society.

Shulman finds continuity between the social referents of "Bartleby" and present-day society, and it is this perceived continuity which enables him to connect with the story primarily by analogy, rather than by a historical metanarrative. Shulman's interpretation does acknowledge the datedness of certain elements of "Bartleby": the occupation of scrivener, the "gentleman" dimension of the narrator's characterization, and the particular kind of Christianity the narrator espouses, for instance. But Shulman's central category of analysis--hegemony, and the understanding of social class it presupposes--enables him to abstract from those referents and transcend the superficial differences between the original context of "Bartleby" and the present. The gentleman and Christian dimensions of the lawyer, for instance, are abstracted to represent "residual cultural elements," in a formulation that borrows from
social theorist Raymond Williams. For Shulman, the tensions within the narrator are contradictions within the dominant-class hegemony that inhabits him, in the uneasy coalition of values and practices which serves to legitimize the economic practices of his day. Since residual culture is presumed to be still with us, a link is drawn between "Bartleby" and present-day society, and the story has immediate relevance.

In Michael Gilmore's *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, the market society context of Melville's writing is adopted as the central term of analysis for "Bartleby." The lawyer represents the passing pre-market-society economic mentality, though he "also shares the instrumental ethos associated with rationalized capitalism and coexisting uneasily with his own lenient tendencies" (135). His divided consciousness represents the transition from one economic ethos to another. Bartleby represents the "new class of workmen who have no personal ties to their employers" (138). The effect of Bartleby on the narrator is to bring this tension out into the open, to put him "at odds with himself, torn by conflicting allegiances to paternalism and to profits" (138). Gilmore acknowledges the datedness of these character dimensions. His book analyzes the literature accompanying an early nineteenth-century shift to a market economy in America, while noting that, since about

the Civil War, this shift has been superceded by a shift into an economy dominated by large scale corporations.

Gilmore is able to center his interpretation on what he understands to be a discreet historical occurrence, without the need to draw any direct connection or analogy with the present (as does Shulman). However, the "eras" that function as his central terms of analysis come directly from his historical metanarrative. Shulman, in his introduction, shows that he is quite intentional in his decision not to deal in historical metanarratives. But, as we have already noted, this decision commits him to finding interpretive keys that have direct, existential relevance to the present. It is doubtful that an interpretive key like Gilmore's, buried as it is in historical particulars of a dated past, could ever be generated by Shulman's approach.

Gilmore's historical connection is made in at least two ways. First, the marketplace society era that Gilmore uses as an interpretive key is part of the genealogy of modern capitalism, implicitly connected to the present by a historical metanarrative. Like Shulman, Gilmore begins with the economic reality of modern capitalism in America, and with the professional reality of academic interpretations of American literary works which neglect the interpretive keys furnished by economic categories. Like Shulman, Gilmore works to establish the importance of these interpretive keys by showing how they render selected literary works
comprehensible. Unlike Shulman, Gilmore tries to fashion his interpretive keys by reference to a metametahistorical account of a past era, rather than by direct reference to present-day realities. Only through the historical metanarrative is a link drawn between past and present. Only in the general fact of Gilmore's appeal to economic categories does he suggest the power of potentially different economic factors in present-day life.

It is important to note here that neither of these two strategies—analogy or history—is automatically superior to the other, at least regarding its potential sensitivity to textual dynamics. In either case, detailed attention to those dynamics can give a narrative genuine potential to resist critical appropriation. Granted, the step from concrete narrative dynamics to relevant and portable meaning is by no means programmatic, and deciding between one "fit" and another will never be an entirely objective process. Still, I can provide two examples of the reasons that I prefer Shulman's reading of the "opacity" instability of "Bartleby" to that of Gilmore, reasons that have more to do with textual dynamics than with my judgements about their differing procedures or about the particular historical metanarrative that Gilmore employs.

For one, it is significant that the tensions within the lawyer's consciousness are merely latent before his encounters with Bartleby. He is initially quite fluent and
comfortable in both his "businesslike" and his "paternalistic" discourse. Gilmore asserts that the tensions within the lawyer come because his values were formed in an "earlier stage of capitalist development" (133), but this formulation does not easily account for the initial comfort and fluency that the lawyer shows in his "businesslike" discourse. Shulman's assessment that the two personas are linked together in a single ideological system does a better job of accounting for the way the lawyer is apparently oblivious to the latent tensions within his values until his encounter with Bartleby causes him to (partially) confront those tensions.

A second problem stems from Gilmore's association of the lawyer with an older economic mentality. He notes that the narrator's attitude toward Turkey and Nippers "seems more appropriate to the antiquated, vaguely feudal world of masters and servants than to the actual working conditions emerging in mid-nineteenth-century America" (133). Granted, Bartleby himself enters the scene as something new to the lawyer's experience, and it is quite plausible to view Bartleby as the product of a new form of de-personalized economic structure. But as we have seen, the interpretive principles by which the lawyer fails to understand Bartleby also led him to misinterpret his other employees. Turkey in particular seems to be, according to Gilmore's framework,
the product of the same economic order as the lawyer, yet he is not understood by the lawyer either.

This misunderstanding is consistent with Gilmore's own claim that Melville is not "uncritical of the outmoded economic attitude" represented by the "Dickensian" and paternalistic aspects of the lawyer's office. But it works against the idea that the lawyer's misunderstandings are caused primarily by the differences between the old economic era and the new. Rather than confirm Gilmore's historical narrative, I feel that the dynamics of the story resist his appropriation at these points, and even suggest differences between the ways that Gilmore and Melville conceived of Melville's own historical moment.

In this case, then, the historical approach taken by Gilmore does not yield a more adequate reading of the opacity issue in "Bartleby." In some respects the story even reveals important differences between the sociohistorical understandings of Gilmore and of Melville. This failure does not, however, merit a dismissal of the kind of historical method that Gilmore employs. Every relevant project of interpretation is constrained to make contact with present-day issues and realities in one way or another. A critic might disapprove of historical metanarratives in general, but one test of any such approach is whether it is able to supply analytical categories by which the rhetorical dynamics of a literary work can be
accounted for and understood. In this case, the analytical categories generated by Gilmore's historical metanarrative fail to contain the text as adequately as those of Shulman.

Referential tensions, when they are historically remote, necessitate the use of sociohistorical frameworks in quite specific ways if the gap between the authorial and the interpretive horizon is to be bridged. The typical practice of intentionalist criticism has been to overcome this remoteness by disregarding the story's referential tensions. Yet responding to remote references, although it does entangle a critic in sociohistorical analysis, actually furthers the larger goals of intentionalist criticism. And the use of sociohistorical theories need not mean that text loses its power to interrogate those theories in turn.

"Bartleby" and the Implied Author

"Bartleby" is driven more by "tensions" than by other kinds of instabilities. I have already traced the establishment and development of the tension that develops from the attempts of the narrator to understand Bartleby. But as I mentioned before, a second tension is important to the progression of the narrative as well. I will now complete my analysis of the story's dynamics by tracing the development of this second tension. Doing so will enable me to revisit Robert Shulman and consider the adequacy of his interpretation to the overall story. It will also provide
further occasion to affirm the usefulness of the concept of implied author, particularly with respect to issues of literary reference.

This second tension has to do not with the narrator's understanding of Bartleby, but with his peculiar reactions to Bartleby and Bartleby's behavior. The tension comes into focus the second time Bartleby refuses to proofread his work. The narrator had let the first episode pass, although noting that "Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience, or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises" (21). After the second episode, however, the narrator himself shifts attention from the strangeness of Bartleby to the strangeness of the narrator's own response to his scrivener, noting that "there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me" (21). Thus the focus of this second major tension is the narrator's unaccountably intense and disconcerted responses to Bartleby.

From the start, there are strong connections between the story's two most important narrative tensions. The narrator's quest to understand Bartleby, to "regard his ways narrowly" (23), follows from the first time the narrator feels disconcerted with Bartleby. And repeatedly the
narrator calls forth his interpretive habits in response to Bartleby's provocations, as a way of managing his own responses to them. In the narrator's "better moods," he self-consciously "will endeavor charitably to construe" Bartleby's conduct, regarding him with pity and purchasing "a delicious self-approval" (21). And when, by contrast, Bartleby's conduct calls forth an exaggerated reaction of hostility, the narrator is still liable to resort to his habit of benevolent interpretation, though sometimes not so self-consciously. Shortly after beginning his attempt to understand Bartleby's strange behaviors, the narrator relates a scene in which "the evil impulse in me mastered me" (24), culminating in a vague intention to carry out "some terrible retribution." But he finds himself too agitated and disconcerted to carry out any such action, and when Bartleby's refusal to proofread becomes a fixed custom of the office, the narrator rationalizes Bartleby's motives by imagining that he refuses "out of compliment doubtless to their [Turkey and Nippers] superior acuteness" (25).

For the first of several times, the narrative resolves itself into a kind of steady state after the account of this episode. This steady state is achieved by the narrator's rationalization of Bartleby, eccentricities and all, as "a valuable acquisition" (26), and of his own occasional hostilities toward Bartleby as proceeding from "the common infirmities of our nature" (26). These rationalizations
don't adequately resolve the narrative tensions for the reader, but they do resolve them for the narrator, so further development of the narrative requires further events, and the introduction additional local instabilities.

This steady state is broken by the revelation that Bartleby has been "making his home" at the office. This discovery sets off a series of intense reflections upon the significance of Bartleby's condition. Yet the initial pity that the narrator feels for Bartleby on this occasion soon gives way to "fear" and "repulsion," a change that the narrator attributes to "common sense." Again the narrator has managed to rationalize his complex response to Bartleby, but his feeling that "the things I had seen disqualified me for the time from church-going" (29) demonstrates that this rationalization is not completely successful. This pattern is repeated over and over in the narrative: Bartleby agitates the narrator in some new way, the narrator broods over the situation and achieves a new understanding of it, some new "knowledge" by which he can manage and assimilate the new situation, and then circumstances bring him back to his uneasiness with Bartleby and the process needs to be repeated.

Two days after the Sunday episode, the narrator notices "that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery" (31). This observation prompts an exchange which does a great deal to develop and clarify the
two major narrative tensions for the reader. Upon questioning, Bartleby tells the narrator "that he had decided upon doing no more writing" (31). The narrator asks for a reason, and Bartleby replies "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" (32). The narrator immediately--and benevolently--concludes from this answer that Bartleby's "unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have temporarily impaired his vision" (32). Yet this conclusion is quickly undercut in the next few sentences, when Bartleby refuses an errand to the Post Office, a task for which his "impaired vision" should not be a factor. As days pass, it appears to the narrator that Bartleby's eyes improve, yet clearly Bartleby's decision to permanently give up copying has nothing to do with his eyesight.

As this becomes evident, the narrator quietly drops his eyesight theory as a way of explaining Bartleby. But for the reader, this revelation clarifies what had been, just a few sentences earlier, Bartleby's most pointed reference to his own motives that the entire story offers. Evidently Bartleby's reference was not to his eyes, but to the "dead wall" that was the focus of his "reveries," a wall that had already been marked for symbolic dimensions.

Early in the story, the narrator introduces his reader to his "chambers," providing a description which focuses exclusively on the walls outside his windows:
At one end, they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call "life." But, if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction, my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes. . . . (14)

The tendency of the narrator to contrast the symbolism of walls with the kind of "life" typified by "landscape painters" is first suggested here, though the narrator does not really treat the walls as symbols at this point. Still, the description is curious in its narrow focus and in the way it is quickly dropped; its lack of meaningful connection with anything immediately before or after in the narrator's descriptions suggests some kind of deferred symbolic significance.

Bartleby is seated next to neither of these two walls, but rather

up close to a small side-window . . . which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome. (19)

Again the wall is mentioned explicitly, with the narrator again chiefly interested in the poor quality of the "landscape" that Bartleby's window—like the others—
affords. And the reader already knows of Bartleby's regular habit of "dead-wall reveries" when Bartleby informs the narrator that the "reason" why he will do no more copying can somehow be seen in the wall itself.

That the wall is to have symbolic dimensions is firmly established this early in the story, but its final meaning is not yet established. For the narrator, the walls separate man from the redeeming power of nature, for Bartleby, the wall symbolizes all that makes him prefer to abandon scrivening and abandon life. At this point the symbol has no real explanatory power; only the story's ending will finally give the symbol a more definitive significance. For now, Bartleby's allusion to the wall's symbolism serves to dramatize and finalize the narrator's failure to understand Bartleby.

This episode does several things for the progression of the narrative. From Bartleby's first refusal to copy up to this episode, the narrative has been driven most prominently by the joint attempt of the authorial reader and the narrator to comprehend Bartleby's actions, as well as the reader's desire to find out what Bartleby will do next. This is true even though the reader is by now well aware that the interpretive habits of the narrator may make him an unreliable partner in this attempt. But after this episode, it becomes clear that the narrator has missed the clue to Bartleby's behavior. The meaning of the wall symbol remains
opaque, yet the reader will no longer expect much help from
the narrator in understanding the symbol or Bartleby.
Moreover, after Bartleby quits copying for good, his
character becomes almost entirely static.

As a result of these changes the focus of the story's
dynamics shifts. What Bartleby will do next becomes
predictable and relatively unimportant, and though the
narrator continues to try to understand him, the authorial
reader will no longer hope for those efforts to bear much
fruit. The reader has already seen that the narrator's
interpretive principles are fallible in ways that are tied
to his occupational position; now it is clear that those
principles are failing him in his attempt to understand
Bartleby. From this point on, the central dynamic of the
story becomes the question of why the narrator responds to
Bartleby as he does, together with the more local
instability concerning what the narrator will finally do
about Bartleby, and the new question of what it is Bartleby
"sees" in the wall.

The narrator is at least sporadically aware of the
strangeness and intensity of his responses to Bartleby,
though at times the reader is more aware than the narrator
of the way these responses repeatedly call forth the
narrator's rationalizations. This tension, however, is
never resolved. When the narrator finally abandons Bartleby
to his fate, he notes that
I distinctly perceived that I had now done all that I possibly could, both in respect to the demands of the landlord and his tenants, and with regard to my own desire and sense of duty, to benefit Bartleby, and shield him from rude persecution. I now strove to be entirely carefree and quiescent; and my conscience justified me in the attempt; though, indeed, it was not so successful as I could have wished. (42)

There remains through the very end of the story a sense of uneasiness in the narrator that goes beyond even his struggles of conscience regarding Bartleby.

At the end of the story, the narrator alludes once more to the "wall" symbolism. Gazing into the yard where Bartleby lies dead, the narrator notices the "walls, of amazing thickness" which

kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung. (44)

As the narrator reads the symbolic landscape here, the living grass suggests an implied judgement upon the settled despair and resignation of Bartleby. Bartleby, however, has already explicitly rejected the narrator's symbolic reading, replying "I know where I am" when confronted by the narrator with the "sky" and "grass" still evident behind the prison walls. Bartleby does not read the symbolism of the wall in polar contrast to the redemptive, life-affirming symbolism of nature, as does the narrator. For Bartleby, the walls
mark out a socially-defined space, not the absence of a "view," of a transcendent contact with nature.

Bartleby's fixation on the prison wall, together with his response to the narrator, complete the development of the wall symbolism and of the corresponding pun in the story's title. The prison walls of the Tombs are connected with the "dead walls" of Bartleby's reveries and the notorious folding office screens, all marking out "social spaces" and establishing Wall Street as the street of walls, a place where social divisions distort human beings and render employees and employers incomprehensible to each other. The narrator's epilogue adds another piece of interpretation to Bartleby's case. But at that point the narrator can no longer speak definitively about Bartleby; his discourse has been shown to be too bound to his position, and the narrative tensions surrounding his responses to and interpretations of Bartleby remain permanently unresolved.

This lack of resolution causes a final shift in the narrative dynamics, this one operating in retrospect to establish the terms for reflection upon the story. The story's ending brings with it an expectation of closure, yet the story's unresolved tensions suggest no ethical or didactic theme, no "symbolic resolution" of social contradictions. The generic expectation of resolution and closure thus focuses on the referential dimensions of the
story. The story resolves itself as a completed propositional representation; the unresolved instabilities of the story represent unresolved dynamics within the world that the story represents, and the wall symbolism provides thematic reinforcement for this referential focus and resolution. Moreover, although the authorial reader is frequently shown more about the narrator than the narrator understands about himself, this reader does not seem to transcend the values represented by the narrator in scenes like the epilogue. Those values, however, have been linked with a particular social perspective which has, in the story, graphically demonstrated its limitations. The authorial audience, implicated by the values of the narrator, is left to reflect upon its own place within the world represented by the story.

Robert Shulman can now be revisited, with his interpretive keys of "hegemony" and "fragmentation." Shulman's reading, as I have tried to show, does a good job with the "opacity" tension that is central to the first half of the narrative. His agenda as a sociohistorical critic encourages him to attend to the referential dimensions of the characters, and to be attuned to the social causes of the narrator's difficulties understanding Bartleby and the other scriveners. We can now consider how Shulman does with the second major tension of "Bartleby," that of the narrator's strange responses to Bartleby.
For Shulman, the narrator is inhabited by dominant-class hegemony, a set of values and assumptions which is characterized by hidden inner contradictions. Bartleby's behavior forces the narrator to confront some of those inner contradictions in what had seemed to him--and to those of the dominant class hegemony he represents--to be a seamless whole. Specifically, Bartleby brings into the open the latent contradictions between the values of capitalism and Christianity, and of capitalism and gentry.

These contradictions certainly are part of the lawyer's representation, and they cause the lawyer considerable consternation as he tries to serve the demands of both business and conscience. But it might be questioned whether the "contradiction of values" idea can adequately contain the strangeness of the narrator's response to Bartleby. After all, the force of his encounters with Bartleby tends to strike him in each instance before he has a chance to reflect, and when he does reflect, he is invariably successful in coming to a rationalization or inner reconciliation of his behavior toward Bartleby. It is only the face-to-face encounters with Bartleby's behavior that shake him up, and it seems that a better explanation of his response might locate its source somewhere beyond the conscious level. This does not necessarily imply the ultimate inadequacy of "hegemony" as an interpretive key for this story, but it does indicate that further dialog is
needed between the text and Shulman's conception of hegemony if this theoretical framework is to contain the dynamics of the text at this point.

One critic who does look beyond the conscious level here is John Carlos Rowe in *Through the Custom House*. Rowe uses Freud's theory of the "uncanny" as the return of the repressed, or "the surfacing of a familiar event or sign that has been made unfamiliar through repression" (Rowe 129), to describe the dynamics of the narrator's response to Bartleby. What is the status of this kind of analysis if it is taken as an explanation of the rhetoric of the narrative text?

First of all, this Freudian psychology is certainly not part of an implied "code" of causality that is assumed by the narrative, the way it might be for any number of modern works. Melville's story might be anticipating such a theory, but that is another matter. Moreover, Rowe's identification of "death" as that which the narrator has repressed is connected with the imagery which the narrator uses to describe Bartleby--"images of blindness, madness, religious asceticism, ruin, privation, immobility, and death" (132)--but the term as Rowe uses it is more firmly connected with Freudian theory than with the concrete particulars of "Bartleby."

Given these limits, what explanatory power does Rowe's interpretation have for a rhetorical understanding of the narrative? His chief contribution is that by locating the crux of the narrator's responses at the unconscious level, Rowe provides a better framework than Shulman for pinpointing the pivotal points in the narrative relative to this particular narrative tension. It is difficult for a critic to make this identification if he or she does not make use of something like a theory of the unconscious to make such an identification comprehensible and relevant.

While Rowe's analysis is useful for its understanding of the "reaction" instability, in other respects it appropriates the text rather too easily. His interpretation helps dramatize the way a decision to bypass authorial intention can easily include a debilitating neglect of referential tensions. After a brief survey of the critical history of "Bartleby," Rowe notes that "the primary questions raised by the narrative about writing and the law, copying and authority seem to be minimized or forgotten" (120), and Rowe pledges to fill this gap by considering "Bartleby" (and Pierre) as "extended reflections on the nature of writing," where "'Bartleby' undercuts the concept of writing as the representation or 'copy' of an original object or idea that escapes the constraints of language" (120).
Rowe is aware of and articulate about his method of choosing a key by which to appropriate the text, asserting that in general

We ought neither to imitate nor translate the writings of our poets and philosophers; we ought to use those texts in the very interpretative spirit in which they were written to discover in a new sense the intelligibility of our own times. Such understanding can never take place outside the space of actual reading—in some impossible realm of hermeneutic abstraction—but only in the active effort to wrest the texts of the past and our knowledge of them away from habitual modes of behavior and unrecognized assumptions. (26)

What Rowe provides is a "strong reading," in which he mines whatever potential he finds in the text for developing his interpretive idea. For example, Rowe does a great deal with the narrator's title "Master of Chancery." He notes that the office "is directly concerned with the origins of ownership and the legal authority for property" (120). A Master is concerned with "original sources" which are "small or questionable" (121), and this makes Bartleby analogous to a "legal problem" for the lawyer. Thus "From the beginning, the legal determination of original authority and proper ownership is related to philosophic concepts of identity and meaning" (121). A Master in Chancery seems "especially subject to the interpretive ambiguities that lurk behind every legal authority," and must "confront the relation of legal writing to some philosophic understanding of truth" (121).
Moreover, the lawyer's testimony that he is "one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury" is taken to indicate that the lawyer has "contempt for the deceptions of persuasive rhetoric" and that "For him there can be only one original text--or proper name--for the truth that governs the meaning of the various legal signifiers" (122). Because of this belief, the narrator doggedly insists "upon the accuracy of copy; absolute justice depends upon the infinite repetition of its sameness, or its unchanging essence" (122). Etymologically,

It is thus no coincidence that a Master in Chancery derives his title from signifiers of guardianship: chancery, chancellor, chancel, cancellarius, cancellus, cancelli. A cancelli is a lattice, railing, or grating behind which the cancellarius worked, so named as 'the keeper of the barrier,' the 'secretary.' And 'secretary' itself retains the traces of such gate-keeping and the determination of proper limits or bounds. A secretarius is one entrusted with secrets, a noun formed from the past participle of secernere, 'to set apart' or 'separate.' Thus, the narrator guards the secret truth that is enshrined/entombed in the tower of the texts that accumulates as the law. (122)

Rowe is here seizing upon dimensions of characters, without concerning himself about whether the dynamics of the narrative turn those dimensions into functions in the ways Rowe is discussing them. Rowe's discussion of the "uncanny" in the lawyer's response to Bartleby and his extrapolations on the office of Chancery are, of course, both part of a single, coherent interpretation. But from a rhetorical perspective, the first of these is "about" the story in a
way that the latter simply are not. Rowe's discussion of Chancery is interesting, and he may be successfully "using" the story to "discover in a new sense the intelligibility of our own times" (26), but much of it has nothing to do with the narrative progression of "Bartleby," nothing to do with the things a reader is asked to consider while reading the narrative.

Rowe's reading helps demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of authorial audience. Rowe is inclined to define the "literary" as "one mode of human knowledge" which "functions in terms of the disruption or dislocation of the apparently familiar and well-established" (13), and he claims that "What should interest us about a literary text . . . is not what has already been appropriated by the rhetoric and values of the present culture but what continues to agitate us or still threatens us with its own outwandering and eccentric character" (14). It may well be that the post-structuralist themes Rowe reads into "Bartleby" and other works of American literature are genuinely "disruptive" and "threatening" to "our present culture." But if the "us" of Rowe's statement is to be taken seriously, then the method of reading that he models in his book may fall short of some of the goals he sets for it. The problem is that, lacking any concept of an ideal reader, Rowe's interpretive framework ends up dominating his interpretation. The narrative is rendered relatively
passive, rather than disruptive, in the face of his "strong" allegorizing tendencies. My claim is that the goal of literary disruption often might better be served by a method of interpretation which works closer to the temporal dynamics of reading, by attending to the transaction between implied author and authorial audience. What the concept of authorial audience can furnish is a way of preserving a kind of concrete pre-interpretive (or at least "pre-appropriative") experience of a text, not in order to repress the interpretive appropriations of a critic, but to give the text a stronger, more potentially "disruptive" voice in the dialog between critic and text.

It should not be surprising that one thing which gets downplayed in Rowe's interpretation of "Bartleby" is the external reference of the narrative. Actually, Rowe does explicitly note that "Bartleby" does not "displace the social realm of Wall Street with a more poetic space," that the story does not "set a poetic script against social rhetoric, but reveals within the discourse of the law that the poetic principle is in fact nothing other than the 'being' of language" (119). Bartleby, meanwhile, is "petrified by a society that either excludes or appropriates differences in order to preserve its illusion of order and truth" (119). Thus Rowe does affirm the text as referential, if only to the legal discourse that it undermines.
Even given this general affirmation of the referentiality of "Bartleby," however, there are ways in which a convention of closer accountability to the dynamics of the text could challenge or extend Rowe's interpretation. As one example, Rowe's interpretation resembles the interpretation of Pinsker, in that it attributes the lawyer's interpretive difficulties to something inherent in the nature of language itself. Yet the entire long sequence of descriptions at the beginning of "Bartleby" does a great deal to attach the lawyer's particular language and his interpretive difficulties to his occupation. It may well be valid—and certainly Shulman and Gilmore would agree here—that the story documents a society that "either excludes or appropriates differences," but what Rowe's reading misses is the extent to which Bartleby's "differences" from the lawyer are not merely idiosyncratic, but are linked to the occupational relationships that the characters of the story represent.

As I have tried to show, the ending of Bartleby immerses the authorial reader in the perspective of the narrator, and makes him the spokesman for values which have been identified with the narrator's own particular and limited perspective. Rowe himself, however, uses the sequel as an interpretive cue. Picking up on the narrator's reflection that "on errands of life, these letters speed to death" (138), Rowe notes that "These letters clearly suggest
the human destiny," and the narrator's note suggests to Rowe that "Bartleby dramatizes what [Rodolphe] Gasche terms "the dispersing movement of the letters which circulate only to leave behind them the traces of death" (138). What this portion of Rowe's interpretation disregards is that the language he appropriates here is the language of the particular social location that the narrator represents. Rowe, too, in some sense identifies himself with the narrator's values here, without really confronting the possible implications of this identification.

Rowe explicitly rejects "The historicism that conceives of literary history as a perpetually renewed translation of the past into the rhetoric of the present" (17), and it is not surprising that he does not root his interpretive key to the story in the detailed references that "Bartleby" makes to its own contextual horizon. But accounting in detail for the rhetorical dynamics of a fictional text need not consign a critic to merely "paraphrasing the texts of the past" (16). Both the rhetorical dynamics and the historical references of a fictional text are capable of engaging the critic in a dialogical relationship that Rowe's method of "strong reading" sometimes suppresses.

The referential methods of "Bartleby" are certainly not the only techniques by which fictions can establish their referentiality, nor are its social referents the only kinds
of referents for which a referential tension might be established. But "Bartleby" does illustrate the power of fictional narratives to signal reference, and careful analyses of the story and of some if its major critics reveal both some limitations of formalist critical methodologies, and the necessity of employing (at least implicitly) sociohistorical frameworks if historically-remote references are to be found to have present-day significance.

In this way, intentionalist critics who respond to referential tensions are placed in a dialogic relationship not only with the literary text, but with the world to which the text refers. When that world is historically remote from the interpretive horizon, such critics are not doomed to antiquarian irrelevence, only consigned to using analogies or historical narratives to bridge the gap between original referent and present-day field of significance. And the use of those interpretive strategies need not blunt the capacity of fictional texts for strong, dialogic engagement both with our world and with the concepts, theories, and histories by which we try to understand that world. A rhetorical analysis of the dynamics and references of a text like "Bartleby" cannot predict what a critic like Rowe, Gilmore, or Shulman might make of their encounters with the story. But such an analysis can give the text a strong voice, restoring some of
the "otherness" to a work in a way that can make dialog between critic and text more fruitful.
Chapter III

Relocating the Scene of Poe's "Usher"

In chapter two I considered the options of intentionalist critics for recovering the relevance of remote references in works of fiction. I have been working with a model of narrative progression that posits an "authorial audience" as a key working concept, and I have discussed the strengths and limits of this concept. Having faced the problems posed by remote references, however, I now must consider what it might mean for the authorial audience of a work to be dated or remote.

This question might profitably be brought to bear upon "Bartleby." But I will instead focus this chapter on Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." One reason for this choice is that Poe has seemed to most critics to be conspicuously—even notoriously—unburdened by the kinds of external references that operate in "Bartleby." As Michael Davitt Bell has noted, "Much recent criticism, bent on rescuing Poe from the charge of obscurantism, has therefore focused on ways of reestablishing a sense of relation between his work and the known world" (102). Yet given the

apparent scarcity of "known world" references in Poe's work, much of this attention has been channeled into reading Poe's work against the cultural context of Poe's "scene," and this critical tendency makes "Usher" a useful focus for the concerns of this chapter.

The ways by which a work like "Usher" might be linked to its cultural "scene" are sufficiently various that, rather than try independently to establish principles by which to make this kind of connection, I will analyze the claims of four critics who have claimed to find such connections, and see how the model of narrative progression with which I have been working speaks to those claims (and how those claims might complicate my model).

All four of these critics analyze the story by drawing connections between the authorial audience of "Usher" and its cultural scene, either by developing in interpretation by which they can enter that authorial audience, or by reading the authorial audience against itself. Although the cultural distance most of these critics find between the present-day horizon and Poe's own cultural horizon should normally serve as an obstacle to entering the authorial audience for a present-day reader, each of these critics invokes a version of the work's contextual scene in such a way as to furnish a positive link between the story and the present, linking the story to a present-day field of significance by the same processes of analogy and historical
narrative that characterize critical approaches to remote references. And as with "Bartleby," these processes necessitate the use of sociohistorical frameworks, even for intentionalist criticism.

For intentionalist critics, the importance of recovering a "scene" that was part of the world or makeup of an authorial audience is liable to vary from work to work. In general, the importance of such a reconstruction might be greatest for works which make the fewest internal references to their scene. Works which are highly documentary are much more likely to contain within themselves a representation of the social and cultural realities against which they are meant to be read. And since America's nineteenth century romancers are not—for reasons articulated by Bell and by many others—notorious for the density of their social representations, one might expect the reconstruction of such scenes to be especially important to the study and understanding of their works.

Attention to authorial audience can also, however, be a productive critical strategy for cultural analysis as well as for rhetorical interpretation. In this chapter I will suggest ways that the way "Usher" and other fictional narratives structure the responses of an authorial audience can provide useful insights into the cultural context of such works. Such an approach to cultural analysis maintains its grounding in the fictional rhetoric of an intending
author, although without limiting itself to consideration of thematic meaning and overt fictional reference. Because of this grounding, such an approach can preserve the power of the text to complicate or substantiate the sociohistorical framework of a critic.

In chapter two, I used the term "remote" to mean absent from the experience and field of relevance of a reader. Thus Melville's Wall Street is remote to present-day readers, although the relevance of this referent might be recovered by interpretive strategies discussed in chapter two. In this chapter I make similar use of the term "remote." The assumptions an author made about his or her reader or contextual situation which no longer apply to a present-day reader will determine the remoteness of an authorial audience.

There are a number of ways that an authorial audience can become remote, although for the purposes of this chapter those ways need to be contrasted with that of a reader's resistance to entering an authorial audience, the sort of resistance I discussed briefly in chapter one in connection with A Farewell to Arms. A resisting reader understands and rejects an available authorial role; for a remote reader, this role does not seem to be available. For a resisting reader, the authorial role may seem threatening; for a remote reader this role may seem confusing.
There are many ways that an authorial audience can become remote. Some involve the "codes" of understanding that an author might take for granted. Such codes might simply involve knowledge that the author assumes his reader to have. They may involve shifting connotations. They may involve cultural symbols that are available for an author to draw upon. In general, such "code" matters are what is most easily dealt with in the footnotes of literary anthologies.

Closely related to these code problems are the more narrowly literary assumptions of authors. These may involve generic conventions and assumptions about what constitutes literary competence in their authorial audience. They may also involve the author's understanding of the literary arena, of his or her literary marketplace or community of readership. Such understandings will include any possible expectations of censorship, the author's sense of what his or her literary public will expect or tolerate from its literature, and the author's sense of what other texts his or her audience has read and finds important.

All of these factors of code and convention can, at least in theory, be addressed merely by educating the present-day reader. But there may be other differences between the authorial audience and a remote reader that are less easily bridged. In the terminology of Kenneth Burke, it might be asked what "scene" is being addressed by the author's "symbolic action," or what "rhetorical situation"
has called forth the author's writing. When this cultural scene is remote, what implications might this remoteness have for the ability of a reader to enter an authorial audience? While matters of code and of literary competence and convention will enter into the discussions of this chapter, my primary focus will be this kind of cultural remoteness. I will eventually argue that such remoteness will necessarily involve critics in the same types of analogies, historical narratives, and sociohistorical theories that characterize critical approaches to remote references. But I will also suggest that attention to the way narrative dynamics characterize an authorial audience can itself help a critic characterize a work's contextual scene.

The Rhetorical Situation of "Usher"

Two critics who make relatively straightforward claims about the scene Poe is addressing are Brian M. Barbour in his article "Poe and Tradition,"2 and Donald E. Pease in Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context.3 Although both of these readings have significant inadequacies, they provide useful opportunities


for beginning to consider the ways a work of fiction characterizes its authorial audience, and the significance of such characterization for cultural studies. Also, since both critics claim to find referentiality in the story, attending to these critics allows for further consideration of the concept of referential tension, and of the ability of this concept to allow fictions to establish the terms of their own referentiality. Attention to these two interpretations will again demonstrate the power of rhetorical analysis to give the text a voice in the dialog between text and critic.

I will first describe the sociohistorical frameworks in relation to which these two critics are interpreting the tale, and the specific interpretations that they produce. Barbour begins by noting that "writers inherit more than just other writers," and that the work of the mature artist "grows out of, even as it seeks to correct, the life around him" (63). He notes that Poe's "creative years coincided with the age of Jackson, and it was within and against that tradition that his own sensibility developed" (64). Citing John William Ward, Barbour claims that "'The central value of American culture in the early nineteenth century . . .' was 'the assertion of the worth of the totally liberated, atomistic, autonomous individual'" (Barbour 64), and that it is against this "prevailing tradition that Poe needs to be seen" (64). Poe's task "was to show his society that its
central values were not humanly adequate" (64), though his "basic technique arose as a way of exploring this tradition without having a recognized countertradition to invoke" (65).

Barbour analyzes four of Poe's tales in his article, two of which, "The Purloined Letter" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," "convey Poe's analysis of the American mind" (65). In "Usher," Poe represents the American mind by his portrayal of the narrator as "the ordinary man of common sense" who "accepts as axiomatic the adequacy of untutored intelligence" (71). The "theme" of the inadequacy of this mindset "emerges from the dialectical interplay between his untutored common sense and the instreaming impressions which evade it" (71). Barbour's framework for understanding the story is principally derived from John William Ward's biographical and social analysis Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age. Ward claims that "as representative of the idea of nature, Andrew Jackson acted out the belief that training was unnecessary, that traditional learning was no more than an adornment to native sense" (Ward 210). Contemporary appraisals of Jackson suggested "a preference for the natural over the artificial, of the intuitive over the logical" (Ward 31), and Ward links popular conceptions of Jackson with often-contrasted Transcendentalist terminology

and doctrine, as "against 'Understanding,' or methodical thought, they [the Jacksonians] appealed to 'reason,' that is, intuition" (Ward 50). Barbour sees this attitude as "necessary for the belief in the autonomous self" (Barbour 70), and it is the attitude that he identifies with the narrator of "Usher" under the label "man of common sense."

Barbour does a detailed stylistic analysis of the narrator's language, particularly at the beginning of the story when, significantly, the character Roderick has yet to even appear. He claims that "The narrator's tone never changes no matter how hard he has to strain to account for phenomena, and this is the key to the tale as a whole. It indicates the strength of his need to domesticate the experience and keep up the illusion that everything is explicable within the general Newtonian framework" (73), until "at the end, he directly experiences what no common sense can ever explain, no science account for" (72).

Like Barbour, Pease reads Poe's story against the individualistic tendencies of Americans both past and present, although these concerns ultimately lead him to a characterization of the narrator very different from that of Barbour. His book Visionary Compacts develops the claim that "Prior to the Civil War, Hawthorne, Whitman, Emerson, and in very different ways Melville and Poe searched for forms of cultural agreement more lasting than the mere opposition to a past sanctioned by the Revolutionary mythos"
(ix), and that "At a time in which many Americans used the Revolutionary mythos to guarantee self-interest, these writers returned to the nation's grounding compact in order to reflect on what was in the general interest of the nation" (x). Moreover, Pease's intention is not to "isolate" these visionary compacts "within that time period but to suggest that these compacts await renewal as a way of liberating us from the general crisis in cultural legitimation ruling the days of our present lives" (xi).

In his chapter entitled "Edgar A. Poe: The Lost Soul of America's Tradition," Pease points to the value of a literary tradition as a "cultural legacy" of canonical works which "sustain what we have called the culture's collective memory" (164). Poe, however, "insists on a recognition of cultural disconnection, threatening the feasibility of the notion of cultural transmission I have been developing" (165). Comparing Poe with Hawthorne, Pease notes that "Unlike Hawthorne's twice-told tales, Poe's allegories of the instant interrupt cultural transmission. In accounting for an instant of change unrelated to any previous or subsequent moment, Poe's tales violate a culture's collective memory" (167). Poe's writing "allegorizes the loss of Hawthorne's cultural memory" (168).

In Pease's reading of "Usher," Roderick Usher has summoned the narrator for a specific purpose, a purpose he "makes explicit" in his rendition of "The Haunted Palace."
In this song "Usher has stored the tradition of his house within a cultural form he wishes the narrator to preserve and pass on," recording "both his lineage's past . . . and the loss of the past in the present" (177). Yet "When Roderick Usher summons the narrator to witness the disappearance of his entire lineage, he addresses a man utterly disqualified to restore the tradition of the house to cultural memory," because the narrator "is under the dominion of what we have called the modernist compulsion" (176). Rather than participate in the cultural transmission that Roderick requires, the narrator's "need for excitement enables him to separate his present world from Usher's last wish," and he refuses to "provide the reflection on the past Usher so urgently demands" (177). Thus for Pease, as well as for Barbour, the narrator is a representative American, dramatizing the deficiencies of American culture.

Both of these readings, then, though they begin by characterizing the cultural scene addressed by the story's rhetoric, end up also claiming that Poe used documentary reference as a key element of his fictional response to this critical scene, just as I earlier claimed for "Bartleby." Unlike "Bartleby," in which references were to discreet types within American society, Barbour and Pease claim to find in "Usher" reference to a broadly representative type of the American character. Yet it is a bit disturbing to see the same character read as craving excitement by one
critic, and as needing to "domesticate" his experiences by another, especially when the two critics seem to be of ethically similar minds toward what they perceive as Poe's American culture. It will be worth some closer attention to the tale to sort out exactly where and why these interpretations differ, and what relationship they have with the tale itself.

In his attempt to characterize the narrator as a "man of common sense," Barbour seizes upon a feature of the narrator that in many ways this narrator shares with the narrator of "Bartleby": his failings as an interpreter of phenomena that lie outside his usual experience. The narrator's interpretive framework is alternately characterized as "common sense" or as his "Newtonian framework," both said by Barbour to represent cultural belief systems undergirding a cultural faith in untutored intelligence. This tension begins to be established in the first paragraph of the story, where "Poe's theme, method, and the basic configuration of the tale are all outlined" (71). Barbour cites this passage:

I know not how it was--but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me--upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain--upon the bleak walls--upon the vacant eye-like windows--upon a few rank sedges--and upon a
few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. (71)

Several stylistic features of this discourse are said to present the reader "with a mind incapable of the development necessary even for its own preservation" (71). The narrator's "rational tone" is in evidence here, in phrases like "I looked upon the scene before me," but the adjectives which follow, an "interesting mix of the objective—mere, simple, few, white, decayed—and the subjective—bleak, vacant eye-like, rank" dramatizes the "dialectical interplay" within the narrator's consciousness. Moreover, "The sentence movement is extraordinarily slow and clogged . . . giving the effect of great intellectual effort, of a mind puzzled by what lies before it and pondering each successive image in hopes of making a breakthrough" (72). The "series of false starts ('there was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening')," implies "the mind's reaching for and discarding in turn analogies which might generate understanding" (72).

These and other stylistic features are cited as establishing the interpretive method and framework of the narrator. The narrator eventually enters the "threshold world" of the Ushers, and "Usher opens the door on things
undreamt of in the philosophies of, say, Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson" (73). Yet the "narrator's way of handling this unlooked for experience varies no more than his tone" (73), until the moment Madeline stands "without the door," after which, "by instinct deeper than common sense, he flies. Life is not defeated, but a certain way of regarding it most certainly is" (75).

Is Barbour justified in his claim that the characterization of the narrator represents a "man of common sense"? Not only are there some serious deficiencies in this particular characterization, but there are several more general considerations which would put the burden of proof on a critic who would claim that the narrator is a documentary representation of any social type, even one as general as a "typical American."

One obstacle to viewing the story this way stems from the theory of literary "effect" expounded by Poe in, among other places, his 1842 review of Hawthorne. If some kind of affective response like "terror, or passion, or horror" (1026)5 is the chief purpose of Poe's tales, one might expect to find referential or thematic concerns subordinated to this aim. This is not a strong obstacle if the story itself supports the kind of referentiality suggested by

Barbour, but clearly the evidence for his claim must come from within the story.

Joel Porte suggests a problem for such a reading that is more internal to the story. He claims that the narrator "is intelligent, but his intelligence is more often used to protect himself from knowledge than to explore the unknown" (63). Yet when Porte turns to discussing particular instances of the narrator's ambiguities and rational explanations that are "clearly meant to reassure us," he notes that "Poe's main purpose in all of these instances is, of course, to heighten the sense of implied horror by being suggestive rather than explicit. And the narrator serves this purpose splendidly, in spite of himself, since his attempt to allay our fears by overlooking the 'anomalous' only increases the air of the sinister" (64). Porte raises the possibility that the mimetic function of the narrator is frequently subordinated to his synthetic function of heightening the tale's horror. Such subordination would work against the establishment of a referential tension for the narrator.

Furthermore, these rational "reassurances" of the narrator can be understood within the literary tradition and generic expectations of gothic fiction, with its precedents in Ann Radcliffe and others. Numerous critics have noted

how indebted to literary models the story's setting, sources and effects seem to be. Thomas Woodson claims that "the Ushers are determinedly 'literary' in origin and being" (19).7 Barton Levi St. Armand describes the mansion of "Usher" as an "eclectic" structure "in which a Gothic frame is supported by a basically Egyptian foundation" (32), and the narrator's opening observations as "in the general Romantic tradition of a meditation on ruins" (36).8 What Michael Davitt Bell calls Poe's radical "sacrifice of relation" between his stories and the "known world" seems to land these stories in alternative worlds heavily peopled by literary predecessors. This "literary" quality of "Usher" provides further incentive for understanding the rationality of the narrator in reference to his gothic sources, as simply a literary convention in the service of an emotional effect, and it makes it still more problematic to try to claim that the narrator is a deliberate fictional representation of a social type within Poe's immediate cultural context.

In addition to these general obstacles to finding documentary reference in the narrator, Barbour's "common


sense" characterization supresses important dimensions of the narrator's character. In some respects, the same opening paragraphs that Barbour uses to demonstrate the narrator's rational repressions could also be used to characterize him as a romantic connoisseur of overpowering impressions. He is dismayed by his first glimpse of Usher because his feeling "was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible" (974). He makes a precise comparison of his impressions to what are evidently his own experiences as "a reveller upon opium," and complains that "no goading of the imagination could torture" the way he feels "into aught of the sublime" (974). These references to opium, the "poetic," and the "sublime" are coded references to a stereotyped romantic persona and should doubtlessly be recognized as such by Poe's authorial audience.

There is, however, another, more indirect sense in which a character like the narrator might potentially be understood as referential, by considering not the overt referential intentions of the work, but its authorial audience. If Poe is trying to achieve an emotional effect on his audience, what does his characterization of the narrator tell us about his conception of that audience? In this light it is significant that Poe felt he could count on his readers to respond to the romantic allusions of the
narrator. It might also be significant that the narrator speaks in particular rational modes. These modes and their functions in the story help characterize Poe's authorial audience, and in doing so they might be called "referential" in an indirect sense, and they will be of interest for any attempt to recover Poe's perspective on his contemporary culture.

Barbour's claim that the narrator refers to a strain of thought and discourse in Poe's society might thus be pursued by considering what his characterization reveals about the authorial audience. But the "common sense" that Barbour attributes to the narrator simply does not correspond to the "methodical thought" versus "intuition" dichotomy that Ward's model would imply. It would seem, in fact, that it is precisely the narrator's "intuition" that brings fear and the threat of the unknown. It is intuition that the narrator represses. And the narrator's synthetic role in the story is to help the authorial audience summon its own darkest intuitions over the objections of the common-place, the scientific, and the rational. It must be concluded that the "common sense" of Barbour's Ward is neither overtly represented by the story nor covertly implied by its authorial audience.

If the common-sense narrator of Barbour is finally not true to the story, what about the excitement-seeking
modernist of Pease? The same general objections to viewing the narrator as a documentary representation of the "American character" that arose for Barbour's interpretation also apply to Pease's understanding of the narrator as a representative American. But Pease draws thematic meaning out of the interactions between Roderick and the narrator, and the shortcomings of this thematic interpretation can be analyzed before considering more generally the possible connections between the story and the cultural situation posited by Pease.

For Pease, the pivotal moment of the story comes when Roderick Usher sings "The Haunted Palace," and the narrator responds (or, in Pease's reading, fails to respond). Pease's claim that the palace of this poem corresponds literally, in Roderick's mind, to the Usher mansion is simply asserted without discussion, though his reading of the poem is virtually unique among interpreters of "Usher."

Actually, the dependence of Pease's interpretation of the story on this interpretation of the poem is a key problem with his argument. The narrator responds to the poem by commenting that "in the under or mystic current of its meaning, I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time a consciousness of the part of Usher, of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne" (979). In Pease's interpretation, the narrator is evading the song's overt meaning by resorting to an interpretation of its "under or
mystic current." But the narrator's allegorical interpretation is rather bluntly invited by the song itself, right from the first stanza.

In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted,
Once a fair and stately palace--
Radiant palace--reared its head.
In the monarch Thought's dominion--
It stood there!
Never seraph spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair.

The palace is here imaged as a head, and the monarch who inhabits this palace is clearly identified as "Thought."

This allegory is later continued with the eyes and mouth alluded to by the "two luminous windows" (line 18) through which the "ruler of the realm was seen" (24), and the

. . . fair palace door
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing
And sparkling evermore,
A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
Was but to sing (26-30).

The biggest question about the narrator's interpretation is how he could read the blatant allegory of the song as in any sense "under" or "mystic," unless perhaps its "undercurrent" is not its meaning but its application to Usher's situation. In any event, associating "the monarch Thought's dominion" with the house and heritage of the Ushers would be much more of an "undercurrent" meaning than the one the narrator offers.

Moreover, the tone of the narrator's discussion of the poem corresponds more to the "rationalizing" mode discussed
by Barbour than to the "excitement-seeking" mode identified elsewhere by Pease. Barbour's careful analysis of the narrator in the paragraph following his song shows the narrator resisting the romantic "excitement" of Usher's world. Nor is the song given a location in the structure of the story that would necessarily invite the weight that Pease attaches to it. After the narrator's initial glimpse of Madeline, he spends "several days" with Usher, during which they "painted and read together; or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar" (978). Roderick's song gives a concrete example of his musical endeavors, sandwiched between similar illustrations of his painting and his reading. There is no hint of Roderick's appeal for remembrance in either of these latter two illustrations, and the entire section recounting the narrator's first few days with Roderick seems designed primarily to characterize Roderick.

Pease claims that the narrator's "refusal to provide the reflection on the past Usher so urgently demands" somewhat mysteriously "never enters either into the tale's theme or into its narrator's consciousness" (177). This claim is hard to square with Pease's thematic interpretation of Roderick's song. But considering some of the ways that "Usher" characterizes its authorial audience, Pease is justified in sensing that Poe's tale is not irrelevant to the interpretive questions he brings to it, even though the
story is not overtly "about" those questions. Although ancient families and ancestral mansions are stock items in gothic fiction, here the extinction of the Usher family line furnishes the basic premise of the story. At times, in fact, Roderick and the narrator attribute Roderick's condition to "his sister's approaching decease and the dwindling of his "ancient race" (978). This attribution belongs to the "rationalizing" mode of the narrator and is not to be accepted by the authorial audience, as I will later try to show. But the domination of the past upon this self-isolated family still provides some of the tale's horror.

After his song, "suggestions arising from this ballad" (981) lead to a discussion of Roderick's belief in the "sentience" of "the grey stones of the home of his forefathers" (981), as evidenced by

the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was. Such opinions need no comment and I will make none. (981)

Here the rationalizing narrator once again hastily dismisses a disturbing suggestion, only to give it an ominous credibility for Poe's reader. Yet the content of this suggestion is interesting for the way it helps characterize Poe's authorial audience. The influence of tradition is
available to Poe as a "horror trope," in a way perhaps analogous to the availability of totalitarian nightmares as horror tropes during the cold war years of our own century. To claim, as does Pease, that Poe "insists on a recognition of cultural dislocation" is going too far; Poe himself is clearly implicated by the uses he makes of this material. In fact, it would come as little news to Poe's readers that his stories are in some way calculated to pander to the "excitement seeking" elements of his readers. Whether this implies that Poe himself denigrates the past is a separate issue. But it could very well be argued that this implicit characterization of Poe's authorial audience is at least consistent with the way Pease would characterize the maladies of Poe's cultural situation.

Barbour and Pease make the intention of the author key to the authority of their readings and to the links they posit between story and context, and between the story and their larger sociohistorical projects. I have argued that the rhetorical dynamics of the story do not support their claims. Yet Pease's observations suggest a way of reading the scene of a work not as it is referenced by an intending author, but as it is implied by the way a work characterizes an authorial audience. Such an approach to understanding the contextual scene of a work maintains its grounding in the rhetoric of an intending author without limiting itself to considering the overt themes and subject of a work.
Cultural Dialectic and the Scene of "Usher"

I will turn now to two other critics whose approaches to "Usher" will complicate the sense of authorial intention assumed by Barbour and Pease, and also what I have meant so far by "scene." Barbour and Pease both interpret "Usher" according to what might be called a "rhetorical situation" model, by which the literary work is understood as a response to the "scene" or "situation" that the author wants to address by "symbolic action."

These next critics expand the notion of scene to include not only the "target" of an author's symbolic action, but also the sources of his or her works. These could include literary sources or traditions, ideas, values, subcultures or counter-cultures—anything and everything that is in some sense a resource for the author's vision and work. This expanded notion of scene opens up the possibility that a work might be self-reflexive, responding to its own resources and perhaps to tensions and inherited contradictions within those resources, by articulating, transforming, or symbolically resolving elements of them.

This possibility suggests some different ways that an authorial audience may be implied by a literary work than those of the "rhetorical situation" model of Barbour and Pease. For these first two critics, I considered the way a cultural situation might contribute to the characterization
of an authorial audience, as well as the ways that cultural beliefs and emotional patterns or symbols might be inscribed in such a characterization. For the next two critics, I will also need to consider the way an authorial audience might be characterized by an internal tension or dialectic which is symbolically represented and (perhaps) resolved by a fictional narrative. I will also need to consider an additional way for an authorial audience to become dated or remote for a given reader or era: not only when its beliefs and emotional symbols are remote, but when the dialectic tensions addressed by a work are not shared by a reader.

I will first look at Evan Carton's interpretation of "Usher" in The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne. In his introduction, Carton promises to place its subjects more squarely in their "philosophical context than is customary" and to observe

the relationship between their artistic challenges and the contemporary problems of European philosophy. I use Kant and Hegel to define the dialectic between the need to distinguish the immanent, empirical, or lawful use of reason from the transcendent and illusive judgements of pure reason and the need to overcome this static and self-alienating distinction through dynamic synthesis through a phenomenology of spirit. The writers of romance, I suggest, sustain this dialectic performatively and imagistically . . .

as it cannot be sustained, or resolved, discursively. (2)

Thus Carton interprets his literary subjects not as acting upon some cultural scene, but as reflecting dialectically upon their literary resources "performatively and imagistically." For Carton's reading of Poe, this will be primarily a dialectic of conflicting emotional responses to the philosophical framework of Poe and his culture.

Carton reads Poe in relation to Hegel's Phenomenology. He claims that "a central apprehension of romance, one that is most basic and most evident in the writings of Dickinson and Poe" is "the apprehension that the moment of fulfillment in the quest for the absolute, the moment of the self's integration with God, is the moment of the self's annihilation and meaning's irremediable loss" (14). As Carton quotes Hegel:

having learned from experience that the grave of its actual unchangeable Being has no actuality, that this vanished individuality, because it has vanished, is not the true individuality, consciousness will abandon its quest for the unchangeable individuality as an actual existence, or will stop trying to hold on to what has vanished. Only then is it capable of finding individuality in its genuine or universal form. (Hegel 132)10

"No writer in English," according to Carton, "has imagined the implications of the Phenomenology as vividly, and with

such a force of fascination and horror, as Edgar Allan Poe" (15).

Carton does not say that Hegel himself is a direct source for Poe, yet he claims that "The probability that Poe never studied Hegel's text only enhances the significance" of the "fundamental relationships between literary and philosophical modes of romantic enterprise" (15). Carton does not spell out the precise nature of this relationship, but presumably the literary culture of romanticism which Poe draws upon holds within it the tensions and possibilities which Poe explores in his work. Hegel has either influenced this culture in a general way, or else shares some larger intellectual or cultural influence with Poe and other American writers.

For Carton, Roderick Usher is the central figure of "Usher." In Roderick, "the natural repulsion by which any 'proper identity' sustains itself and the growing supernatural attraction toward a universal identity--battle" (74). The fall of the House of Usher is Roderick's "most exalted work of art," and by "interweaving Usher's 'fulfillment' with his own conceptions about the consummation of art and the universe" (conceptions best illustrated by the "great flowing in" which concludes Eureka), Poe "achieves his most perfect portrayal of the mingled attractiveness and repulsiveness, and the ambiguous
suicidal and salvational implications, of the movement toward such consummation" (72).

To consider Carton's thematic claims, it will be necessary to examine the character dimensions of Roderick and the way these dimensions participate in the dynamics of the narrative. From the start Roderick is presented as a puzzle and a mystery, both for the narrator and for the reader. The tension that accompanies the establishment of this puzzle provides the context in which Roderick's character is progressively revealed, together with theories on the part of both the narrator and Roderick himself about how to make larger sense of those dimensions.

Early in the narrative, the relative trustworthiness and limitations of the narrator's observations and judgements are established. Significantly, the stylistic uneasiness which, in Barbour's analysis, characterizes the narrator's discourse as he first encounters the house is not apparent upon his first encounter with Roderick himself. Here the narrator's observations seem sure and precise. When the narrator mentions that he "was at once stuck with an incoherence--an inconsistency" in Roderick, the authorial audience has no cause to doubt this assessment. Immediately after this observation the narrator paraphrases Roderick: his illness "was, he said, a constitutional and family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy--a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would
undoubtedly soon pass off" (976). This citation, though paraphrased, confirms the narrator's assessment of "inconsistency" in Roderick and affirms the reliability of the narrator's observations.

This reliability does not, however, extend to the narrator's attempts to understand Roderick. At one point, for instance, the narrator cites Roderick's belief in the "influence . . . of his family mansion . . . over his spirit" (978). The narrator dismisses this theory as "superstitious impressions." Yet the narrator himself had done battle with a kind of oppressive "influence" upon his initial encounter with the mansion, and the language by which he now dismisses Roderick's theory is the same language he had employed to repress his earlier forebodings. At one point, Roderick does admit, "although with some hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin" (978), that of his sister's approaching decease and the dwindling of his "ancient race." For the moment, both Roderick and the narrator agree on the probable cause of Roderick's condition. But this agreed-upon theory is far from a certainty. It fits the already-established patterns of rational repression on the part of the narrator, and of "inconsistency" on the part of Roderick—recall the way Roderick had just before asserted his condition as a "constitutional and family evil," only to dismiss it in his
next breath as "a mere nervous affection." Roderick later returns to his theory of "influence," although the narrator more than once refers to him as a "hypochondriac." Which explanation is the more trustworthy is not immediately clear, although in general both characters seem least reliable when they are being most dismissive of their darker intuitions.

The narrator's initial encounter with Roderick reveals, in addition to his "incoherence," a habitual trepidancy—an excessive nervous agitation" (977). He suffers from "a morbid acuteness of the senses" (977), and is "a bounden slave" to "an anomalous species of terror" (977). After Madeline briefly passes through the scene, the narrator begins chronicling a time during which "a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit" (978). The appearance of Madeline marks the beginning of an additional instability, but during the days before Madeline's "death" and burial, the focus of the narrative on the mystery of Roderick's character and condition actually intensifies, as the narrator records those days with the intention of revealing more about Roderick.

Roderick and the narrator "painted and read together; or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar" (978). He finds in Roderick "a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality,
poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe" (978-79). He also finds in him a varied and powerful artistic presence, though narrowly obsessed with "phantasmagoric conceptions" in his painting, music, and reading. In his music Roderick evidenced "intense mental collectedness and concentration" (979). In his painting he "painted an idea," suggesting in his "simplicity" and "nakedness" of design a deeper metaphysical realm than that which presents itself to "mortals."

This section of the story ends abruptly with the reintroduction of the Madeline instability, and leaves Roderick as fully characterized as he will ever be in the story. Additional traits in Roderick will now be caused by the new situation of Madeline's burial. Is Roderick's portrayal, then, consistent with Carton's characterization of Roderick as one who "cannot defend his 'proper identity' against the slightest incursion from without," who has "beheld in operation the life of inanimate things and recognized it as his own" (74), who is suffering the horror of losing his individuality in the consummation of a Hegelian dialectic?

Many of Roderick's traits do fit this identification. The epigraph, too, fits:

Son Coeur est un luth suspendu;
Sitot qu'on le touche, il resonne.
The change Poe made in this quote from "my heart" to "his heart" seems calculated to attach the saying to Roderick, and it reenforces Carton's influence/identity theme. In fact, Carton is able to make a convincing connection between most of Roderick's character dimensions and this Hegelian formulation: his artistic character, his fear, his sense of ancestral influence or determination, the "excited and highly distempered ideality" of all his studies and occupations. Yet Carton's characterization of Roderick is quite focused and specific, and a casual reading of the story does not suggest that Roderick's traits have such a tight thematic focus. At first glance, some key attributes of Roderick, such as his "phantasmagoric" reading and his mysterious relationship with Madeline, don't seem to fit into Carton's formulation at all, although they might fit a more generalized stock notion of the "romantic artist."

Carton's reading gathers force, however, when it is read in light of "code knowledge" gleaned from Poe's other writings, although this exercise will also help expose some of the datedness of Poe's story. The ending of "Usher" is read by Carton in light of the cosmic consummation described at the end of Eureka. The theme of "integration with the divine" as an ambiguously positive consummation is connected with similar readings of "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom." Such a theme at least appears
in other works by Poe, including works which are not particularly "gothic" in genre.

The features of Roderick's characterization which might initially have seemed to escape Carton's formulation also fall into place when read against other writings by Poe. Roderick's "phantasmagoric" reading takes on additional significance when considered in light of Poe's theorizing about the "spiritual" dimensions of literature. Michael Davitt Bell cites Poe's Alciphron review, in which Poe claims that the "mystic or secondary expression" of a sentiment "spiritualizes the fanciful conception, and lifts it into the ideal" (Bell 93), a notion akin to "the quasi-religious spiritualism of Poe's contemporaries--the 'mystic' imagination providing access to those 'spiritual' truths invisible to the fancy" (Bell 93). The role of Madeline may also be fit into this theme of spiritual perception and integration when read against, for instance, Poe's review of Undine, in which he asserts that "the whole wide range of fictitious literature embraces nothing comparable in loftiness of conception . . . to those final passages of the volume before us," leading up to "the rapturous death of Sir Huldebrand in the embraces of his spiritual wife" (Bell 96).

Other elements of the story fit Carton's theme more tightly when other Poe texts are considered. The puzzling term "kingdom of inorganization" appears in Roderick's discourse on "the sentience of all vegetable things," in
which the narrator notes that "in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization" (981). Carton elsewhere notes the use of a similar term in "Mesmeric Revelation," in which Vankirk claims that "When I am entranced the senses of my rudimental life are in abeyance, and I perceive external things directly, without organs, through a medium which I shall employ in the ultimate, unorganized life" (Carton 64). This private philosophical definition Poe gives to a term like "unorganization" (or "inorganization") helps connect Roderick's understanding of "the gray stones of the home of his forefathers" (981) with his other modes of spiritual perception.

Some of Poe's symbolism also takes on additional significance. On the climactic, fatal night of "Usher," Roderick opens a window and the narrator sees that "a whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity" (984). Carton reads the theme of "Usher" in conjunction with two other stories, "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom." Although Carton himself does not discuss the connection in symbolism between the two stories, the whirlwind of "Usher" takes on additional significance when considered in relation to the "vortexes" of these other two tales. In Carton's reading, these vortexes are manifestations of divine power which threaten
to subsume the individual, and they bring with them not only terror, but the promise a kind of fulfillment through integration with the divine. What may have appeared to be simply an atmospheric effect can here, once again, be tied to Carton's thematic reading of "Usher."

Carton claims that

The characteristic subject (even, perhaps, the object) of a Poe story is the attempt to achieve some sort of contact with, or to apprehend certain principles of, the primal and ultimate reality which lies beneath and beyond the quotidian and the known. Such a reality, given its otherness in relation to common experience and its conflict with the apparent, is unavailable to ordinary modes of perception or thought (60).

This mode of perception not only puts one in contact with God or with the divine; it involves a kind of integration with the divine. Carton notes that for Poe, madness and death are metaphors "for integration into the universal mind/body of God or for entrance into the realm of imagination" (70). Thus "spiritual" perception involves, for Poe, a loss of selfhood or individuation. "Usher"'s seemingly diverse and eclectic collection of romantic trappings have this in common; they involve Roderick, the sensitive artist, in spiritual perception, and lead him toward the "ambiguous suicidal and salvational implications" (72) of this integration with the divine. Carton's thematic reading, it must be concluded, makes very good sense of the narrative dynamics of "Usher."
Such terms, symbols, and unspoken assumptions can be re-constituted piece by piece by reference to Poe's other work and his culture, and they comprise some of the "code knowledge" by which a work like "Usher" becomes more comprehensible. But in other respects such patchwork bits of "knowledge" are not enough to enable a reader to fully enter into the world of the tale. Poe's entire system of philosophical and spiritual beliefs and those of his contemporaries provided a broad context in which a work like "Usher" had meaning.

According to Carton, Poe exposed the "risks" involved in these "mechanics of the imagination" in a uniquely insistent way. He confronts "the imaginative quester's perpetual risk that his most crucial perceptions are illusions, that his most lucid reasoning is madness, that his passionate search for the secret of life in death is itself a form of death in life" (60). The relevance of much of this, however, depends upon some kind of investment in the truth and potential of this kind of spiritual perception. Poe seems, in fact, to posit an authorial audience who not only believes in this possibility, but for whom his own stories might be the instrument of such perception.

Granted, generations of readers of gothic and horror fiction have been willing to suspend disbelief and enter into the authorial audience of such works. More than
perhaps any other writer of the American Renaissance, Poe remains popular with ordinary readers. Yet present-day readers are unlikely to attach any serious cognitive value to the spiritual perception that Poe somewhat ambiguously offers in the rhetoric of his tales and poetry. While we may often be willing to accept the ambiguities of perception and the world of spirit as affective conventions of gothic fiction, present-day readers--and particularly present-day critics--are not nearly so disposed to take Poe's thematic offering seriously as were many of Poe's contemporaries. As Michael Davitt Bell has shown, debates about the ambiguous interrelationships between death and spirit helped define a cultural belief system which Poe could attempt to resolve through his literary efforts. However we characterize our present cultural situation, Poe's attempted resolutions of his own cultural tensions do not address ours the same way.

This remoteness of Poe's scene and authorial audience creates a potential relevance problem for Poe's readers and critics. Carton attempts to meet this problem, in part, by discussing Poe in the context of contemporary European philosophy. All the explanatory features of Carton's analysis come not from Hegel, but from examining Poe's own fiction and critical writings. All the "coded" features of Poe vocabulary and symbolism and the philosophical assumptions that help make unified sense of "Usher" come from Poe himself, or from the conventions of gothic fiction.
References to Hegel and European philosophy serve not to explain the workings of Poe's narratives, but to help provide a present day link to those narratives, to recover something of their relevance. By linking American romantics with European philosophers, Carton links the former to a historical metanarrative that culminates in (or is created by) the present day crisis in metaphysics as manifested in thinkers like Derrida.

Another critic who explores dialectic tensions in "Usher" is Michael Davitt Bell in The Development of American Romance. Bell is, on one hand, interested in psychoanalyzing the way the story structures the emotional responses of its authorial audience. Ultimately, however, Bell is concerned with the way Poe exposes latent contradictions within the generic conventions of "romance," and corresponding contradictions in the cultural conception of "spirit" which undergirded the literary practice of romance. To a greater degree than Carton, Bell's analysis makes relevant sense of Poe by moving from understanding to overstanding altogether, from confronting an alien philosophical framework to critiquing it, or to finding an implicit critique of it within an author's own work.

Bell's larger project is to study the genre of "romance," to determine what nineteenth-century American authors who wrote in this genre meant by it. His answer is
that romance, for these authors, meant a "sacrifice of relation" with the "known world," and the particular interest Poe has for Bell's study is that his theory and practice make this "sacrifice" more thoroughly and consistently than any other of America's romancers, and that in taking the genre to such extremes, he is uniquely able to expose some of its inner tensions. According to Bell, Poe made the crucial step most of his contemporaries refused: his theory of romance was not a rationalization but a rationale. Poe did not overcome the problems that had plagued his predecessors. Rather, he brought into sharp focus, at last, the covert and irreconcilable tensions that animate their works. (87)

Bell claims that Poe himself embodies an implicit critique of the "milieu" of which he is, nonetheless, "part and product" (88).

Carton hints at one justification for such an approach, when he notes that Poe's theoretical "commitment to 'psychol impressions' or 'sensations'--is an abstruse and precarious blend of phenomenon and method" (60). Bell is more explicit:

Poe's chief importance as a critic is that he focused on the actual techniques of producing beauty rather than on the pseudo-religious, intuitive experiences that supposedly legitimized these techniques. By doing so, he provided a necessary corrective to the visionary vagueness of so much Romantic criticism; but in supplying this corrective, he shrouded the very concept of the 'mystic' or 'spiritual'--so crucial to his theory of imagination--in a nearly impenetrable fog of epistemological confusion. (93)
Thus, as Bell understands it, the tensions hidden within Poe's culture-bound assumptions correspond to tensions within his critical prose.

Moreover, Poe's development as a literary theorist shows him slipping along this very fault line in his reasoning. Bell points out that "by the mid-1840's his confusion had become so intense that he very nearly jettisoned spirituality altogether." In 1844 "Poe could write to James Russell Lowell: 'I have no belief in spirituality. I think the word a mere word...," and "By 1845 the mechanistic 'unity of effect,' celebrated in the 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, had replaced the earlier imagination of spiritual insight" (94). Such wavering is clearly not a linear development in Poe's thinking; later works like *Eureka* and the "ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave" (1038) spoken of in "The Poetic Principle" demonstrate a continued robust interest in "spirituality."11 But this apparent inconsistency in Poe's theoretical understanding may suggest that he was sometimes hung up at the very point where Bell wishes to critique him.

When Bell turns to "Usher," he finds it necessary to discuss "how" Poe's tales mean before he discusses what this tale means. Bell suggests that Poe's tales are radically

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devoid of connection with the "known world," and hence radically devoid of meaning in any overt sense. But the means by which these tales sever those connections and achieve "purity" or "ideality" leads Bell to consider a kind of meaning that the tales achieve by their processes of repression.

Bell finds the terms to describe this process in the title of Poe's first story collection, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. In the term "Arabesque," Bell insists, "Poe found a convenient label for artistic 'purity'" (105). Yet "ideality is equated not with meaninglessness alone but with the presence of a 'mystic or secondary expression'" (105-06). And Poe's tales achieve this purity and ideality by the suggestion and repression of the "grotesque." According to Bell, "the line between arabesque and grotesque, between apparently 'pure' form and submerged meaning, runs somewhere parallel to the line between conscious intention and contradictory unconscious impulse" (108). The meaning of the tale lies in the dynamics of its repressions.

Bell first makes note of the systematic repressions of the narrator in "Usher," of the "arabesque 'purity' of his narrative intention" (109). Bell connects this tendency with the conventions of Poe's gothic genre--with "so many of Anne Radcliffe's rational heroines and heroes" (108)--and we have already noted the way these repressions contribute to
the narrator's synthetic function in the tale. But for Bell the real meaning of the tale grows out of the "homicidal 'etherealization' of Roderick's sensual sister" by both Roderick and the narrator, and the "submerged meanings" of her sexuality (109). The "Mad Trist" conceals "a grotesque parody of sexual penetration and sexual guilt, transmuting sexuality into murder" (109). This submerged allegory re-enforces a "struggle between opposed masculine and feminine images" (110) that runs throughout the story and culminates in the collapse of the masculine mansion--"erect and enclosed"--into the feminine "deep and dark tarn" while the "blood-red moon" bursts forth through the opening fissure.

Bell's definition of "meaning" is not what is usually meant by the term; by this definition, in fact, "the reader must conspire with the author in the suppression of meaning" (106), and the "narrator's sexual revulsion is not the meaning toward which the tale strives; it is rather the mystic suggestion against which the narrator and his tale struggle, which is also the essence of the story's form" (111). Yet Bell is not merely imposing his psychoanalytic framework on Poe's tale (although he is doing that); he is probing the tale's sometimes self-reflexive relationship with its own rhetorical scene.

There are several objections that might be raised to Bell's analysis. First, the "problem" of Poe's apparent lack of meaning is not a problem if, as rhetorical critics
have long suggested, some works might be analyzed for their "affective" structures rather than for their cognitive content. Moreover, Carton's analysis shows convincingly that "Usher" does have thematic meaning of a more conventional sense, centered on the character of Roderick. Bell's analysis neglects discussion of the way Madeline's presence participates, alongside a number of other "spiritual" influences, in the larger theme of Roderick the artist's impending encounter with the divine. Bell also seems to equate a lack of reference or thematic meaning in a work with a total "lack of relation," at least in its overt rhetoric. Yet we have already examined several ways in which the relation of "Usher" to its authorial audience has inscribed some such "relations" to Poe's "known worlds," to which Bell's account of the work's repressions would constitute a potential addition.

Despite these objections, Bell's analysis is not unrelated to the rhetoric of Poe's tales, for reasons I have already cited. Perhaps if Poe's present-day critics were more interested in Poe's literary project on his own terms, the fault lines and uncertainties in his thinking would seem less important. But it is hard to blame critics for finding the errors of such a writer more interesting than his conscious insights--such a reaction is at not, at any rate, a mere matter of critical methodology.
Bell's larger project is to study the genre of "romance," to determine what nineteenth-century American authors who wrote in this genre meant by it. His answer is that romance meant, for the authors that wrote them, a "sacrifice of relation" with the "known world," and the particular interest Poe has for this study is that his theory and practice make this "sacrifice" more thoroughly and consistently than any other of America's romancers, and that in taking the genre to such extremes, his is uniquely able to expose some of its inner tensions.

Insofar as Bell is simply recovering generic conventions of romance, he is a handmaiden to conventional rhetorical analysis in ways that were discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Bell, however, does not confine himself that. His interest lies not just in the literary conventions of romance, but in the "failure of American romance" (244), and this failure is connected with "what Hawthorne and Melville saw as a prior failure of the American experiment" (244). The project of romance failed in a cultural setting in which "all visible culture seemed a kind of fictional language, a species of romance, a fabric of artificial formalism uneasily concealing the anarchic energy that produced it" (xiv). What Bell is doing, then, is in one respect not fundamentally different from what Barbour and Pease were attempting to do--they all draw connections between Poe's authorial audience and a rendering
of his contextual scene. For Barbour and Pease this scene is reconstructed as a means of entering Poe's authorial audience, while Bell's reconstruction provides a means of reading Poe and Poe's implied audience against themselves. Each of these critics, however, invokes Poe's scene to make the rhetoric of the tale comprehensible and meaningful.

I began this chapter by discussing the remoteness of an authorial audience as a potential obstacle to understanding and relevance. Curiously, however, the "scenes" proposed by Barbour, Pease, Carton and Bell all function in their discourse not as obstacles, but as positive links with literary works. Giving attention to these scenes is a means by which these critics propose to recover the relevance of literary works which might otherwise seem remote. For Barbour and Pease, this is done by analogy, by proposing a scene which coincides with some relevant aspect of what they consider the present-day scene. Poe might not, for instance, seem immediately relevant to the crisis in community-oriented values that Pease sees in our own generation, but if we can only see how Poe's work grew out of similar concerns in his own day, then we can see its relevance for our own "scene."

For Carton, the scene of Poe's writing--here its larger philosophical context--is the means by which it can be linked with a larger historical metanarrative, and by which it can partake of the perceived present-day relevance of
this metanarrative. Bell's interpretation of Poe's self-reflexive relation to his contemporary cultural scene designates that scene as "America" in a way that suggests a connection between that scene and the scene of present-day America, either via the role of "fictional language" in constituting culture in both Poe's culture and our own, or by the genealogical history that would claim America's romancers as a cultural heritage.

These ways of establishing connections with a remote contextual scene are analogous to the two ways of establishing connections with a remote referent discussed in chapter two: analogy and historical metanarrative. And when a work gains its original meaning and resonance, at least in part, by its relationship to a now-remote context, the task of recovering something of that context becomes necessary for rhetorical criticism. At the same time, such a recovered context must necessarily be something of an imaginative construct, and one that often cannot be satisfactorily reconstructed by considering only an individual literary work, or even a constellation of literary works. Once again, reconstructing the contextual scene of a work will necessarily involve the explicit or implicit use of sociohistorical frameworks, and of the verbal constructs by which such a context might be articulated.
CHAPTER IV

History and Difference in Literary Interpretation

Historicist criticism strives to situate literary works as firmly as possible within their original social contexts, usually as a means of investigating those contexts. In this chapter I will explore two related issues pertaining to critical historicism. First, I will explore the tension between the desire to explain works within their original horizons, and the need to make such discussion relevant to the present. I will argue, through an analysis of Jane Tompkins' critical accounts of sentimental fiction, that no historicist approach can avoid the need to posit trans-historical categories of analysis at some level.

Second, I will engage with the historicist criticism of Brook Thomas as a means of considering the role that rhetorical analysis might play in historicist critical methodologies, even where cultural analysis is the ultimate goal. I argue that treating fictional works as, in the first instance, acts of communication between author and reader can open up the possibility of cross-cultural encounters with historical difference in a way that approaches which bypass such fictional rhetoric in an effort to engage with the "social text" can easily suppress.
The model of rhetorical criticism that I have been developing in this dissertation is far from unique in valuing literature as an opportunity for encountering difference. From the notion of defamiliarization developed by the Russian formalists, to Wayne Booth’s defence of rhetorical criticism against anti-authorial textualists, to recent work by reader response critics like Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, critics have frequently shown interest in literary encounters which challenge our usual frameworks for perception and cognition. Jauss, for instance, writes

The distance between the horizon of expectations and the work, between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experience and the "horizontal change" demanded by reception of the new work, determines the artistic character of a literary work, according to an aesthetics of reception: to the degree that this distance decreases, and no turn toward the horizon of yet-unknown experience is demanded of this receiving consciousness, the closer the work comes to the sphere of "culinary" or entertainment art (25).

The goal of such an encounter with difference is generally held to be some kind of expansion or transformation of the self. In Iser’s formulation,

The production of the meaning of literary texts ... does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may reformulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness. These are the ways in

which reading literature gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated (294).2

A similar theory is developed by Hazard Adams in his article "Canons: Literary Criteria/ Power Criteria."3 For Adams, "literary" criteria signify any attempt to posit an aesthetics of literature as a realm removed from society and history. Power criteria, conversely, are criteria used to select literary texts based on their usefulness for promoting particular social or political ends. Adams posits the idea of "antithetical" criteria as a sort of middle term, where the antithetical does not merely oppose dominant culture or some political target, but rather opposes or reformulates the very conceptual oppositions within which such "targets" take shape and are understood. In this way textual encounters with difference challenge not only individual readers, but the terms upon which an entire culture or community carries on its discourse.

Jauss, Iser, and Adams obviously value the opportunity literary works provide for "horizontal change" and "formulating the unformulated," and their theories suggest a canon composed of literary works which resist appropriation by present-day readers. Resisting appropriation can be understood culturally, as in Donald Pease's claim that

2. Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974)
canonical writers of the American Renaissance "founded a lineage for their labors within that moment. And each subsequent generation proved the value of this cultural legacy by failing to exhaust its wealth" (164). These writings, then, continue to act "like some archaic resource in the midst of a thoroughly modern world" (164). Here the idea is that the cultural possibilities invoked by these writings remain continually relevant to and yet unexhausted by successive cultural actualities. But parallel to and in some ways related to this notion of cultural inexhaustibility is the hermeneutic resistance of such works to appropriation.

In this sense Adams' "antithetical" would designate not only the resistance of a text to the terms and oppositions of a culture's discourse, but also its resistance to the terms and oppositions brought to it by critics and other readers. Thematic interpretation, even when it is invited by a work, functions at the same time as an attempt to manage and appropriate a work's dynamic progression, its affective rhetoric, by the use of a critical language borrowed from the interpretive horizon. Rhetorical criticism works to expose difference in these textual encounters, to open the gap between textual rhetoric and critical appropriation, between the provisional terms by

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which we can label the concrete dynamics of a text and the culturally-significant terms to which we would link those dynamics.

In this way, encouraging encounters with difference is a motivation for rhetorical close reading. Such encounters are not an end in themselves, but a first step that opens up several interpretive possibilities which would not be available without such a first step. One of those possibilities is resistance, a clearer recognition that something in the text needs to be rejected rather than loosely subsumed under some broad strategy of assimilation which would have to operate by repressing aspects of narrative progression. In this case an initial recognition and experience of difference is a prerequisite for what may be a fruitful re-articulation of a reader's own values or knowledge.

At the same time, this kind of close reading can complicate the initial move by which a reader would reject the offering of a text. Readers bring to a text structures of disbelief as well as structures of belief, and literary encounters have the capacity to complicate the former as well as the latter of these. Careful attention to rhetorical progression can expose a gap between the text and the terms by which a reader proposes to resist it. Rhetorical close reading also opens the way for meaningful dialog about literary texts. Attending to this gap between
textual rhetoric and available modes of understanding makes such dialog meaningful, as recognition of this gap can provide an opening for encountering difference in the form of an alternative response to the text. Each of these possibilities presumes the value of texts which resist assimilation in the first place.

Encountering Historical Difference in Literature

Jane Tompkins complicates all this emphasis on difference, by proposing that literary works be valued not for their resistance to understanding or assimilation, but for their power to do "cultural work" in their own context.5 She values the immediate popularity and impact of literary works, criteria nearly diametrically opposed to the notion of difference as developed by critics like Jauss or Iser. I will contend that a concern for difference re-emerges in Tompkins' theory when consideration is given to what makes the fictions she discusses and her analyses of them relevant to present-day readers. But her studies of nineteenth-century popular fiction suggest important extensions to the way difference can be conceived and valued. Historically remote fictions can provide dialogic encounters with historically remote cultural situations, and here, too, such

encounters can be facilitated by engaging with the rhetorical dynamics of those fictions.

Recent emphases on literary historicism have focused renewed emphasis upon understanding the interrelationships between literary works and their contextual settings. What historicism has sometimes failed to explain so clearly is why a literary work that is culturally or historically remote from us should command our attention at all. This issue is particularly acute for recent revisionary readings of the so-called "sentimental fiction" of the American mid-nineteenth-century. Tompkins' compelling defence of this popular fiction demonstrates the need for even the most radical historicism to posit and make use of trans-cultural links between past and present. Her analyses suggest strong reasons for attending to the popular fictions of the past, yet those reasons are not always the ones to which she gives theoretical articulation.

Tompkins' defense of sentimental fiction is strongest where she takes on the modernist credos that have often been used to denigrate the "cultural work" that this fiction performed. Against charges that such fiction is "superficial," she clarifies its use of stock cultural codes that touched upon deep emotional investments by its audience. Against charges that this fiction is "escapist," she notes its realistic approach to living within difficult social constraints and compares it favorably to the Huck-
Finn escapism of much canonical American fiction. Against charges that this fiction represents a self-defeating compliance with a social order which oppressed women, she champions it as part of an ambitious and empowering attempt to re-figure women and their social sphere at the center of the moral and political universe. If nothing else, she has done much to insure that merely labeling a work "sentimental" or "popular" will no longer suffice as a negative critical judgement.

But Tompkins wants to do more than defend the cultural work of these fictions; she wants works like Uncle Tom's Cabin and Wide Wide World to be read today, to be included in the canon. She justifies this recommendation by drawing connections between these sentimental fictions and present-day experience, using the processes of analogy and historical narrative that characterize all historically-accountable attempts to find relevance in dated or remote fictions. Yet although I find both the fictions that Tompkins discusses and her contextualization of those fictions to be interesting and worthy of attention, the particular links she draws between past and present aren't always the same ones that I find most compelling.

Her central theoretical proposal is that literary texts be studied "not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks
about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment" (xi). Since popular fiction can reveal this thinking most clearly, it should be included in the canon. Yet this argument for canonization isn't sufficient to commend these fictions to present-day readers. However well those books accomplished "cultural work" in their own time, they seem no longer capable of accomplishing similar work in our time. Yet the very idea of "doing cultural work" is itself an analogous abstraction from the more particular polemical agendas engaged in by these works. As long as, for instance, trying to usher in the Kingdom of God can be seen as a particular, concrete instance of the larger practice of "doing cultural work," these texts can be related to our own time, since presumably cultural work is something people still do.

Tompkins makes a more explicit connection with present-day concerns by a two part analogy. Part one is the analogy between women of the 1850's and women today. Tompkins simply assumes the validity of this connection, even as she asserts that there is radical discontinuity between the world of 19th-century evangelicalism and our own world. The "sentimental" values of these novelists and the culture they represent are implicitly portrayed as distinctly female, without being essentially female. In other words, they are responses to the discreet social conditions of nineteenth-century America, conditioned by the transcultural
distinctives of female genderhood, or at least of female biology. For Tompkins, "The struggle now being waged in the professoriate over which writers deserve canonical status" is "a struggle among contending factions for the right to be represented in the picture America draws of itself" (201). She locates works like Uncle Tom and Wide Wide World within a "powerful and specifically female novelistic tradition," a tradition which has been suppressed by our male-dominated critical tradition. In other words, she is proposing that these novels in some way represent "women" in the canon.

Part two of this double analogy portrays particular values that motivated the cultural work of these fictions as instances of a broader conception of "heroism." She compares the tea time ritual of Ellen and her mother in Wide Wide World to "hoeing a bean patch on the shores of Walden Pond, or squeezing case aboard a whaling ship," as "parallel reactions against bondage and pain, and a means of salvation and grace" (170). In general, she asserts that "given the social circumstances within which they had to work," the "prescriptions for living" of the sentimental novelists of the 1850's "seem at least as heroic as those put forward by the writers who said, 'No, in thunder'" (160). When these two analogies are combined, a connection is drawn between the heroic responses of women to the social arena of the 1850's, and whatever heroism might be required in the present. The works she discusses might--after this kind of
analogizing—be situated within a wider historical narrative which could perhaps be entitled "the history of heroically non-evasive responses by women to their constrained social circumstances." It is this kind of connection-making process that enables Tompkins to place the works she analyzes within "a powerful and specifically female novelistic tradition" (123).

These connections, however, have some limitations. For one, the heroism for which Tompkins praises these works is really a twentieth century sort of heroism, and the term itself bears only a loose relationship to the rhetorical progression of and guiding concepts behind works like *Uncle Tom* and *Wide, Wide World*. Tompkins may well be successful in finding such values in these works, but doing so is more an act of conceptual imperialism than of genuine dialog with the works in question. Her appeal to gender representation also raises questions. By what means does a critic so committed to cultural relativism and socially-constructed realities presume that women like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner "represent women" in today's canonical parliament? At the very least, there is a step missing in the logic of this connection between those women and women today.

One general feature of Tompkins' approach in *Sentimental Designs* is its emphasis on establishing the continuity of these fictions with concerns of a present-day
audience. These works are said to participate, for instance, in a continuing history of "doing cultural work." Women are linked together trans-culturally, and "heroism" links together values of the past and present. What I find, however, is that the high level of abstraction needed to make such links often obscures questions which might be more interesting about these works and their context. How was the literary context for doing "cultural work" different for Warner and Stowe than it is in an age of mass media? What conception of heroism attaches to Susan Warner's Evangelicalism, and how does it compare with heroism in Jane Tompkins' anti-foundational postmodernism?

What such questions would explore are connections between past and present based not on continuity, but on difference. Tompkins makes the important observation that "a text depends upon its audience's beliefs not just in a gross general way, but intricately and precisely" (156). What this suggests for massively popular works like Wide, Wide World and Uncle Tom is that they somehow embody, "intricately and precisely," the beliefs and feelings of their cultural location. Other, more "literary" works might seek to capture social or cultural dynamics by techniques of literary reference, but these popular works offer a different kind of window into their world, if we can manage to enter into their implied audience, as Tompkins has tried to do for the works she analyzes. And when we allow popular
works to speak for their own cultures in this way, what is apt to be most interesting is not the continuity of those cultures with our own, but their differences. How, one might ask, is an authorial audience who responds to little Eva's death different from ourselves, whatever "heroism" we might still be willing to grant them.

In the contrasting emphasis of Hans Robert Jauss, the "artistic character" of a work can be determined "by the kind and the degree of its influence on a presupposed audience" (25). The greater the "aesthetic distance" between the work and its "first audience," the greater its "artistic character." "Entertainment art," by contrast, can be characterized by an aesthetics of reception as not demanding any horizontal change, but rather as precisely fulfilling the expectations prescribed by a ruling standard of taste, in that it satisfies the desire for the reproduction of the familiarly beautiful; confirms familiar sentiments, sanctions wishful notions, makes unusual experiences enjoyable as 'sensations,' or even raised moral problems, but only to 'solve' them in an edifying manner as predecided questions (25).

In his desire to rescue literary hermeneutics from the negativity of ideological analysis, Jauss gives special attention to the ways that literary communication and reception can go beyond "ideological accommodation and system-affirming reception" (98).6 This emphasis leads him

to a generalized tendency to value what he terms aesthetic distance.

Tompkins' analyses suggest some important complications to this dichotomy between artistic and entertainment literature. As Tompkins shows, Warner deliberately indulges in most of the practices by which Jauss characterizes culinary art: she fulfills standard expectations, confirms familiar sentiments, reproduces the familiarly beautiful, and "solves" her moral questions in ways that were well-articulated within her culture. Yet the edification at which her work aims cannot very well be characterized as mere "consumption"; she rather challenges people to action and change. And as Tompkins points out, the sentimental fiction of the American 1850's was part of a powerful and formative cultural movement on the part of evangelical Christians, and of women in particular. Sentimental fiction complicates these distinctions between aesthetic distance and "ideological accommodation," since it both accommodated its readers to a social order and empowered them to transform it.

Another tendency of Jauss which is illuminated by Tompkins is a kind of latent progressivism in his view of literary and social change, what John Guillory refers to as his "whiggishness."7 Literature is valuable because

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"the experience of reading can liberate one from adaptations, prejudices, and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things. The horizon of expectations of literature distinguishes itself before the horizon of expectations of lived historical praxis in that it not only preserves actual experiences, but also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behavior for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience" (Reception 41).

In Tompkins' view, sentimental novels like Wide, Wide World in some sense "anticipated unrealized possibilities" for mid-nineteenth-century American culture. But in her insistence that a culture can only be understood within its own terms Tompkins questions the authority of the present to appropriate or judge the past by the terms of the present, or automatically to value "new desires, claims, and goals" or "future experience" above past or present experience. Past cultures have their own integrity, their own complex discursive systems.

According to Jauss,

The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations, in the face of which a work was created and received in the past, enables one . . . to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and thereby to discover how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work (Reception 28).

This kind of "reconstruction" is a good description of Tompkins' critical methods, as she seeks to avoid raising her own "aesthetic preconceptions to an unacknowledged norm" and unreflectively modernize "the meaning of the past text"
(Jauss, Reception 29). Yet the effort involved in avoiding such modernization suggests a different sort of literary encounter with "difference" from the one which primarily interests Jauss.

For historically remote works, this experience of difference can be a measure not of "artistic character," but simply of historical remoteness. And the popularity and "digestibility" of such works within their own contextual horizon, rather than proving their immediate exhaustion and lack of interest, can turn an encounter with literature into a cross-cultural dialog. Such an approach to the popular fictions of a remote culture sets up what Fredric Jameson has termed an "existential" encounter with history, "a contact between an individual subject in the present and a cultural object in the past," in which "each pole of this experience is thereby at once open to complete relativization" (Jameson 53).8

From Tompkins' perspective, the writings of Stowe and Warner are quite remote from us, and this remoteness is felt by the modern reader both in the situations these works addressed and in the cultural codes they made use of. Tompkins persuasively undertakes the process of recovering those codes, but the remoteness of a work's contextual scene cannot be overcome this way. While the cultural codes which

inform a work can be discussed in a way that makes them more or less accessible and functional for a present-day reader, discussion of a work's contextual scene can instead push the work deeper into the past, and reveal the depth of the gulf separating its world from our own.

Tompkins' discussions of *Uncle Tom* and *Wide Wide World* have this dual effect, as she increases the sense we have of their remoteness, even as she makes their symbolic rhetoric more comprehensible. The cultural codes involved in scenes like little Eva's death in *Uncle Tom* and Ellen's tea-making ritual in *Wide Wide World* are discussed in ways that make sense of those episodes and make them seem less trivial by situating them within a wider cultural context. At the same time, however, these discussions make us feel the remoteness of the novels with new force, and make their intended readers seem even more different from us. At the same time that access to these cultural codes makes particular scenes of these works more accessible, it makes the works seem that much less likely to have anything to say to people as different from their original readers as ourselves.

This dilemma is one that Tompkins' "cultural work" model shares with virtually all forms of historicist interpretation. Any approach that is content neither with an ahistorical conflation of a work's original contextual horizon with the horizon of its interpreter, or with equally ahistorical "strong reading" approaches which appropriate a
literary text without reference to its original meaning in context, will be unable to connect a remote feature of a literary work to any present-day field of significance, except by processes of analogy and historical narrative.

The historicism of Tompkins is genuine, insofar as her discussions attempt to account for the meanings of literary works within their original contexts. This does not mean, however, that her interpretations are immune to any historicist critique. It simply means that such criticisms are likely to be focused upon the strategies by which she connects those works to the present. Is her implicit analogy between women then and women now really valid? Does a value like "heroism" serve as a useful trans-cultural link? Is the "cultural work" of these fictions really analogous to processes in our own culture, with enough precision to be useful?

Particular questions and criticisms like these are inevitable, because the processes of analogy and historical narrative inevitably involve judgements about trans-cultural validity and cause/effect relationships. But while such criticisms may object to particular analogies and histories by which critics connect historically remote works with the present, they cannot very well be leveled at the processes of analogy and historical narrative as such. Without them, historicism would become an irrelevant, antiquarian exercise.
Tompkins herself turns from considering continuity to considering difference in her afterward to the 1987 Feminist Press edition of *Wide, Wide World*. Here she faces more directly the question of "what [novels like *The Wide, Wide World*] can do for us" (597). Her answer is rooted in her claim that Warner's novel is "the Ur-text of the nineteenth-century United States" (585). Rather than following up this claim by processing the novel according to standard or accepted modernist historical assessments of nineteenth-century popular culture, Tompkins takes as her starting point the rhetorical impact of the novel upon a twentieth-century reader. She first claims that even present-day readers "cannot help sharing [Ellen's] emotional point of view," since we all share at times in her experiences of vulnerability and powerlessness. At the same time, however, Ellen's responses to these conditions are alien to present-day readers;

Its ideology of duty, humility, and submission to circumstance, and its insistence on the imperative of self-sacrifice, are infuriating to some readers, for these doctrines challenge everything the twentieth century has stood for in politics, psychology, and morals (585).

What the book can produce in a present-day reader, then, is a fruitful conflict, as "it forces us to recognize within our own systems of belief conflicts, such as that

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between the Christian and Freudian versions of the self, that we have been unaccustomed to face" (586). As Tompkins articulates this conflict,

though Ellen's belief in submissiveness and self-abnegation may horrify us, we cannot help siding with her in her efforts to do what she believes is right. For, and this is the point at which the essential conflict surfaces, there is always the possibility that she is right, that self-sacrifice is better than self-actualization, acceptance wiser than protest. We are, after all, the children of the nineteenth century; we, too, believe in charity and service to others" (585).

It is important to note that, in this instance, the conflict stems not from an encounter with the historically disembodied values of a historically remote book, but from a historicized encounter with an alien culture.

It is through her claim of a genealogical relationship that Tompkins constructs the historical narrative by which she connects this book to the world of present-day readers. The novel is relevant for her because of the way it situates us historically, exposing to ourselves the residual character of many of our values in a way that sharpens our sense of ourselves in the present moment. She does draw analogies between the situation of the present and that faced by Susan Warner: personal experiences with "powerlessness" and "vulnerability," general values like "charity" and "selflessness." But for her it is not these analogous continuities that make the book worth reading; they are merely descriptions of the common ground that forms
the basis of our encounter with difference in the book. Tompkins' interpretation asks us to position ourselves within a historical narrative that gives us a heightened awareness of the past in the present, and of the volatility of the unstable mosaic of values which characterizes present-day people and, likely, ourselves. And this sense of instability is only reinforced by Tompkins' account of the way the book reveals similar instabilities within Warner's own self and society.

Whether Tompkins' particular genealogical metanarrative is valid or not, it is largely for such encounters with difference that I value and would choose to teach works like *Uncle Tom* and *Wide, Wide World*. I see no way to recover the book either for myself or for my students without considering its contextual scene in a way that already implies a particular, contestable link between that scene and my own. Even so, it is perhaps telling that Tompkins herself was able to connect the book to the present in two significantly different ways, without much apparent change in the way she experiences the rhetorical dynamics of the book. What this suggests is that a literary encounter with a culturally different past does not have to occupy a fixed relationship to the present. Whatever fields of relevance I might bring to my engagement with the text—evangelical Christianity, capitalism, nationalism, gender, and so forth—my articulable interpretations will not exhaust the novel.
Behind such interpretations will remain a more basic encounter with the rhetorical dynamics of the text, and that encounter can travel with me from one interpretive act to another, as a conversation partner in my attempts to understand myself and my own cultural moment.

Historicism and the "Social Text"

While historicist criticism holds out the promise of cross-cultural dialog, such dialog is not an inevitable result of this approach. A look at the scene criticism of Brook Thomas helps illustrate why approaching a fictional narrative as a "social text" can be a less productive starting point for such cross-cultural encounters than approaching it rhetorically, as a communication between author and reader. Thomas, in "The Historical Necessity for--and Difficulties with--New Historical Analysis in Introductory Literature Courses," argues that rather than recreating "the conditions of the past so that we can recover the author's original intention," we should approach a literary work as a "social text" which "in telling us about the society that produced it also tells us about the society we inhabit today" (519). The literary formalism with which Thomas takes issue in this article is abstracted from the New Criticism, and the historicized rhetorical

model that I have been working to develop here has a good deal more in common with his methodologies than does the formalist version he attacks. Thomas takes the responses of a present-day reader to a literary text as his starting point, and he too is alert for remote or dated literary features of "historical" literary works. For Thomas, these remote features are not so much barriers to understanding as opportunities to explore the history that has made those features remote. Yet Thomas' method of engaging with this remoteness has an unfortunate tendency to neutralize literary dialog.

Thomas' method is that of "scene" criticism, criticism that tries to understand the situation that a literary work was responding to, and recover the significance of the work by relating that scene of origin to the present scene. In Thomas' words, "literature is seen in constant relation to the world around it, not so much reflecting its historical situation as responding to it," and "since both literary texts and literature as an institution are defined by their response to their historical situation, we cannot attempt to understand them in isolation from it" (514). In "Historical Necessity," Thomas tests his methodology with an interpretation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 87, "Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing."

Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know'st thy estimate.
The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;
My bonds in thee are all determinate.
For how do I hold thee but by granting,
And for that riches where is my deserving?
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,
And so my patent back again is swerving.
Thyself thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,
Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking;
So great thy gift, upon misprision growing.
Comes home again, on better judgement making.
Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter,
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.11

Thomas first briefly suggests a rhetorical reading. He notes two "formal elements" of the poem, its heavy use of "legal terminology" and the "reversal or change of tone in the final couplet" (516). These two elements help the poem to accomplish a very difficult task in the highly emotional moment of the breakup of a love affair. They allow him to praise his beloved and also to maintain his self-worth. On the one hand, the legal language distances the poem emotionally. On the other, when contrasted with the language of the couplet, it convinces the reader of the poet's emotional involvement. For while the couplet compares the affair to a dream, the legal language confirms its actuality. Read this way, the poem can be said to transcend time and speak to anyone who has experienced or can imagine experiencing the breakup of a love affair. (516)

By this interpretation, the poem speaks to the present through the simple analogy between love relationships then and now.

According to Thomas, however, "to historicize the poem is to let it speak more poignantly to our students" (516).

He notes "that we cannot read a work's language closely without a historical awareness and that a close reading of a work's language can alter our sense of history" (516). Rather than read the poem as a rhetorical structure, then, Thomas proposes to situate the language of the poem within history.

This language serves to, "As Anne Ferry has argued . . . express inner feeling at a historical moment when our modern vocabulary for the inner self was lacking" (516). Thomas connects the poem to its contextual scene by relating its use of legal language to the historical transition to the capitalist "legal" view of the self. This transition is then situated within the broader historical transition from feudalism to capitalism. Using legal language, "the poet implies his status a free agent capable of entering into and out of human relations" (517), while "in the couplet he reverts to the language of feudal relations--'in sleep a king'--implying that bonds cannot be broken" (517). Thomas concludes that

the play between the poem's amorous subject and its legal language, between the first twelve lines and the couplet, is one between differing historical concepts of social relations, concepts in severe tension in Shakespeare's England, a tension that persists today, as even our post-industrial society retains residual elements of feudal relations. In fact, I can guarantee that students will share the tension the poem dramatizes between the contractual and eternal notion of a love relationship. Reading the poem historically they will be in a better position to understand the costs involved in both sorts of
Although Thomas begins his exploration of the poem's language by situating it within a historical narrative, he ends by relating the poem to the present by means of an alternative analogy. The poem speaks to us not just because love relations in Shakespeare's time are analogous to our own, but because we share with that era a tension between capitalist and feudal relations. This is in some respects a peculiar place for a historicist reading to end up. After beginning by "looking at how a noticeable quality of its language registers historical change" (517), Thomas ultimately leads us to affirm that the poem directly addresses our own situation.

Still, this is a compelling interpretation in many ways; it is both more interesting and more precise in accounting for the poem's language than the more rhetorical reading of the poem with which Thomas contrasts it. But at this point it must be questioned whether his rhetorical reading of the poem is a very good one. The feature of the poem which Thomas cites--its self-conscious reveling in legal metaphors--is the central conceit of the poem; it is clearly not taken for granted as a language of love in Shakespeare's contextual scene, any more than it is in our own. Moreover, the novelty of this coupling seems central to the poem's conception within its own context.
What Thomas does not consider is the referential tension that is established by the self-conscious highlighting of those legal metaphors in the poem. The poem is making clear reference to legal discourse, and exploring some implications of this developing discourse for human relationships. It is because of the sense Thomas makes of the way Shakespeare handles this referent that his "historical" interpretation has such obvious relevance to the poem. Even from a rhetorical perspective, the function of this legal language is not simply to "distance the poem emotionally." Shakespeare himself is calling attention to his use of legal, contractual language as an image for the transience of this love relationship, and using the feudal image of kingship to draw a contrast. If a rhetorical or "author intent" reading is equated with formalism, as it seems to be for Thomas, then only an escape from the rhetoric of the poem could reveal these sociohistorical connections. But these connections are actually part of the rhetoric of the poem.

Clearly this poem alone cannot generate the sociohistorical framework within which Thomas situates it, but to the degree his interpretation contains the rhetoric of the poem, the poem does help confirm this framework. Yet I find that while the poem reenforces and helps clarify the broad feudalism/capitalism narrative employed by Thomas, the analogy by which he connects the poem to the present is less
compelling. That any "eternal" notions of love relationships which might today be in tension with contractual notions are actually residual elements of feudal culture may be a serious proposal, but the poem itself does little to support this idea. It seems more plausible to say that Shakespeare is responding to the acute tensions of the transition of his own era than to attempt to make the poem speak directly to an era in which feudal values are no longer in active transition, but have become residual in a way that obscures their economic origins. What is significant, however, is that it is the very rhetoric of the poem which encourages me to relate it to a historical narrative rather than directly to the present situation. In this case, at least, reading the poem "historically" does not mean reading against its author's intentions.

More serious shortcomings of Thomas' "social text" methodology emerge in his discussion of "Bartleby" in Cross-examinations of Law and Literature. Here Thomas really does dispense with any sustained engagement with the rhetoric of the story, and the result is a failure to engage with the work effectively even as a historical document. Thomas discusses at length several key legal decisions which he feels intersect with and help explain Melville's focus in "Bartleby." He discusses the precise function of the office.

of Chancery and the reasons for its abolishment, and a key ruling concerning the issue of charity. Both of these legal issues Thomas relates to a "paternalistic" conception of law that was at issue in Melville's time. Thomas also discusses an important ruling by Melville's father-in-law Lemuel Shaw, which helped replace a more paternalistic "master-servant rule" by which "masters were responsible for their servants' actions" (Thomas 167) with the "fellow-servant rule," by which masters and servants were seen as free contractual agents.

Thomas does not claim that Melville's story is directly addressed to any of these particular legal issues, but rather that these issues may have helped form Melville's mindset and concerns as a writer. And his observations contribute little to a direct apprehension of the story's dynamics: Chancery, charity, and the obligations and relationships between employees and employers function in specific, concrete ways in the story, and the general connections alluded to by Thomas do not add much to an understanding of those functions. What Thomas' discussions do suggest is an interesting historical metanarrative, potentially with close connections to the subject matter of the story, by which the story might be interpreted and linked to the present. Where Michael Gilmore understands the lawyer as representing a transition from a household economy to a market economy, Thomas' historical discussions
suggest seeing the lawyer in relationship to a transition from a more paternalistic economic model to an economy in which "charity" takes over some of what had been an employer's obligations. It would be interesting to see how well an interpretation that draws from such a historical narrative might contain the rhetorical dynamics of the story.

Such an interpretation is not, however, what Thomas offers. Rather than attempt a "complete reading" of the story, Thomas is content to isolate those aspects of the story which he feels are illuminated by his account of Melville's contextual scene. What results is a series of observations about the story which make no claim to comprise a full-fledged interpretation. Some of these observations seem interesting and valid, such as that "In refusing to be grateful for the lawyer's charity, Bartleby helps to expose its ideological function" (174), and that "the disruptiveness of Bartleby's mere presence suggests that he is a bizarre representative of an unconscious force that the lawyer tries to repress" (174).

Many of Thomas' observations, however, bear only a vague or even questionable relationship to the story. He claims that the "metaphor of the wall" in 'Bartleby' suggests "the ideological separation of public and private spheres" (179), yet the story itself develops the wall symbolism in a somewhat different direction, as I tried to
show in chapter two. Thomas claims that "although the lawyer's methodological prudence may be extremely effective in managing rich men's money, it cannot manage his lowly scrivener" (169). Yet this "methological prudence" is one attribute of what I earlier called the lawyer's "professional" discourse and identity. Thomas' observation fails to note that the lawyer speaks in another discursive mode as well, that of a Christian gentleman, and that it is the failure of the lawyer in this latter mode to "manage his scrivener" that is the more primary focus of the story. Thomas also claims that "that the decisions of Melville's father-in-law helped to legitimize that capitalist system adds another dimension to the parable of the artist" (181), without considering whether the familiar "parable of the artist" interpretation is really compatible with the sort of socohistorical interpretation suggested by most of his other observations.

Such problems, I believe, grow out of Thomas' critical methodology. Thomas' readings are always threatening to become reductive, because he attempts to explain only those aspects of the story which lend themselves to his explanatory framework. Thomas himself is acutely aware of this danger, and he is careful to remind readers that "I am not even claiming to offer complete readings of the literary texts I analyze, since my concentration on the law clearly emphasizes some aspects at the expense of others. The law
and literature of the time were shaped by more factors than one another" (16). Thomas' approach to "Bartleby," however, shows that even an awareness of this limitation is not enough to overcome it in a satisfying way.

The danger of this tendency toward reductiveness is evident in Thomas' explanation of Melville's "metaphysical" emphasis in the story. He writes

One need not take the extreme position that historical forces provide the complete answer to the 'mystery of the human condition' to recognize that Melville's continual suggestion of Metaphysical mysteries is his own strategy of containment, a technique by which readers, like the lawyer, can avert their attention from the underworld from which Bartleby emerges. To offer a sociohistorical explanation for Bartleby's silence seems to reduce his mystery. But then, so do all other readings. If reference to sociohistorical conditions does not provide the key to unlocking Bartleby from his mysterious prison, it can help account for Melville's fictional strategy that creates silent figures like Bartleby . . . a fictional strategy that in turn enables us to see the contradictions within the orthodox legal ideology (180).

Ironically, Thomas ends up seeing less connection between Bartleby's "metaphysical" woes and the social dynamics of the story than the story itself invites. But this is not surprising, because such connections are not articulated within the particular sociohistorical framework by which Thomas analyzes the story. Thomas' hint that Melville is indulging in a "strategy of containment" is really doubly reductive, since the narrower issue of the story which Melville might be "containing" is itself being
imposed upon the story by Thomas' own self-consciously narrow focus. Thomas expresses an unwillingness to reduce the "mystery" of Bartleby, but his interpretive strategy doesn't really equip him to confront or explore any such mystery either. His sphere of interaction with the story is limited by his articulation of its contextual scene.

Moreover, his understanding of what makes his a partial reading of the stories he discusses—that there are other causal factors besides the ones he focuses on—implies that something like a complete reading might theoretically be assembled by the sum of partial perspectives like his own. What should be clear, however, is that no encounter with "mystery" or difference could ever result from such a compilation, so long as no individual readings were willing to extend beyond the sphere of interaction that could readily be processed by their own terminologies and prior understandings. When Thomas wants to get outside the limits of his particular partial perspective, he has to engage in a problematic brand of eclecticism, making brief allusions to other interpretations, including Richard Chase's version of the "parable of the artist" reading and critics who have made use of the "horological/chronometrical" distinction Melville develops in *Pierre*. Thomas goes on to discuss the compatibility of these interpretations with his legal history theme, without worrying too much about their adequacy to the story or their relationships to each other.
This kind of eclecticism offers no real escape from the reductiveness of what might be called Thomas' "scene perspectivism." Rather than enter into dialog with these alternative interpretations, he simply explores their possible interactions with his own limited perspective.

In "Historical Necessity," Thomas confesses "that because the historical situation is so complex--because there is an overdetermination of defining forces--we will never be able to have a total understanding of literature" (514). For Thomas, this ambiguity of scene provides an opportunity to talk about literature from many different disciplinary perspectives, and holds out the promise that literary study might overcome the fragmentation of today's university curriculum. But Thomas bases this hope upon a confused sense of the relationship between the original contextual horizon and the interpretive horizon. The potential applicability of any present-day field of significance to literary works does not depend upon the overdetermined relationships of those works with their contexts. Thomas' proposal to study literature from a variety of disciplinary perspectives is in this sense viable without invoking his theory of contextual overdetermination; it depends only upon the inherent participation of the interpretive horizon for any interpretation.

What results from Thomas' discussion of "Bartleby" is an interesting mutual reinforcement between the referential
subjects of "Bartleby" and the parallel legal history that Thomas narrates. But the degree of mutual illumination between law and literature in this engagement is limited. The terms by which Thomas interprets the story encounter little resistance or complication by confronting "Bartleby," since Thomas limits his interpretive interest to those elements of the story to which those terms seem applicable. As a result, "Bartleby" can contribute little to Thomas' historical narrative. At the same time, the elements of the story's scene which Thomas is convincingly able to relate to the story are largely elements which are referential in the first place, embodied in the characterization of Bartleby or of the lawyer. They are as accessible to a rhetorical approach as to a historicist approach. And frequently Thomas' observations about the story are much more firmly rooted in his historical metanarrative than in the dynamics of the story.

Literary Rhetoric and Historical Difference

Without undue denigration of "culinary" literary experiences, clearly literary study and teaching in the university justifies itself by the promise of encountering difference in the Jaussian sense of the word. Tompkins' discussions of Uncle Tom and Wide, Wide World suggest an extension of such a focus on difference into the realm of historical difference. Yet the example of Thomas shows that
such encounters are not the inevitable result of historicist approaches to literary criticism. It is possible to learn from the legal history Thomas discusses in relation to "Bartleby," but "Bartleby" itself contributes little to this particular encounter with difference.

In practice, there is almost always ambiguity in sociohistorical criticism as to whether a literary work is being used to explain its context, or whether the context is being used to explain the work. Yet for literary fictions to serve as historical documents, they must be engaged with in a way that opens up the real possibility of transforming dialog with whatever contextualizing constructs are brought to them by a critic. Traces of the processes and struggles by which text and context are brought together into a single reading are almost invariably obscured in a published work of criticism. But if texts are not engaged with in a way that can facilitate literary encounters with difference, historicist criticism can easily become little more than an imperialistic backward projection of an interpretive framework, domesticating the rhetorical force of the text by absorbing it into a generalized system of explanation.

This is, I believe, what happens in much of Thomas' discussion of "Bartleby." When, however, Thomas turns his attention to Uncle Tom's Cabin, his discussion of the competing legal philosophies informing contemporary discussions of slavery and factory employment is
illuminating and convincing, largely because it addresses not just contextual overdetermination, but authorial intention. At times he merely explains some of the specific legal references made by Stowe herself, but he also convincingly demonstrates ways that the rhetoric of Stowe's work addresses particular legal debates surrounding the slavery issue.

What Thomas' analysis of Uncle Tom suggests is that a rhetorical approach to literary interpretation is not a rival, but an effective starting point for historicist criticism. This suggestion is much more fully realized in the critical methodology of Jane Tompkins, who gives priority to this encounter between critic and text as she uses the detailed rhetoric of Wide, Wide World to reconstruct its implied audience. It is ultimately Tompkins' willingness to subject herself to the rhetoric of the text, to the temporal process of experiencing the development and resolution of its instabilities and tensions, that enables her to engage with difference, rather than simply use the narrative to re-confirm some preconceived analytical framework. It is her willingness to read the text that forces her to confront the conflicts that a work like Wide, Wide World produces in herself and, by extension, in the mindset of her time and place. By experiencing the text as, in the first instance, a communication between author and reader rather than as a
"social text," she does a more effective job of opening up the text for sociohistorical understanding.

When encounter with difference is a goal of historicism, personal encounter with the rhetorical dynamics of a fictional text is a logical starting point. If critics scan the literary text looking for historical difference, only to jump from the literary text into a parallel form of sociohistorical explanation whenever such difference is encountered, the encounter with difference is effectively negated. That may be a good way for teachers to introduce students to a particular historical narrative, but ultimately it is not a critical method that takes literary texts seriously as historical documents, let alone as sources of insight.

Throughout her analysis of Wide, Wide World, Tompkins stresses the historical remoteness which makes the book so difficult for modern readers. Interestingly, however, she draws relatively few causal connections to explain the differences between the social world of Susan Warner and that of the present. She has, of course, been much criticized for treating the values of literary works as items in a kind of "value supermarket," disembodied from the social structures within which they took shape. Ironically, however, her very reluctance to draw explicit connections between past and present seems to help her draw out differences between past and present which might serve as
more fruitful starting points for social history than do the more tightly controlled historical analyses of Thomas.

Jauss' distinction between literary art and culinary art is a helpful way of discussing the use value or function of a literary work at a given point in its reception history. But Tompkins' discussion of sentimental fiction is sufficient to show that these distinguishing terms cannot be conceived of as inherent properties of particular works; fictions can move back and forth between these two poles at different points in their reception histories. As she points out, for some of us an encounter with the "Victorian values" of Wide Wide World might be less "culinary" than yet another encounter with epistemological ambiguity in Moby-Dick. One constant, however, is that a genuinely dialogic encounter with difference—whether conceptual, ethical, or sociohistorical—does well to take an encounter with the rhetorical dynamics of a literary text as its starting point.
CHAPTER V

America and Literary Interpretation

The interpretive histories of the canonical texts of American literature have, from the start, been intimately connected with the changing significance of their "Americanness." From the journalistic campaigns for a unique national literature that colored the literary environments of the nineteenth century up through, as Michael Spengemann puts it, the "fatal turning point" of the debate "early in the twentieth century . . . when the magazine editors stopped saying what American literature ought to be and the professors started explaining what it is" (16),1 both literary canons and the interpretations of individual works have been closely connected to ideas about a national literature.

In more recent years, direct assaults have been launched from a number of perspectives against the very idea of "American" literature, or at least against the ways it has traditionally been conceived. Ironically, these assaults have come at a time when formalism has become a

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pejorative term and criticism has embraced various forms of history, and when dominant voices in literary criticism both affirm interpretive subjectivity and demand political relevance for critical interpretation: in short, at a time when in many respects one would expect national categories of interpretation to be thriving. I will begin by considering three bases upon which the "Americanness" of American literature has been critiqued: national diversity, historicism, and rhetorical integrity. I will then work toward an understanding of how the dialogic model of criticism I have been developing might help re-conceive of the institutional field of American literature and suggest some solutions to the institutional dilemmas which now beset it. I will argue that it is possible for American literary studies to function as an interpretive paradigm without becoming reified and abstracted from legitimate concerns that have given rise to national categories of interpretation in the first place.

The Diversity Critique

The most numerous and influential critiques of the concept of an "American" literature have come in the name of cultural diversity. As Annette Kolodny has put it, "if there was something uniquely American about our nation and our literary inheritance, it was not harmonious commonality or shared traditions but diversity, division, and discord"
Such critiques are aimed at the attempts of Americanist critics to make the American literary canon speak for all the diverse peoples of the nation. They counter that the idea of an essential American culture actually elevates one cultural strand among many to special canonical status, reinforcing the repressive hegemony of our dominant culture. This problem is urgent because "The struggle now being waged in the professoriate over which writers deserve canonical status is not just a struggle over the relative merits of literary geniuses; it is a struggle among contending factions for the right to be represented in the picture America draws of itself" (Tompkins 201). Such critiques of Americanness have, however, been less fundamental than they have sometimes been made out to be, and at times they have actually intensified some of the problematic tendencies of more traditional Americanist practices.

The solution usually proposed for this diversity problem is opening the canon to literary works that represent non-mainstream cultures, and hence to the values and literary forms of those cultures. As diversity critics such as Paul Lauter and Jane Tompkins have pointed out,


however, it is not enough to argue for the inclusion of non-canonical works on the basis of the same standards that have been formulated by reference to the traditional canon. Critics and teachers need to ask "not how to apply a given and persisting set of standards, but where standards come from, whose values they embed, whose interests they serve" (Lauter xvii).4

Because a given set of standards will inevitably be bound to a particular culture, cultural representation itself, rather than any particular standard of literary value, tends to become a central criteria for inclusion in the canon. Yet the question of exactly what and who to include can quickly become a problem. Class, race, and gender have been the usual starting points for building a more inclusive account of American literature, but these are clearly not the only relevant factors. As Robert J. Di Pietro and Edward Ifkovic point out in their anthology Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature: Selected Essays of the European contribution,5 "Some ethnic groups--such as the Hispanics, Asiatics, American Indians, and blacks--have come to the public consciousness by being declared


minorities. Others—like the Irish, Italians, Germans, and Poles—are numerous but rarely the object of legislation. Still others—the Latvians, Slovenes, and Icelandic people—are almost unknown among the general population" (3). Yet even these anthologized reviews of twelve different ethnic-American literatures come far from exhausting the diversity of America's complex cultural heritage. Add to this the varied and dynamic relationships individuals within these groups have had to dominant culture, to other minority cultures, and to their own cultural heritage, and the task of constructing a truly representative American literary canon quickly becomes unmanageable.

Gregory S. Jay suggests that "We should probably abandon even a reconstructed version of the American literature survey course," because "No one or two semester course can possibly live up to the implied claim of historical or representative coverage" (274). Jay proposes "Writing in the United States" as an alternative course offering, where "the objects of study will be acts of writing committed within and during the colonization, establishment, and ongoing production of the US as a physical, socio-political, and multi-cultural event, including those writings that resist and critique its identification with nationalism" (268). Such a course

"would then be placed within the history of colonialism and imperialism, as well as nationalism, better providing a foundation for comprehending the current political and social dilemmas facing the US as it reconceives itself as a multicultural society in a multicultural world" (269).

In some ways, the diversity critique of traditional Americanist practice involves more of a change in emphasis than a fundamental paradigm shift. For one, multiculturalists do not dissent from dominant culture so much as they suggest a way for its possibilities to unfold, and multiculturalism itself is a doctrine fashioned from and appealing to elements of dominant culture. It can undermine the myth of a uniform American culture by highlighting and celebrating the diversity of America’s cultural heritage, yet its own moral ideals are deeply grounded in the same democratic heritage so often celebrated by traditional Americanists. In this regard, there is some irony in the tendency of multiculturalists to, for instance, make more room for writers like Susan Warner and Harriett Beecher Stowe at the expense of such proto-multiculturalists as Herman Melville and Henry James.

It could be said that the traditional Americanist emphasis on a narrow literary heritage that best explores the cultural possibilities which have been most formative for American social institutions faces the same polar dilemma as do the multiculturalists, only to resolve it
differently. Traditional Americanists explored the cultural and literary sources of democratic ideals without enacting those democratic possibilities through canonical diversity. Multiculturalists opt for an open and diverse literary canon instead of a narrow focus upon the literary tradition which has best explored the democratic possibilities and moral values which inform multiculturalist practice. It is not so much the values of the dominant cultural heritage championed by traditional Americanists that are challenged, as it is the best way of enacting those values in the classroom.

Multiculturalist approaches to literature also share with more traditional approaches a tendency toward metaphysical idealism. For multiculturalists, metaphysical status attaches not to "America" but to "democracy," as in Jay's suggestion that "A commitment to multicultural education also belongs to our own historical moment as we witness a renewed interest in democracy, and as we ask how a democratic culture might be fashioned" (266). To take another example, editors Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren give their introductory essay to Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle the title "Schooling, Cultural Politics, and the Struggle for Democracy." 7 Democracy here, in a definition reminiscent of the progressive historians of an earlier era, is not an already-realized political system

but an idealized realization of American social aspirations, projected into the future.

In some respects, the idealistic tendencies of traditional Americanists are actually intensified by multiculturalist critics. The need to draw selectively upon cultural tradition makes terms like "America" and "democracy" into cultural and rhetorical battlegrounds for the meaning of America, even while the unity of American cultural life and history is vigorously denied. The result is a mode of American history that is fundamentally different from most literary histories of earlier critical eras, yet one that in some ways intensifies the tendencies toward national idealism that are often criticized in those earlier studies. This intensification results from abandoning the claims of historical causality that characterized those earlier studies.

Granted, most Americanists of the early cold war era were themselves reacting against what they considered the simplistic causal relationships of the progressives. Historian Gene Wise cites the Hitler-Stalin pact as an example of a concrete social event which helped dramatize the complex ambiguities of social change, helping to lead social historians increasingly to explore what theologian Reinhold Neihbur called "The Irony of American History."8

What resulted was a body of literary and social criticism that moved away from the concrete economic, geographic, and social causalities which had tended to inform "progressive" history, to a more mind-centered understanding of history whose key category of analysis was "myth."

This shift is typified by the treatment Henry Nash Smith gives to progressive historian Fredrick Jackson Turner in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth.*

Turner had pointed to the American West and its vacant land as the chief determining force in the development of American democracy. Smith rehearses some of the arguments of this frontier hypothesis, but his interest lies not in its truth or falsity as a system of explanation, but in the American myth that had influenced Turner's formulation of the hypothesis, a myth Smith traces as far back as the agrarianism of Jefferson.

Smith's history thus abandons the mechanistic causality that informed that of Turner. Still, the myth Smith analyzes is treated as a causal feature in its own right, as a collective psychology which has influenced--and not always for the better--America's social and political development. Smith finds a causal connection between this agrarian myth and, for instance, the "covert distrust of the city . . . which has impeded cooperation between farmers and factory

workers" and the difficulty Americans have thinking of themselves as "members of a world community because [the agrarian tradition] affirmed that the destiny of this country leads her away from Europe toward the agricultural interior of the continent" (304). The myth of the American West is a causal feature for Smith just as the fact of the American West was for Turner.

What a diversity critic will object to in Smith's analysis are its generalizations about the American mind. Though Smith's study draws widely upon popular literature and expression, his very claim to explore a collective psychology or myth requires him to suppress or gloss over the considerable heterogeneity of the peoples who constitute America. The ways that factors like gender, race, ethnicity, region, or social class might at the very least situate people differently toward any kind of shared myth—if indeed the myth is that widely shared at all—are largely precluded by the very interests and procedures that Smith pursues. And most other myth critics of the era did not even draw upon popular literature and expression, but rather developed theories according to which these cultural myths could be recovered by reference to a handful of literary masterpieces.

From a multiculturalist perspective, a given cultural myth or collective psychology is best understood as characterizing only a particular cultural strand of American
experience, not American experience as a whole. And if it is true, as Smith claims, that a myth like that of the American West has informed canonical literature and public policy, this may say more about which cultural strands have controlled both public life and academic literary criticism than about the universality of the myth.

Despite these criticisms, the fact remains that, like Turner and other progressive historians, most critics of Smith's era maintained a sense of historical causality. Their studies characteristically attempted to see behind literary works some more fundamental force still relevant to their present-day praxis. For Turner the causes may have been material, while for the American myth critics the causes were psychological or spiritual, but in both cases there was a separate historical agent to which the literary works were said to refer or respond.

In multi-cultural history this sense of causality is frequently abandoned. Literary works themselves are the focus, not causal features which lie behind them or to which they might refer. Or if causal features are discussed, they are usually past human actions of, for instance, oppression and cultural imperialism, as literature and other cultural "data" are shown to have participated in and responded to such struggles. Yet although such studies might help unveil the genealogy of the present situation, no common causality is developed between past and present, no larger force still
to be reckoned with. The appeals for change that these revisions propose consequently are made largely on moral rather than rational grounds. And as I have tried to show, it is at the level of morality that multiculturalism incurs its greatest debt to dominant culture.

Despite the frequent claims of multiculturalists to be truer to "history" because of their greater inclusiveness, there is a sense in which literary multiculturalism can become curiously disembodied from anything that could be called history. Literary texts become resources to draw upon in the cultural and rhetorical battlegrounds of the present, rather than artifacts of a past that maintains an independent relevance to the present. Having renounced the possibility of coherence for "America," there is little left for these texts to be a history of. Still, the cultural dialog that multiculturalists promote is given significance by a national cultural and political arena, so concern for America retains center stage.

A theoretical understanding of the significance of such multicultural dialog is articulated by Giles Gunn in his article "Beyond Ideology or Beyond Transcendence: The New Problematics of Cultural Criticism in America."10 Against the doubts of New Historicists about "how we might continue to inhabit a worldview that is continuous with a past that

we can still perceive objectively" (778), Gunn argues that ideology is far from monolithic, and that social institutions contain as yet unarticulated possibilities within their own diversity and contradictions. Following Dewey and William James, Gunn understands cultural criticism as rendering "differences conversable so that the conflicts they produce, instead of being destructive of human community, can become potentially creative of it" (16).

An approach to American history and culture based upon such a model may easily become more radically organicist than many of the more traditional histories it attempts to displace. After all, the more mechanistic elements in the thought of early theorists of America like Tocqueville and Crevecoeur are characteristically modeled by their mid-twentieth century Americanist descendants. These Americanists attempted to explain key characteristics of America as the product of larger forces which needed to be considered as America forged a cultural and political future. Whatever history is implied by literary multiculturalism, and by Gunn's articulation of its theory and rationale, is likely to be organicist and idealist, as "America" becomes the unfolding product of its own cross-cultural dialectics.

A look through Reconstructing American Literature, Paul Lauter's anthology of sample syllabi for revisionist American literature courses, shows how two parallel concerns of multiculturalists—demonstrating cultural diversity while encouraging cross-cultural dialog—might work out in practice. The first eleven courses are introductory level American literature courses with coverage including the period before the Civil War, and those courses can serve as a short index to multiculturalist literary practice. Works by American Indians, slave narratives, non-canonical works by women, artifacts of popular culture, and other non-traditional selections are deliberately included in every syllabus, including the two which are otherwise quite traditional in their focus upon uniquely American "psychic tensions" or themes. An effort at wider "cultural coverage" is certainly at work here, as evidenced by Kenneth Roemer's apology that in his course "there are still gaps . . . Hispanic and French travel literature, for example, are necessarily omitted" (38). But it is usually more accurate to see these works as chosen for their ability to complicate the hegemony of the narrower cultural strands which have been canonized by traditional American studies, to show that this particular cultural tradition was only one of many.

Three of the eleven courses demonstrate this diversity by structuring themselves around the concept of "the American Dream," and then examining "how various social
groups—Native Americans, slaves, immigrants, women, gays, etc.—have reacted to the notion of the American Dream, and the voices through which they expressed these reactions" (15 Louis Kampf). Texts are chosen first to help define the dominant-culture understanding of the American dream—Franklin and the Puritans characteristically fill this role—and then to reveal alternative perspectives on this "myth," particularly the way it "later proved to be something of a nightmare for many white women, people of the working class, and people of color" (4 Allen). The point of these courses is not so much cultural coverage or representation as it is challenging the adequacy of a present-day dominant class understanding of social possibilities in America, to "uncover the biases hidden by cliches like the 'American Dream'" (4 Allen).

Most of these eleven courses, however, do not maintain this largely negative focus upon exposing the limitations of a particular myth or ideology. They are instead interested in gleaning something positive from literary works. Yet they are not geared toward learning from the insights of any one literary work or cultural tradition. Their goal is rather to bring these various works and traditions into dialog with each other, both to model the kind of cultural dialog and respect that these teachers hope to promote in their students, and to generate new cultural possibilities out of the articulation of differences, much in the way
Gunn's essay suggests. This is the rationale around which the remaining six Lauter selections are structured.

In two of those six courses, the juxtapositions are situated in history, as with Kenneth Roemer's expressed focus upon "the exciting clashes and cross-fertilizations that characterized early American literatures and cultures" (38). But this historical focus upon source relationships is strained by the thematic organization of Roemer's course. (Frederick Douglass, for instance, can be taught either in the "Revolutionary Literatures" section of the course or in the "Ability to Know Self in Nature and Society" section, presumably depending upon where he resonates most interestingly.) What is implicit at times in Roemer's course is explicit in the other four of these six courses; writings are juxtaposed not because of historical connections or source relationships but, as the entry developed by the Yale Institute on Reconstructing American Literature puts it, to "juxtapose familiar and unfamiliar texts in ways that would stimulate readings of both" (45). Carolyn L. Karcher structures her survey "as a dialectic between the opposing viewpoints of white and non-white, male and female" (5). John Schlib encourages "the students to juxtapose their [noncanonical writers] perspectives with those of the celebrated white male writers" (25).

Edgar Allen Poe and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (gendered perspectives on insanity) is a favorite juxtaposition for
these teachers, and many others are suggested as well: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson (male poet vs. female poet), Gilman and Henry James (male vs. female perspectives on hysteria), Margaret Fuller vs. Emerson (transcendentalist vs. revolutionary), Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass (on expressing the self), and so forth. These encounters seem designed not only to relativize the canonical or mainstream cultural perspective within each pairing, but also to allow a broader understanding of a given social or thematic issue to emerge from the dialog between the juxtaposed texts.

At its best this method is a very effective way to explore the possibilities and limitations of the particular perspectives that characterize literary works and cultural locations. Such courses run the risk, however, of becoming radically ahistorical, as literary works are selected from an expanded Americanist canon and juxtaposed at will in order to generate new cultural possibilities. When more traditional Americanists organized their work thematically, they thought they were discovering something relevant and enduring about the American mind, and this confidence often led them to juxtapose works which were remote from each other. But when diversity critics group texts with similar abandon, they often seem justified by a belief that these texts are disembodied cultural resources for an unfolding national identity in a way that transcends their more
particular circumstances and contexts. In fact, the thematic bases by which texts are grouped together can very well suggest contextual scenes for these works that have very vague and dubious historical roots.

As important as multiculturalism is as a political program, and as suggestive and fruitful as these classroom practices might be, multiculturalism does not offer a far-reaching critique of the Americanness paradigm in the name of cultural diversity. The multiculturalist charge that traditional Americanists were guilty of helping to create an elitist and self-servingly exclusive literary tradition is often misleading. They may have done so, but often only as a reified by-product of their attempts to trace the imprint of the larger forces determining American life on the works of American authors, and of their attempts to explore the possibilities of dominant culture by creating a literary heritage for it. Multiculturalists tend to abandon the former of these tendencies in favor of an even more organicist use of "America," and to open up the traditional canon while still deriving moral energy from the values explored by the old canon. These tendencies add up to a far less sweeping critique of traditional American literary practice than diversity critics are often willing to allow.
The Historicist Critique

Given the inability of literary historians of American diversity to avoid the American idealism of their predecessors, it is not surprising that critiques of American literature and literary history have arisen from other quarters. One such mode of criticism might be termed a historicist critique, in that it focuses attention not so much on the adequacy of American literary history to its object as on its suppositions as a form of knowledge. Significantly, however, such critiques are invariably forced to posit alternative institutional paradigms which are just as vulnerable to deconstruction as "Americanness," and often less useful.

One such critique has been undertaken by William C. Spengemann. Spengemann questions the "most fundamental" assumption of American literary scholars, "that any excellent poem, play, novel, or short story written in any place that is now part of the United States or by anyone who has ever lived in one of those places must also be American in some deeper sense and that these accidentally American works will reveal their essential Americanness if we will only read them carefully enough" (14). Spengemann unravels the presumed essence of both "America" and "literary" as terms employed by literary historians. He

also explores the masked tensions behind the linking of these two concepts, complaining that "If the historians tended to include in their studies whatever seemed to them American and to consider it excellent by definition, the Critics merely reversed the formula, treating only those works that seemed to them excellent and taking the Americanness of those masterpieces for granted" (19).

To the degree that Spengemann's assessment of the academic field of American literature is accurate, these confusions testify to the degree to which forces of academic institutionalization have tended to grant "American literature" an essence independent of the more narrowly focused questions that animated the work of many of its founders. But Spengemann's proposal in "What is American Literature"—to substitute a definition of "America" which signifies "everything having to do with civilization in the new world since the European discovery," and a definition of "literature" which includes "every written document that will respond to literary analysis" (19)," only relocates rather than resolves the methodological issues he has raised. His later proposal in "American Things/Literary Things," is to make not America or Literature, but "the common ground of language . . . which is both historical in its own right and essential to literature" (474),13 the

basis of a literary history. What his discussion of this proposal fails to provide, however, is any reason why such a history should be of interest. Spengemann proceeds not by giving renewed consideration to the usefulness or significance of American literary history, but by searching for an object of study that corresponds more accurately to a narrowly semantic definition of the field. Rather than proposing escape from or revitalization of the reified academic boundaries that have posited the notion of an essentially American literature, Spengemann's critical method simply makes scrupulous adherence to these boundaries the chief precondition for the legitimate reformulation of American literary history.

Peter Carafiol, in "The Constraints of History: Revision and Revolution in American Literary Studies," makes charges similar to those of Spengemann about the very idea of American literature. Carafiol claims that "an assumed unity has always been the enabling foundation of American literary study," whether the terms be "spiritual, ethical, economic, political or 'literary'" (607). He takes specific aim at "Revisionist forces within American literary studies," who have "extended, rather than dissented from, the tradition" (609). He claims that "The effort in the name of diversity to enlist historicist theoretical

approaches in the traditional project of outlining a history of American literature is both wrong-headed and deeply conservative . . . because it suggests that the variety of practices that the term 'diversity' would ostensibly unite are merely alternate perspectives on the same subject" (616). A truly radical critique, then, is one that would deconstruct this very subject, since "The traditional project of American literary criticism cannot go on without its foundational belief in America, the ideal object of its study" (617).

In order to avoid the charge that he is claiming "privileged" epistemological status for his own revisionary program, Carafiol makes it clear that his proposals to substitute "writing in English" for "American literature" are not based on "a deeper level of wisdom" or "some new interpretive solid ground," but rather are suggested "because they reflect a more comprehensive account of the history of American literary scholarship and better fulfill contemporary needs" (617). He sensibly implies that scholars need to maintain close contact with the particular "use value" of literary works for their particular projects, as an antidote to the kind of reification that I have discussed.

Still, it might be questioned whether Carafiol makes enough allowance for the possible "use value" of "the traditional nationalist project that has prevented scholars
from investigating American writing in the broader context of writing in English" (619). After all, "writing in English" has no more a priori claim to interest and validity than a nationalist agenda, and with respect to many concerns a nationalist realm of inquiry makes more sense. The very resilience of "America" as an interpretive category belies his charge that this category has only vestigial interest dating from the "Romantic idealism" and "need for reassurance about national unity" of the late nineteenth century" (617).

An interesting testimony to the continued resilience of the category "America" comes from Jean-Philippe Mathy's recent article "Out of History: French Readings of Postmodern America."15 Mathy reads Jean Baudrillard's America in the context of a host of other recent French commentary on America, as this book develops the thesis that "The modernity of America, as its birthright, is linked to its early exit from history, its capacity to escape the gravitational pull of historicism and dialectical thought, its successful break from Hegelianism" (296). Baudrillard's claim, according to Mathy, is situated in a tradition that responds to "the most widely shared representation of American society among French literati after World War I: America as the most elaborated product of the modernization

and rationalization of Western culture, the ominous harbinger of things to come" (267).

More locally, of course, different use is made of national categories of interpretation by Robert Shulman and Michael Gilmore, for whom America is defined in economic terms. Alternatively, Michael Davitt Bell discusses "American romanticism" in the context of its relationships to the unifying fictions that help constitute America as a nation. Such national categories have not been employed by every critic I have examined: Evan Carton, for instance, largely avoids them. But the alternative field that Carton does employ—European intellectual history—is still quite different from the field of "writing in English" proposed by Carafiol. And the links Carton draws between "Usher" and this more European category are in many respects less firm than the links that Bell and Shulman draw between the works they analyze and their "American" categories.

Whatever the persuasiveness of the particular arguments of these varied thinkers, it can hardly be said that the use of national categories is merely residual and out of touch with "contemporary needs." And the positive alternatives to American literature that these critics propose are inevitably just as vulnerable to reification and deconstruction as the paradigm they would replace. Carafiol's critique, like that of Spengemann, draws blood at every point where ideas of "America" and "American
literature" have been granted an independent essence and detached from the particular driving concerns that motivated scholars to establish or use those concepts in the first place. And Carafiol points out some valid concerns about the limitations and incompleteness of certain revisionary strands of Americanist scholarship. But neither of these two "historicist" critiques argues successfully that any given alternative interpretive category should automatically be given priority over the category "America."

A Rhetorical Critique

The rhetorical approach to literature that I have adopted and extended in this dissertation suggests a third objection to considering the Americanness of American literature. This objection is liable to consider Americanness "an inadequate explanation in light of our knowledge that American authors wrote at various times in various places under various circumstances, producing a variety of texts which call for--and allow for--various responses from readers."16 This objection has similarities to the "diversity" objections, except that here the appeal is to literary as well as cultural diversity. And the proposal is not just to complicate what is meant by "Americanness," or to substitute some other interpretive

field for that of "America," but to liberate literary study from such generalizing paradigms altogether and grapple with the communicative rhetoric of individual literary works in their full uniqueness. But while such a critique raises important questions about the implications of this or any other institutionalized interpretive paradigm, it is not prepared to grapple realistically with the inherently dialogic elements of literary interpretation that I have been exploring in this dissertation.

This critique has not had a very significant voice in the current academic discussion of Americanness, but as it bears a close affinity with my own agenda as a rhetorical critic, it is worth some attention here. Yet while I share with this approach a concern for careful attention to rhetorical dynamics, to particular responses literary texts evoke from their readers, I earlier discussed two crucial elements of literary interpretation for which rhetorical formalism is not adequate, theme and reference. If literary themes—the "portable knowledge" of real-world causality and ethics that narrative texts characteristically offer their readers—necessarily involve dialog between the text and some field of significance for its varied readers, and if fictional referents need to be recovered either by analogy or by historical metanarrative if they are not to be conflated with their fictional representations, then interpretation cannot stop after attending to rhetorical
progression. And I see no a priori reason to rule out the use of national categories of significance for these interpretive processes.

It might still be objected that while present-day fields of significance might play a necessary role in literary interpretation, there is no reason why it needs to be the same field for every work. Why not let each work dictate its own fields of relevance, rather than create entire institutional disciplines and courses around one particular such field, then use it to force every literary work ever written by someone associated with this country to be interpreted by reference to national categories, rather than by reference to any number of other fields which might, for many or even most literary works, seem more pertinent to many or most readers?

The full scope of this critique might reveal itself by comparison with the theory of an articulate multicultural critic like Gregory S. Jay. Jay cites the work of Adrienne Rich as a useful foundation for his proposals for literary and cultural criticism. Rich contemplates a "politics of location" which "would begin not with the continent or nation 'but with the geography closest in--the body'" (RIP 264). Jay is not, however, somehow suggesting the physical body as an interpretive field of significance: as Jay quotes Rich again, "Even to begin with the body I have to say that from the outset that body had more than one identity
female, white, Jewish, middle-class, Southern, North American, lesbian etc.")" (265). Or in Jay's own words, he promotes a criticism that "tries to read, think, and feel the differences that our bodily locations—in history, in geography, in ethnicity, in gender, in sexual orientation—can make" (264).

From the perspective of this rhetorical critique of Americanness, the key to Jay's proposal might be words like "situatedness," "location," and (in Rich's discourse) "liberation." These terms imply that the "body" is to be considered as a locus within a larger field. Thus these various points of situatedness are not ends in themselves, not interpretive fields of significance in their own right, but labels for the limitations and agendas that we might carry into a wider dialog—primarily, it seems, a national dialog. From the standpoint of this rhetorical critique of Americanness, then, Jay is still mired within a national interpretive frame, even though he actively denies the unity of a national culture or past.

The list of "locations" compiled by Jay and Rich could obviously be expanded almost indefinitely without violating the spirit of Jay's proposals. But one telling characteristic they have in common is their passiveness, their pre-determinedness. They are locations we inhabit simply by inhabiting our own bodies. Backing up our own self-understanding to this point may be a genuinely
important and enabling move toward an agenda of "liberation." But any attempt to limit our total self-understanding to such a listing of determinate locations within a wider cultural field will be too limited. Work, religion, relationships—anything we enter into in the form of willed decisions or commitments—are likely to be left out of these lists of our locatedness. Are they to be ruled out as fields of significance for literary interpretation?

Moreover, this way of conceiving locatedness can have the peculiar consequence of ruling out even one's own "location points" as fields of interpretive significance. When factors like "ethnicity" or "gender" are assumed as labels that situate oneself within a wider cultural context, the complexities of one's own relationships to these "sub-identities" become obscured. Adrienne Rich may be Jewish, for instance, but how has she situated herself with respect to her own Jewishness and the religious and cultural groups with which her Jewishness connects her? What room does Jay's covert nationalism leave her to consider such a question? It is a familiar complaint of many "minority" scholars that they are continually expected to be spokespersons for the minority they represent, a problem Henry Louis Gates Jr. has referred to as "the 'burdens of representation,'" whereby "black [in this case] authors are primarily entrusted with producing the proverbial 'text of
blackness'" (716). Whatever the promise of Jay's agenda for cultural transformation, the pedagogy and scholarship that proceeds from such a program will continue to be bound to a national field of significance.

A rhetorical critique of Americanness or of any other conceptual paradigm will be concerned with recovering the interpretive possibilities that the paradigm represses, with freeing the communicative rhetoric of a literary work from the confines of any pre-determined field of significance. This move is calculated to open up a more genuine interpretive pluralism for both teaching and scholarship, and to avoid the distortion or neglect of valuable works which don't particularly lend themselves to interpretation via their Americanness or any other predetermined field of significance.

It might be questioned, however, how easily a coherent pedagogical practice could be fashioned from such a position. If literary meanings were determinate and situated within the works themselves, then there might not be a problem. Intertextual groupings and fields of significance could follow after the work of interpretation; meanings could be determined, and those meanings could serve as the basis for locating works with respect to each other and with respect to our fields of significance. But

literary narratives offer only particular invitations for
readers to name the causes and dynamics that those texts
represent. These texts cannot specify the concepts and
fields of significance that will be employed to take
portable meaning away from the thematic invitations that
they offer. The meaning of a work cannot be determined in
isolation from a particular field of significance on the
interpretive horizon.

Because of this necessity, criteria for grouping texts
and assembling syllabi will almost inevitably be external to
the texts themselves. Even when an isolated literary work
is the focus of a collective discussion, the coherence of
the discussion depends upon the willingness and ability of
participants to collectively assume a given field of
significance at a given time. And it is impossible to make
literary works speak meaningfully to each other without the
mediation of a common field of significance. Even if it
were possible to rid literary institutions of overarching
interpretive paradigms, it would still be impossible to talk
about literary meaning without employing something like an
interpretive paradigm at any given moment. And it is
probably inevitable that overarching literary fields and
institutions—like that of American literature—will
likewise form around particular fields of significance.

Moreover, I have already claimed that any consideration
of the remote referents or contextual scenes of a literary
work requires a critic to employ the interpretive processes of analogy and/or historical narrative. A historical narrative frames a work as an episode in a larger story that relates to some present-day field of significance. An analogy seeks to abstract a referent or scene of a work so that it can be seen to interact directly with some present-day field of significance. In either case, the very naming of such a contextual scene or referent will normally already imply its relationship to the present-day field of significance by which a critic finds a work to be relevant.

For a work which addresses either a remote referent (e.g. "Bartleby"), or contextual scene (e.g. Wide, Wide World) as something socially-contingent, the most direct links are liable to be with something socially contingent on the interpretive horizon. The linking principles themselves, of course, will need to have transcultural validity: hegemony for Shulman, cultural work for Tompkins, capitalism for Gilmore. But the present-day entities to which the original referents and scenes are linked will be things we see as contingent: America as an economic system for Shulman and Gilmore, the present-day American cultural scene for Tompkins.

Relating remote elements of literary works to socially or culturally contingent entities within our own cultural scene means invoking whatever social or cultural arenas within which we experience our own contingency. To the
extent that we conceive of such contingency primarily on a national level, in collective (or imposed) decisions about economic structures, criminal justice, international relationships, cultural education and the like, we are likely to make use of national categories in our literary interpretation. This tendency will not depend upon whether national categories informed and guided the authors we study; even when they did not, such categories will help shape our present-day fields of relevance. And to the degree that we understand the literary works under our professional jurisdiction to have strong tendencies to social reference, or important polemical relationships to their contextual scenes, it will be difficult to avoid an imperative to structure courses around fields of significance which proceed from our own experiences of social contingency.

Our social contingency need not always or most fundamentally be experienced on a national level. Many prominent authors within American literary studies already suggest alternative fields of significance: the local community networks of Thoreau or Faulkner, the regionalism of Hawthorne, the internationalism of James, the Kingdom of God of Warner. But our current tendency to understand the lives of ourselves and others in relationship to certain kinds of social structures practically guarantees our present focus upon national categories of significance. A
critique of this tendency would have to grapple not merely with techniques of interpretation, but with fundamental issues concerning human freedom, purpose, and possibility. The rhetorical critique I have been developing here sheds light upon some serious and unfortunate consequences of the way our interpretive paradigms function institutionally, but this critique is not prepared to grapple realistically with the depth and intractability of the problem until it finds a more adequate way of dealing with the problems raised by historically remote literary references, and with the unavoidable participation of the interpretive horizon in literary criticism.

America the Future/ America the Past

Is there any way that the Americanness of literature can be considered that will overcome the objections that have been raised against it? I believe the first step toward this end is to admit that any literary consideration of "America" is, in the first instance, situated within a present field of significance rather than a coherent and self-evident object of study, past or present. It may be that many American authors at certain times and places have themselves been concerned with the meaning and possibilities of America, but that makes little difference for the significance we find in their work unless we still care about those possibilities. Otherwise their nationalism
becomes just one more dated feature of their work, the
significance of which we would have to recover by analogy or
historical narrative, if we were forced to consider it at
all. At the same time, frank consideration of our
orientation to the present explains the almost invariable
tendency of "America the future" to shape the agendas even
of those critics who are most reluctant to generalize about
"America the past."

This is not to say, however, that it doesn't matter
whether anything coherent can be said about America. If no
such generalizations can be made, then not only does
"America" disappear as a field of literary significance, but
political and cultural thinking on a national level becomes
impossible as well. If we believe ourselves to be incapable
of making generalizations about the national effects and
possibilities of our culture, our institutions, or our
heritage, then and only then will America cease to exist as
a field of significance for us. This would happen not in
the first instance because the past and present are found
incoherent, but because we will have nothing left to say
about America's future.

In this light, the deconstruction of America might be
premature, and a programmatic rejection of any claim to find
coherence or commonality among the diverse strands and
currents of America's cultural heritage needs to be
questioned. At any rate, such programs usually deconstruct
America in one realm only to resurrect it in another. Still, a second step toward correcting the abuses of the concept of Americanness is to continue examining the claims and limitations of "literary" history.

Gerald Graff claims that it was in the hands of early Americanists that "the New Criticism became a historical and cultural method," as they "conceived the organic structure of a literary work as a microcosm of collective psychology or myth and thus made New Criticism into a method of cultural analysis" (217). This mode of analysis posited both an organically-conceived American cultural heritage and a corresponding organic or dialectic tradition of American literature in which this cultural heritage was uniquely manifest. The challenge now faced by Americanists is to fashion revitalized methods of historical and cultural analysis, without presuming upon the organic unity of either a national culture or a corresponding literary tradition.

Our increasing awareness of America's cultural diversity ought to make Americanists much more cautious than they have often been about the scope of their claims and generalizations. Do the great canonical works of the American renaissance really contain both sides of a dialectic that characterizes all of America, as Lionell Trilling implied? More recently, does the "fragmentation"

that Robert Shulman observes in selected literary works really reflect the collective experience of America? What can we learn about such claims by considering, for instance, the best-selling fictions that New Critical standards of canonization have often rendered unavailable even to studies of literary history and cultural analysis? Such questions might well be answerable, but too often they have not even been asked.

Third, it is imperative that Americanists be on guard against the tendency of their conceptions of America to become abstracted away from the questions, concerns, and methodologies that legitimately define and redefine our field of inquiry, and threaten to turn it into an objectified thing, the essence of which they are seeking to discover. As I conceded earlier, it is probably inevitable that literary subfields be drawn from fields of significance like that of "America." But when an objectified America begins to be studied for its own sake and literary study loses its connections with the concerns which motivated its defining metaphors, this process of institutional reification will be at work.

F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* has probably done as much as any other study to define the shape that the field of American literature has taken for decades following its publication, and for many present-day critics the book has come to represent all that is wrong with the traditional
conception of the field of American literature. But it could be that the institutional heritage of Matthiessen's book has been built upon the wrong part of what Matthiessen conceived of as his field. Matthiessen's orientation to the present is made explicit in his preface, where he asserts that his five canonical authors "all wrote literature for democracy in a double sense." The first sense is their concern with "America's political opportunity" in their own age. But the second sense is their capacity to serve as "a literature for our democracy," in which "we can feel the challenge of our still undiminished resources" (xv).19

The institutional heritage of critics like Matthiessen has tended to build not upon the fields of significance which inspired those critics to turn to certain American literary authors in the first place, but upon the literary authors and themes to which these critics turned as a means to their larger ends. Instead of maintaining Matthiessen's focus on a literature for America, critics adopted his canon as a literature of America, and went about elaborating upon the essence of this literary object until the purpose of such study became obscured. Having failed to model Matthiessen's motivating orientation toward his present concerns, later Americanists have found it difficult to re-establish contact with their own fields of national significance, since they have chosen as their defining

inheritance a body of texts which was conceived in response to an earlier interpretive agenda.

Granted, much of this tendency is encouraged by Matthiessen's own book, as in his claim that he is merely discussing literary works whose unique claims to excellence have already been established by "the successive generations of common readers, who make the decisions" (xi). But if we define our field by its present-day horizon we can afford to be more self-conscious about the provisional nature of whatever collections of texts we assemble as an extension of our present-day concerns. And perhaps we can overcome the cycle of reification and deconstruction that will inevitably accompany any attempt to constitute and define a field of inquiry according to its presumed internal coherence.

One interesting result of defining an academic field like American literature in relation to present-day fields of significance would be the loosening of boundaries by which works of "American literature" have been divided from other academic realms. Distinctions between modern literature and older literature, or serious literature and popular fiction, or even American and non-American authors would cease to be binding, except when such concerns are relevant to the conception of a particular course or scholarly project. Paradoxically, even courses or projects in literary fields outside of American literature might prove in part to be exercises in "American literature" by
this definition, insofar as their relevance is conceived in relation to a national field of significance.

Defining fields by their present-day relevance might also show the way toward freeing literary works from national fields of interpretation. Once the idea of a necessary bond between a given set of literary works and a corresponding field of interpretive relevance is broken and such relationships are treated as merely provisional, the institutional freedom might exist for those literary works to be studied in relationship to other fields of significance as well. Whether other such fields are as fundamental and important as our national one is a matter for debate; perhaps the apparent stagnation of American democracy and the disappointments of Marx-inspired governmental structures foreshadow a coming de-emphasis of nationally conceived fields of significance. But at least a determination to define literary courses or inquiries according to present fields of significance (instead of according to older, fossilized fields, as is usually the case now) will keep departments and sub-disciplines from being insulated from such issues by recourse to the bodies of literary texts that are now our usual self-defining criteria.


