Reading Fiction in Antebellum America

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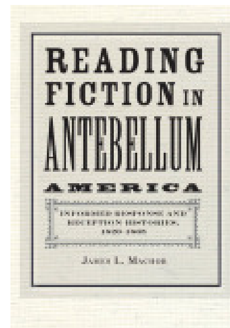

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CHAPTER 1

Historical Hermeneutics, Reception Theory, and the Social Conditions of Reading in Antebellum America

Reading is not only a private act but also an intersubjective, social practice, in part because we are socialized through reading. We are, moreover, socialized into reading, trained and positioned into and through social practices for making sense of discourses. By giving us a way to interpret the world of print and electronic media, reading in a double sense reads us into society and culture by offering us a set of moves for deciphering and shaping them.

Although socialized patterns of response have become almost second nature in the modern world of mass culture and its reception, in the early nineteenth century Americans for the first time were beginning to encounter mass reading through the proliferation of books, magazines, pamphlets, and tracts. At this period, reading took on a new significance and a new urgency in the formation of individual, communal, and national identity to the point where it became a recurrent topic—directly or by implication—in the vehicles of an emerging mass culture of public discourse. This preoccupation with reading and its connection to questions of identity, morality, aesthetics, and power help account for a remark in the *North American Review* in 1844 that warned, "the novelists who would induce us to take the murderer and pirate to our hearts, show very plainly where their affections lie."[1] No mere expression of taste that can be dismissed as sententious posturing or simplistic pontification, this comment reverberates with implications endemic to the specific historical conditions and practices of interpretation in the antebellum public sphere.

This concern with reading certainly did not begin when Americans found themselves suddenly facing the year 1800 nor did it end with the Civil War. But however regnant its role since that conflict, it is no exaggeration to say that attention to reading as an interpretive activity—in the broadest sense, as a process of making sense of signifiers—has achieved a new prominence over the past four decades, particularly in literary criticism and theory. As a number of commentators have noted, the "return of the reader" or a "shift of attention to the reader" has come to constitute an important component of literary and textual studies, marked not only by the development of reader-response and reception criticism but also by a concern with reading, response, and audience within a variety of areas, including semiotics, deconstruction, marxist and feminist criticism, narratology, the New Historicism, cultural studies, cognitive linguistics, and both the history of the book and its more recent "offspring," the history of reading.[2] Arguing that the significance and functions of texts are inextricably connected to the way they are received, reader- and reception-oriented study has helped revise our conceptions of literature by emphasizing that the status, shape, and meaning of texts are functions of reading activities, which, as reception study in particular has emphasized, are communal practices grounded in shared conceptual and interpretive frames.

If literary studies have been altered by this particular turn, it has, moreover, been affected by another reorientation—what has been called the "return to history." That development in turn helped draw attention to a particular question that early reader-response criticism had sidestepped or obfuscated: Who exactly is "the reader" with whom this criticism has been so intently concerned? Although some reader-response critics in the 1970s maintained that "the search for meaning, which at first may appear so natural . . . is in fact considerably influenced by historical norms," this recognition repeatedly gave way in practice to essentialist descriptions that framed reading either as a feature within texts themselves or as an unvarying set of interpretive procedures.[3] In the 1980s, in fact, several critics challenged reader-oriented criticism on precisely this point, charging it with a failure to ground the study of reading in historically specific conditions and procedures. These challenges rightly pointed out that readers of reading repeatedly had conceived the reader as a transhistorical interpreter by implicitly privileging the critic's own response as an experience shared by all competent readers.[4] Such praxis not only fixed reading within a single interpretive formation but also ignored the historical conditions of response that constitute the critic's own activities.[5]

Amid such legitimate critiques, by the 1980s, response and audience studies began to take a turn toward history. This shift was apparent in the first English translations of Hans Robert Jauss's books addressing the theory and practice of reception aesthetics, as well as in the inaugural developments of historically oriented reception study in the United States.[6] Reception-oriented study expanded in the following decades to the point of virtually replacing earlier reader-response criticism and becoming the dominant form of audience-oriented work in literary studies.[7] A problem with this scholarship, however, has been its tendency to share with its 1970s predecessors a lingering formalism that relies on literary texts themselves for information about historical readers, either by treating such readers as thematized elements of the texts or by analyzing the ways texts sought to shape the experiences of broadly hypothetical historical audiences.[8] Although serious about examining the historical contextuality of reading, most practitioners of reception criticism have engaged, on the one hand, in analyzing writers' conceptions of their audiences and authorial theories of response,[9] and, on the other, in exploring authors' responses to previous literary works or charting the changing history of reception by academic critics and professional literati.[10] As a result, much response and reception criticism and its sorties into history remain far from uniting three major objectives of historical reception study: (1) the analysis of activities of actual—as opposed to textualized or hypostatized—historical readers who are not themselves literary authors or academic critics; (2) the exploration of reading as a product of the relationship among particular interpretive strategies, epistemic frames, ideological imperatives, and social orientations of readers as members of historically specific—and historiographically specifiable—interpretive communities; and (3) the analysis of the dynamics of what can be called reception events—that is, the process by which contextual conditions and historically specific reading formations shape the reception of particular texts and authorial oeuvres within the public sphere.[11]

These developments and problems within response and reception criticism do not, however, represent the full range of work in reading and audience studies, since that work has included scholarship within the fairly new, related fields of the history of the book and the history of reading. Although the relationship between these cognate fields and response and reception criticism is a point of debate,[12] it is clear that this new scholarship has produced significant studies of reading as a sociological activity and of the material and cultural conditions affecting the availability of reading materials. Seeking to get at the experiences of what book historians often call "real readers" or "common readers"—usually defined as "any reader who did not read books for a living"[13]—scholars working in book and reading history, and to a lesser extent in reception-oriented literary criticism, have increasingly turned to letters, diaries, memoirs, and surviving marginalia—sometimes combining these materials with reviews—to discover evidence of historical readers and reading. But this work has also had its limitations. At times such studies have taken an excessively narrow scope—for example, looking at the responses to a single work or even of a single reader without considering or adequately addressing the representativeness of such data in relation to broader reception events and reading formations.[14] More broadly, this work has been constrained by its focus on the history of print publication and distribution, literacy, and audience access—that is, who read, what they read, why they read, and under what conditions. Indeed, until quite recently it was accurate to say that while book history revealed much about the way readers in the past viewed and used reading materials, it disclosed little about the processes of response and the dynamics of reception—little, in other words, about how historically specific readers processed texts and how interpretive strategies shaped the way texts worked on their readers.[15]

My caveat about "accuracy" is necessary because over the last five to eight years, a few historians of reading and a few reception-oriented critics have begun to use letters, memoirs, marginalia, and reviews to reveal something about the dynamics of readers' engagement with print and the strategies by which readers in the past made sense of texts.[16] But this work, too, has had its problems, from questions raised by book historians themselves about its underlying assumption that marginalia, letters, and memoirs provide unmediated, representative indices to the experiences of "real," "common," or "typical" readers,[17] to a frequent lack of theoretical grounding, which has caused book historians repeatedly to succumb to the kind of textual essentialism that response and reception theory has called into question.[18] More importantly, this work, still in its embryonic stage, has yet to reveal and explore the connections between the historical response practices of individuals and the broader reading formations and specific interpretive communities of which they are a part—the place, in other words, where historical studies of reading, literary-critical reception study, and response-and-reception theory can and need to come together. As a result, book historians Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker's 2003 observation that "the theory of interpretive communities awaits . . . historical specificity" still obtains today.[19]

This is not to say that previous ventures into examining audiences and the history of response have been failures or that this field is incapable of developing a viable historical approach to reception. But if response criticism and reception study—two areas that, as Patrocinio Schweickart has recently pointed out, remain at odds with one another—hope to move beyond their current state, we must reconceive practice to confront the historical dynamics of response and the contours of reception histories.[20] Such a reorientation needs to integrate response theory and criticism, which concentrates on the stages of hermeneutical processing, with the contextual emphasis of reception study and methods from the history of the book to create a historical hermeneutics that identifies specific reading practices and explores the role of interpretive communities in the way texts were read and made sense of in a given era.[21] For an era other than our own, such a turn would necessitate a close analysis of interpretive traces recoverable from the archive. In doing so, however, a historical hermeneutics would go beyond Jonathan Culler's call for a history of reception that merely surveys the legacy of responses to a particular text to describe the codes that produced its various interpretations over time.[22] Instead, a historical hermeneutics needs to reconstruct the shared patterns of interpretation for a specific historical era to define the reading formation of particular interpretive communities. That reconstruction would explore the role a particular interpretive community had—or sought to have—in shaping interpretation, that community's repertoire of interpretive codes, its assumptions about how reading should proceed and about how texts position their audiences during the reading process, and the relation between community-specific interpretive strategies and the cultural contexts in which they were practiced. By attending to audience positioning, I do not mean that historical hermeneutics would return to the assumption of an essential text containing inherent patterns or forms that simply await reader activation. Rather, this approach would operate from the premise that any textual configurations that can be said to do work for or on a reader are always a function of that reader's historically specific interpretive practices. Historical hermeneutics, that is, would provide a framework for examining the way past reading formations, cultural conditions, and readers' engagements with texts intersect as reception events.

Before proceeding as a practice, however, historical hermeneutics needs to address a theoretical issue that has undergirded—and troubled—response and reception study but that has been largely sidestepped since the early 1990s. This issue involves the question, originally raised by early response critics, of where meaning—and the text itself—resides. Do texts have inherent features that contribute to meaning and shape the reading experience (a position that has been termed a realist, positive/positivistic, or essentialist notion of textuality and response), or are readers totally in charge of constructing texts through the act of interpretation (a position characterized as an idealist, negative, or anti-essentialist theory of reading because of its poststructuralist base)?[23] The second position was most forcefully argued by Stanley Fish, in a form that became, according to Michael Bérubé, the central assumption of response and reception theory: the claim, in contradistinction to the principle of Derridean deconstruction, is that "there is nothing inside the text."[24] Though Bérubé does not say so, the problem with this answer was not only that it was never conceptualized into a viable form of practice but also that it entailed a second question that Fish himself raised: If readers construct texts in the act of interpretation, what is the object of interpretation? Or, to put the query more accurately, when we interpret a text, what is it that gets interpreted? What is interesting is that even as Fish was answering this question by asserting that no one can provide an answer, others began declaring that the question of whether the text or the reader—or some combination of the two—produced meaning was an issue that audience-oriented study no longer needed to worry about.[25] However, it would be a mistake to claim that this issue has gone away or to assume, as Bérubé does, that this former theoretical flash point is now somehow passé or irrelevant. On the contrary, this question—or more accurately, implicit answers to it—continues to be at work in the underlying, often unspoken, premises of current scholarship in reading history and reception study. For such work shares with other forms of critical practice a set of moves that rely on making claims about textual properties, whether those properties are the operation of a political unconscious, a subtextual ideology, a structure of narrative forms, a generic profile, or even the indeterminacy and infinite regress of signification. In other words, most critical practice—including contemporary forms of audience, reading, and reception study—implicitly address the question of what gets interpreted by making tacit assumptions about the object of interpretation.

Unavoidable as a critical inquiry, the issue is whether that question can be addressed without invoking a problematic textual essentialism or succumbing to a Fishian exasperation that says there is no explanation. I want to argue in the next section that an answer to the question of what gets interpreted can be theorized, as a form of historically embedded practice, without recourse to textual essentialism and that historical hermeneutics can help provide that answer.

When engaged in practice, critics and scholars of reading and interpretation have tended to shy away from positing a totally empowered interpreter and to assume instead that texts possess some inherent characteristics that exist before reading begins. Most commonly, this assumption subscribes to an interactive or transactional model of reading, which either maintains that the text possesses inherent meaning (or conceives the text as containing an inexhaustible plenitude of meaning), or attributes to the text intrinsic features—for example, generic markers, image patterns, plot structures, narrative conventions, implied reading roles, or semiotic gaps—from which readers take directions to build (or deconstruct) meaning.[26] Whether they assume that texts embody meaning or argue that readers create meaning from the "signals" provided by a text's formal elements, both approaches quickly run into trouble once the question arises over how such meanings or signals are known. Any assertion of intrinsic meaning has difficulty explaining how these are manifested without positing the reader as a mere blank slate or passive recipient of imparted textual messages. Because even the most tendentious arguments for intrinsic meaning draw back from this assumption, however, and agree that readers help shape meaning, they cannot cogently answer the question of how intrinsic meaning is to be distinguished from the reader's constructions—that is, how anyone could know which is which—without going outside the text itself by invoking interpretive principles that determine what counts and what does not count as evidence. A version of the same problem destabilizes realist/essentialist claims for the presence of formal properties, signals, and directions in texts. As Steven Mailloux has persuasively argued, the attempt to answer the question of how "textually embedded conventions determine [or contribute to] interpretation . . . leads . . . toward some kind of correspondence model: interpreters recognize conventions in a text because they have . . . an internalized set of interpretive conventions."[27] Essentialists thus ground their defense by invoking, as a metacritical principle, the reader's interpretive work as a form of literary competence that is always and everywhere the same. Both strategies thereby succeed only in undermining their premise of textual immanence by admitting to the primacy of interpretive conventions while denying historical variety in interpretation except as a form of incompetence or error.

Still, those who maintain that texts do contribute to meaning have on occasion invoked a different argument based on what might be called a principle of textual restriction. This position is exemplified in Umberto Eco's claim for the "limits of interpretation," particularly through his discussion of a scenario in which someone finds in a bottle a note that reads, "Dear Friend, In the Basket brought by my Slave there are 30 Figs I send you as a present. Looking forward. . . . " Eco points out that such a message could be interpreted several ways. The message could be read as a code in which "*basket* stands for 'army,' *fig* for '1,000 soldiers,' and *present* for 'help,' " whereby the meaning of the note refers to a military operation. Or *Figs* could be taken in "a rhetorical sense (as in such expressions as *to be in good fig*, . . . *to be in poor fig*), and the message could support a different interpretation." Or the reader, being a medieval scholar, might interpret the note as "an allegory of 'Divine Grace,' and so on and so forth." But while the note could be variously interpreted, Eco asserts that "there are some senses that would be preposterous to suggest"—for example, "that it means that Napoleon died in May 1821." Hence, Eco concludes, "there is at least something which the message cannot positively say."[28]

Although it is not difficult to imagine a reader who could invoke a different code to read this note as meaning "Napoleon died in May 1821," I doubt Eco would be troubled by this additional way of reading the message in the bottle. Rather, his point is that, while words may have a plenitude of meanings, a word, by its particularity *as* a word, limits those meanings to a particular range. *Roof* may mean "the covering of a structure" or "upper palate" or "the sky" (as in "heavenly roof"), but it does not mean "basement" or "car" or "my dead aunt Agnes." *Light suit* may signify "lacking sufficient weight" or "of the wrong color or material for winter" or ironically signify "too heavy" or "too dark," but it cannot mean "oversized," "poorly cut," or "explosive." A single text, in other words, cannot mean just anything.

How credible is such a claim? To consider it, let us imagine a situation involving two people driving a car through the backcountry of Italy, when they are forced to stop for a group of school children crossing the road. While waiting, the passenger turns to the driver and says "go." In this scenario, the meaning of *go* becomes ambiguous in that the driver must conclude that the passenger is either insane or homicidal or that he is being ironic. But according to proponents of textual restriction, there is a limit to the meaning *go* can have. It cannot mean *eat, read,* or *smoke your pipe,* nor can it nonironically mean *stop.* But consider this scenario further. Suppose the driver had earlier informed the passenger that he was hungry and wanted to eat a sandwich they had packed but had been unable to do so because they were on a serpentine road that required repeated gear shifting. As they stop for the children, the passenger says "go," which the driver, not unreasonably, takes as a suggestion that he now have his sandwich. *Go* suddenly is interpreted to mean "eat." Or we could imagine that the driver had expressed the need to use a restroom and had said to the passenger, "If we don't find one soon, I may have to pull over and use nature." In this case, the passenger's "go" could be taken to signify a quite different meaning from "proceed forward." In other words, it is possible to describe situations in which *go* may mean anything from "eat" or "run over behind those trees and take care of you bodily needs" to "check the oil." Should someone object that these situations involve unusual or even abnormal circumstances, we can only reply "abnormal or unusual in relation to what?" Normal circumstances are always context specific, and they always consist of the shared interpretive conventions that determine what meaning(s) apply in a particular interpretive situation.[29]

Where, then, does this leave us regarding the question with which we began: In interpretation, what gets interpreted? If one were to remark that the previous discussion shows that different situations are interpreted differently, my reply would be that that is precisely the point—or more accurately the first point to be made in recognizing what gets interpreted. For the object of interpretation is not some historical context existing "out there" independent of interpretative codes. As Derrida persuasively argued, because context is "an essential nontotalization," its specification must be formulated and marked; hence, context must be constituted in a "performative operation."[30] What counts as context—the shape it takes, the features that are noticed—is itself the product of interpretation. Not only does any speech act or written text become meaningful through an act of interpretation within the active relationship of epistemic frames, ideologies, and interpretive codes constituting the reading formation of a historically specific interpretive community. Any interpretive move also operates within a formation that itself is shaping the context that will not only produce meaning but determine what moves are necessary for its creation.

Consequently, what interpretation interprets is itself: the network or interpretive *field* of reciprocal relations and codes of which the text has become a part by virtue of the linguistic status it is accorded within that field. When a novel, poem, newspaper article, or any text, as sign, enters the field, it becomes part of the site for interpretation. What gets interpreted is not the text but the portion of the interpretive field or reading formation in operation during the particular sense-making act. Interpretation is a self-deciphering activity because the reading strategies, beliefs, and so on that make up the field do not occupy the same plane but operate in a hierarchical arrangement in which decisions about more particular or higher-level interpretive moves are made by lower-level or more "foundational" ones, some of which are shared by more than one interpretive community (e.g., that different genres of writing exist, that an interpretation needs to be as inclusive as possible, that story is an inherent feature of narrative).[31]

But, one might ask, if interpretation interprets itself as an interpretive field, wouldn't interpretation be an infinitely regressive act consisting of an endless chain of decisions about other decisions? In one sense, yes. Interpretation is endless because we are always intersubjectively deciphering signs and shaping contexts, but no particular interpretive act ever operates this way because of what could be called the rule of closure: whenever a reader interprets a sign or a particular collection of signs, he or she moves on to the next collection because the interpretation performed satisfies, to some degree, that reader. Precisely why such satisfaction occurs or what it consists of cannot be theorized as a formal principle since it is always particular to a historically specific reading formulation. But such closure is necessary because without it a reader would find it impossible to function in a world in which new signs need to be dealt with. And it is possible precisely because of the hierarchical arrangement of interpretive codes and beliefs, in that higher-order decisions will yield a satisfactory interpretation because they themselves have been decided upon—that is, interpreted as appropriate—by more foundational principles so deeply embedded in the formation that they function as facts or truths in no need of further decisions.

This explanation, however, leads to another question. If an interpretation is always historically specific in the sense that what gets interpreted is always a portion of a contextually specific interpretive field, why include the text as part of the field? Since a text can mean anything a particular field decides it to mean, such an explanation seems to do away with the text by turning it into a Rorschach blot or an empty set that cannot be differentiated from any other text. I would argue, however, that this is not the case because the materiality of the signifier cannot be ignored. It *does* matter that a particular set of graphemes or phonemes in a particular order is read or heard just as it matters that in listening to music one hears a particular set of sounds in a specific temporal order. How does such a claim, however, square with the fact that a reader can interpret "Sally threw the ball" and "The ball was thrown by Sally" to mean the same thing? If "It's bright in here" can mean "It's too light in here," "It's cheerful in here," "Turn down that spotlight," or "My eyes hurt," it would seem that neither the particularity of the words nor their order matters.

Addressing this issue requires recognizing that when a reading formation interprets itself it does so through a process of decisions and judgments about what interpretive strategies to invoke and what way they are combined, tested, discarded, and reformulated. The fact that the material text consists of signs in a particular order matters because the meaning a reader might create for those signs will result from a particular combination of interpretive moves that differs from other combinations producing different meanings from that material cluster. While "It's bright in here" may mean "The lighting is too intense" or "It's colorful in here" or "Close the drapes," these meanings will be the product of the different shapes each reading formulation takes, just as the shape will vary among formulations in which the same meaning is produced from different clusters. Those differences in shape eventuate, in part, because each formulation makes meaning—and in the process makes the text—in relation to what can be called a particular *pre-text* that becomes, not an anchor for interpretation, but only part of the interpretive field by virtue of the interpretive act itself. The pre-text is not a stable entity, a collection of formal features that is the same for all readers, nor is it the object of interpretation. Rather, the pre-text is the *occasion* for an interpretation, but its status as occasion is itself the product of the reading formation that has determined that the self-deciphering act of interpretation should begin.[32]

Besides providing a viable answer to the question of what gets interpreted in a way that takes into account the historically specific conditions of response, the premises just given as the theoretical basis of historical hermeneutics allow for a reformulation of the relation among interpretation, communication, textual production, and the role of authors and intentions. If interpretive formations are always interpreting a part of themselves, it would seem at first glance that these last three elements drop out of the equation, either as irrelevant or nonexistent within historical hermeneutics. Such an assumption, however, need not—in fact, cannot—be the case, since ignoring those components would lead to the counterintuitive position that we never understand each other. For one thing, production and communication remain within the equation but, in one sense, shift registers once it is recognized that a reading formulation is a construct that produces the text. In this sense, reception is an activity that changes the site of production from the author to the reader or interpretive community. Communication remains an essential part of this process because as the reading formation produces the text by interpreting itself, the formation also attributes to the pre-text, as a collection of signs, the capacity to produce ideas in the minds of readers. Communication thus takes the form of the interpretive community creating a communication with itself, conveying by its act of textual production not only what the text means but how that particular part of the interpretive field, which has produced that meaning, functions.

What needs to be stressed, however, is that as readers we do not experience communication this way, in terms of what we assume happens as we read. Rather, most readers approach texts as acts of communication, designed by someone—usually taken to be the author—who intends to convey some type of meaning (whether as ideas, information, or feelings) to them. This is not to imply that readers are deluded in what they do; on the contrary, the assumption of authorship and authorial intention is necessary within the communication model most readers hold, which treats texts as containers and conveyors of meaning.[33] To recognize this is not to assume that meaning is inherently authorial meaning or that there is no such thing as intentionless meaning. Rather, the point is that when readers, in the act of responding to a linguistic text, read to obtain communicated meaning—the situation, to varying degrees, of most readers today as well as in earlier historical periods—they formulate a concept of the author's intended meaning as the sense they seek. An audience's constructed conception of intentions and authors (what Michel Foucault called the author-function) as producers of texts and as realities independent of and prior to interpretation is an integral part of the history of response.[34] Historical hermeneutics, therefore, cannot sever production from reception but needs to treat the two as processes intertwined and co-extensive in particular ways within historically constituted reading practices.

Consideration of production, however, cannot be limited to the readers' function as producing agents because production in another form is already at work before reading itself begins. Here the materiality of the pre-text comes into play in that the physical form of the text, including the way it is delivered, can affect the shape of response. Such factors are perhaps most obvious in dramatic productions where lighting, the arrangement of props, and other staging practices can have an impact on audience conceptualization. But conditions of material production also play a role in dealing with print. As Diana Goodrich has pointed out, "the book a reader will take up is inscribed in a complex, highly mediated circuit that includes . . . the far-reaching distribution of the text as object . . . and the participation of publishers, editors, and even distributors in a network of financial relationships."[35] A publisher's decision to reprint a work in an unexpurgated or "restored" version or in a deluxe edition can likewise become a factor in the way texts are made sense of. That these production factors result from decisions that are themselves interpretations goes without saying, but that principle itself underscores in one more way the interconnections between production and response in any reading situation.[36]

Those interconnections, moreover, include authors, not only as projections of audiences but as projecting readers. The significance of this factor involves more than the shopworn saw that authors are readers too. Even if communication consists of an interpretive community communicating with itself, the interpretive field inevitably includes as part of its formation a pre-text that itself must be physically constructed as a sequence of signs. That pre-text, furthermore, is the product of interpretation in that its construction as a sequence transpires in a context that includes both the author's previous reading (as interpretive work) and the interpretation that accompanies composing and revision. And what do writers interpret? The answer is "the same thing as other readers": a segment of the interpretive field in which they are positioned. This includes a working sense of the reading conventions that constitute the audience they assume they are addressing and the codes of interpretation they share with other members of one or more interpretive communities. Since those codes inevitably include assumptions about the way reading might or should proceed, any interpretive formation a writer inhabits will involve some working conception of the audience he or she seeks to address. Indeed, as Peter Rabinowitz and others have maintained, "an author . . . cannot begin to fill up a blank page without making assumptions about the readers' beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with [interpretive] conventions."[37] As social, intersubjective practices, authorial assumptions about audience are always formed within a historically specific reading field that an author shares to some degree with his or her contemporary readers. The importance of that relation cannot be overstated, because, when production and reception are operating within a shared historical grid marking the activities of both author and reader, the interrelations between response and production are most at work. It is precisely at such moments that a historical approach to response, taking into account the nexus of author and audience, is especially valuable and necessary.

Since any historical discussion of authorial intentions, conceptions of reading, and assumptions about the author-reader nexus is itself a product of critical interpretation, we seem to have come full circle. That same circularity would appear to mark any attempt to disclose the shape of response within a given historical context. To put the matter another way, because any description of interpretive codes and reading processes proceeds from the critic's own act of reading—and thus is inherently an interpretive act—would not a historical analysis of response constitute just one more critical construction no more valid nor valuable than ahistorical examinations? Would it not yield just one more reading of reading? In the remainder of this section I offer a partial answer to this question, but because a fuller response ultimately depends upon the way historical hermeneutics is pursued as a practice, I will return to this issue in the last chapter.

If we agree that the critic is always a reader first, it follows that any attempt to reconstruct a set of historical conventions and integrate them with an analysis of reception events will itself be mediated by the critic's own interpretive strategies. Hence the critic's role as interpreter, which itself is historically constituted, cannot be eliminated. Yet that mediation is not only inevitable but necessary, since the relation between historical conventions and the reader's practices and role cannot be pursued solely through the interpretive conventions of a pre-text's original audience. To modify one of Jauss's insights, because an audience's encounter with a pre-text, when it first appears, can involve both fulfillment and reorientation of that readership's interpretive horizons, the critic "must bring his own experience into play, since the past horizon of old and new . . . problems and solutions, is only recognizable in its further mediation, within the [critic's] present horizon."[38]

The inevitability of the critic's role in the reading experience does not mean, however, that a historical hermeneutics must succumb to a temporal solipsism that covertly naturalizes—by tacitly ignoring the conditions of—the critic's own historically constituted response. A historical hermeneutics would militate against this tendency by recognizing that the representation of historicized response consists of an intertextual relation between the experience at the work's origin and the reconstitution of that experience by posterity's interpretive practices, both of which are always (pre)structured by the reader's own position in an interpretive community. While a historical hermeneutics, therefore, cannot eliminate such prestructuring by posterity, what it can do is mitigate it by fashioning an intersubjectivity that counterpoises two different horizons of expectation playing off one another: the set of conventions (re)constructed as the basis of textual response within the historical context formulated, and the horizon governing the critic's created account of reading within and against those original strategies. The purpose of such an approach would not be to proscribe other interpretations of reading as unacceptable or to try to provide a purportedly "objective" description of historical reception events, but, in explicitly confronting the historical nature of reading, to open out and historicize accounts of reading practices. A historical hermeneutics would thereby offer a "fusion of horizons" that is always partial, provisional, and thus open to the flux characterizing interpretation as an intersubjective historical activity.

The decades in the United States from 1820 to 1865 offer an especially appropriate period for examining reception events through the lens of historical hermeneutics. Called by some historians an era of "reading revolutions," the antebellum years witnessed an upsurge in the production and dissemination of reading materials and an unprecedented growth in population—and especially in urban population—that dramatically increased the audience for print.[39] An important byproduct of urbanization was its concentration of resources necessary for the publication of books, periodicals, and printed matter on a scale to match this population. By 1850, according to estimates by some historians of book publishing, the number of publishing and printing houses in the United States totaled over seven hundred. With the founding of such major firms as Wiley, Little Brown, Scribner's, and Putnam, publishing had grown from a small-town cottage industry to a big business; by the 1850s Harper and Brothers had become the largest publishing house in the world.[40]

As large as it was, Harper's output comprised only a fraction of the marked growth in the production of books and other printed matter in the United States. At a time of relatively stable prices, the value of books produced rose from $2.5 million in 1820 to over $16 million in 1865. Between 1820 and 1852, the number of book titles alone averaged eight hundred a year; from 1855 to 1858 that number more than tripled. In all, the total number of imprints mushroomed from 2,500 in 1800 to almost seven thousand in 1844 and continued to climb at a comparable pace right up to the Civil War.[41] What was true of book production in general was true of fiction in particular. Of the 1,400 titles of American fiction published between 1720 and 1850, more than half appeared from 1840 to 1849. By 1855, when the total number of works of fiction published in the United States reached four hundred, that genre comprised almost 30 percent of all titles for that year.[42]

This concurrent growth in population, urbanization, and the availability of printed matter in the first half of the nineteenth century was, to be sure, not unique to the United States. Not only were all three factors regnant through most of the Euro-Atlantic world; the yearly production of book titles in England and France equaled or outstripped that of the United States in the 1850s. However, the ratio of volume production to population was higher on the western side of the Atlantic. In the late 1830s, total volumes printed in the United States and England were about equal at a time when the British population was nearly 50 percent greater.[43] After 1850, the difference became more pronounced, and sales figures for individual titles corroborated the trend. Richard Altick has put the upper limit of sales for any British work at this time at two hundred thousand, a figure achieved by W. H. Russell's account of the Crimean War in 1855–56. By contrast, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold one hundred thousand copies in the first five months after its appearance in book form in 1852 and over three hundred thousand copies by 1853. In fiction, the differences in book sales and print runs were most pronounced. Two years before Dickens's *Bleak House* (one of his most popular novels) sold forty thousand copies during its first year of publication in 1853, the American novelist Susan Warner had sold over one hundred thousand copies of *The Wide, Wide World*. Nor was this an isolated contrast. In Victorian England, "ordinary circulating-novels," writes Altick, "seldom had an edition of more than a thousand or 1,250 copies"; by contrast, according to Cathy Davidson, as early as the 1820s in the United States it was possible for the first printing of a new novel to have a run of ten thousand copies. Aided by the availability of inexpensive pirated editions of British novels in the absence of an international copyright law, by the 1850s America had far surpassed England in the sales of fiction.[44]

The growth in print matter in antebellum America was most noticeable, however, in newspaper and periodical publication. Whereas in 1790 there were approximately ninety newspapers in the United States, by 1827 that figure had ballooned to just under one thousand—nearly a third of all newspapers published in the world. When that total grew to 1,600 in 1840, the United States had more than twice the number of newspapers in England and France, the next leading producers of that medium.[45] A similar ascendancy marked U.S. periodical production. Although there were fewer than one hundred magazines in the United States in 1825, that number expanded to nearly seven hundred by 1850; twenty years later the total in Britain had not yet reached five hundred. At a time when France's population still exceeded that of the United States and the number of American periodicals was approaching seven hundred, the total of all periodicals *and* newspapers in France was under six hundred.[46]

Several factors contributed to the greater production of print matter in the United States vis-à-vis Europe. Although technological advances in the methods of book production—including innovations in typesetting, the advent of machine-made paper, and the introduction of the Napier-Hoe cylinder press in the 1840s—contributed greatly to the general outpouring of printed material in the Western world, these developments were especially pronounced in the United States, where stereotyping and electrotyping were more extensively used and where the vast majority of cylinder presses were in operation.[47] Equally important were changes in the organizational and investment practices of American publishers. In this period the activities of printing, binding, and selling became segmented, with the resulting specialization contributing to greater efficiency and to greater capital outlay for new technologies. As they increased their investments in equipment and buildings, publishers sought to expand their markets from local to regional, and eventually to national, audiences for books and magazines. One result was the development in the 1840s and 1850s of nationally distributed periodicals such as *DeBow's Review, Graham's Magazine, Harper's New Monthly Magazine,* and *Godey's Lady's Book*.[48]

Technological advances in transportation further facilitated the expanding regionalization and nationalization of publishing. By the 1820s and 1830s, the Erie Canal and extensive use of steamboats along the Mississippi and Ohio valleys enabled print matter to be shipped to areas it had never reached before. Even more important was the development and growth of the railroad. In 1840, when railroad mileage in all of Europe totaled 1,800, the United States had three thousand miles of track covering an area less than half the size. By the early 1860s, U.S. rail miles would surpass thirty thousand—more than three times the total in Great Britain and more than the total for all of continental Europe.[49]

Such changes and the concomitant growth in the volume of printed matter do not by themselves, however, prove that the antebellum era was marked by a substantial increase in reading that was most pronounced in America. Any claim for such an increase must take into account not only production but also consumption. Although the dramatic growth in newspapers and periodicals and the unprecedented sales figures for some novels indicate that more printed matter was being consumed than ever before, such data may indicate not that more people were reading but that the same number of Americans simply were reading more.[50]

Several factors nonetheless suggest that the increased consumption of print in antebellum America did result from more people reading. Besides growing dramatically in size, the American population was becoming more literate. White adult literacy rates in the first decade of the nineteenth century stood at 75 percent in the North and 50 to 60 percent in the South, but a continual increase above and below the Mason Dixon line caused the literacy rate to reach 90 percent by 1840 for white adults nationwide. Literacy especially grew among women, to the point where rates for men and women had become roughly equal by the 1840s. In 1850, when the adult literacy rate was under 70 percent in England and Wales and not yet at 60 percent in France, literacy among white American adults had become the highest in history at approximately 95 percent.[51] Still, as James Allen has pointed out, "a distinction must be made between simple literacy and the sophisticated ability to participate actively in the world of print."[52] Reading is a function of such factors as access to print materials, education, and the presence of social and cultural conditions that encourage or require reading proficiency and provide situations in which reading can occur. It was precisely the presence and interrelated growth of such factors that characterized antebellum America.

Besides the expansion of the publishing industry and transportation advances that extended distribution and lowered the costs of shipping books, a proliferation in the number of bookstores and the expansion of libraries increased access to printed matter.[53] Between 1790 and 1815, more than five hundred new subscription libraries were established in New England alone, and that number doubled by 1850. In the same period nationwide, subscription libraries increased fourfold. The number of commercial libraries, which circulated books through rental, similarly increased. Although public libraries as we know them (that is, free circulating libraries supported by public taxes) were virtually nonexistent before 1850, 259 were established in the United States before the end of the Civil War. Between 1825 and 1850, the number of subscription, commercial, free public, and school libraries in American had tripled to fifteen thousand, or one for every six hundred free adults; by 1860 that total nearly doubled again to over 27,000.[54] Besides expanding access to print, the growth of libraries in America encouraged reading by offering more opportunities and space for that activity.

The library movement acted in consort with an educational expansion, which saw the number of schools in the U.S. grow to 150,000 by 1860, more than twice the number in more populous France. That rise was accompanied by a substantial increase in school enrollments, length of the school day, and total number of school days attended.[55] The most significant development in this area came in public schooling. Although most elementary schooling was church affiliated or otherwise private through the first decade of the nineteenth century, by the early 1830s funding for public common schools was established in virtually very state along the eastern seaboard from Massachusetts to South Carolina. By the 1850s, a national public school movement, with a goal of "universal access" to education, was at work in the United States, extending to western states such as Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.[56] This commitment to state-supported schools came much earlier and proceeded at a faster pace than in Europe. Part of the reason, according to Ira Katznelson's and Margaret Weir's study of the history of public education, was that "the principle of free public schooling that proved so contentious for ruling groups in other countries," who saw it as dangerous, "was accepted as a given by virtually all the social classes and groups in the United States" by the time of the Civil War.[57] Another factor was the rapid acceleration of capitalist modes of production in the United States. The increasing number of workers involved in merchandising and commercial activity, which required skills in deciphering written orders and reading delivery schedules, needed the literacy public school education could provide.[58] In the wake of these developments, the number of public schools and total public school enrollment grew enormously from 1840 to 1860, thereby increasing access to reading instruction and to opportunities for reading.

Besides the growth in bookstores, libraries, and education, other factors contributed to the improved opportunities for people to read more and for more people to read. Advances in illumination—first through kerosene lamps and then through gas lighting in the 1840s—extended the hours available for reading, while improvements in eyeglasses, which began to be produced on a large scale in the 1830s, opened reading to children—and prolonged it for adults—whose visual impairments would otherwise have prevented them from exercising that skill.[59] Further opportunities for reading outside schools and libraries resulted from changes in American homes and in leisure time. Homes increasingly were built to provide family members with individual bedrooms, which offered privacy and quiet space for reading. This change in domestic architecture was driven in part by a general expansion and reorganization of leisure time in this period. The growing separation of work and home space under industrial capitalism enabled more workers to circumscribe the time spent in the workplace, which enlarged and concentrated leisure hours that could be devoted to reading. As the activities of economic production moved outside the home, thereby redefining domestic activity primarily as nurture and consumption, women and young adults still living at home had more time to exercise their reading skills.[60]

Proving as important to the promotion and spread of reading as these material developments was a signal cultural formation of the antebellum years: what Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens have called an "ideology of literacy," which linked literacy, citizenship, and socialization. Combining a growth in nationalism following the War of 1812 with what John Higham has termed a "pan-Protestant ideology that claimed to be civic and universal," antebellum ideology identified the advance of Christianity with the development of the American republic through the twin agencies of education and literacy—a linkage that not only spawned the American Tract Society (an institution that would distribute more than 200 million tracts, periodicals, and books between 1826 and 1855) but helped fuel the expansion of libraries and public schools.[61] The result was a symbiotic relationship between the ideology of literacy and the expansion of institutions whose growth further promoted the idea that the country's social, moral, and political health depended on a well-read citizenry. Indeed, it would be accurate to say that this way of thinking constituted not so much an ideology of literacy as an ideology of reading, for what was valorized was not simply attainment of basic literacy skills but greater access to print and increased, regular engagement with reading materials.

This ideology of reading was further fueled by an emphasis on female literacy, which had begun to build in the late eighteenth century under the assumption that the republic could best succeed if its mothers raised their children to become good citizens. Encouraging women to become better educated through reading, this incipient ideology expanded in the antebellum period under what historians have come to call the "cult of domesticity" that developed within the capitalist separation of work and home. Along with the redefinition of home as a place of nurture, womanhood was redefined, with women conceived as uniquely endowed with the ability to teach children because, by their nature or God's will, they were more moral, patient, and nurturing. Mothers were encouraged to read to their children (and become better readers themselves) to promote learning, Christian values, and respect for the social order and to provide the young with the means that would facilitate future economic success.[62]

The growth in reading that resulted from the increase in print matter and the expansion of cultural formations promoting print consumption did not, however, spread uniformly or penetrate equally into all segments of antebellum society. Though the number of public and total elementary schools grew in all regions, much of the increase was concentrated in towns and cities. Even when schools were available, attendance was more irregular in rural areas, where the separation between work and home was less pronounced owing to the nature of farm labor. Spending more time in production than their urban counterparts, rural children had less time—and fewer undisturbed blocks of time—to attend school, a problem exacerbated by the seasonal organization of farming. In 1840s and 1850s Massachusetts, for example, where literacy was among the highest in the nation, both the length of the school session and the average number of school days attended per child were 40 percent greater in towns of ten thousand or more inhabitants than in less populous areas. Nationwide, available data indicates that literacy rates for counties of one hundred inhabitants or fewer were fifteen percentage points lower than in counties of ten thousand or more. The lower literacy skills required in farming occupations also curbed the influence of the ideology of literacy, while the continued blend of work and home spaces caused the cult of domesticity and its attendant impact on the ideology of reading to be much less pronounced in rural areas.[63]

Access to reading materials was also more limited in those areas, since most publishing firms, bookstores, and libraries were concentrated in urban areas. Although one of the main sources of book distribution before 1830, the itinerant book peddler, has come down to us in the image of a print-sowing Johnny Appleseed trudging along lonely roads to isolated farms and villages, most book peddlers concentrated their efforts on towns to maximize profits.[64] Ironically, the coming of the railroad only intensified that trend. In the South, most rail lines linked major cities, while in the North and West, railroad expansion was closely tied to industrialization and thus concentrated in and around urban areas. Consequently, book distribution by rail was marked by a predominantly urban geography.[65]

If the growth in reading was predominantly an urban development, it was, however, no more equally spread among city and town dwellers than it was among the national population. Rather, economic and cultural factors caused the growth in reading and the numbers of readers to be concentrated in the urban middle class. Over the last thirty years, historians have begun to delineate the nature of this segment of the antebellum population. While questions remain about whether the term *middle class* is historically accurate and about what exactly marked middle-class status, most who have grappled with this issue agree that the forty years before the Civil War witnessed the emergence and expansion of an American middle class marked less by specific income categories than by a cluster of social, economic, and cultural features. These included an especially strong concentration of the ideology of reading, of access to print, and of opportunities for reading. As one American commentator in 1855 remarked, the "ability to read and the consequent love of reading have developed in this nation especially [among] an immense middle class of ordinary readers."[66]

One reason for such class differentiation was that access to education and to the reading skills that went beyond functional literacy was not equally distributed in urban America. Children from working-class families attended school less frequently and for shorter periods than their middle-class counterparts, primarily because working-class families needed the income from children laboring in the workplace. By contrast, for middle-class children the school rather than the workplace was the site of social development, with the result that literacy rates were substantially higher among middle-class youths.[67]

Disparities in access to reading materials and to locations conducive to reading further restrained reading among the working class and facilitated it for middle-class city dwellers. Most working-class families did not benefit from the restructuring of domestic architecture in this period, since homes offering the private space provided by individual bedrooms were beyond the reach of the laboring class.[68] While public libraries began to appear in this era, the vast majority of libraries continued to be subscription or commercial institutions, with the former charging annual dues from $4 to $25. Such costs were simply outside the means of day laborers and factory workers, whose wages averaged $5 to $6 per week.[69] Although the price of books in general—and novels in particular—declined in the 1830s and 1840s, hardcover books continued to cost between seventy-five cents and $1.25 throughout the antebellum period, while the price of a novel in the standard two-volume format had risen back to about $1.50 by 1850. The equivalent of a day's wages for working-class men and a half-week's wages for working-class women, the price of a single book was too high for most urban laborers. Although cheap pirated editions of British novels and the introduction of paper-bound volumes helped reduce costs somewhat, the era of widely available cheap paperbacks did not occur until the 1860s with the advent of Beadle's dime novels. As a result, in the 1850s the average cost of a novel in a New York City bookstore was about $1, and the average book sold for a little over fifty cents, a figure still beyond the means of most unskilled laborers. While newspapers and periodicals represented an alternative source of print matter, most periodicals had to be purchased through a yearly subscription, which ran anywhere from $2 (e.g., for the *Home Journal*) to $6 (e.g., for *Littell's Living Age*), the equivalent of two days' to a week's wages.[70]

Although cost and availability limited working-class access to print and to literacy training, these factors were part of a larger set of conditions that disproportionately concentrated reading activity within the urban middle class. The increasing prosperity of that class, combined with the labor surplus provided by the first large influx of immigrants from Germany and Ireland, enabled many middle-class families to hire servants and to purchase commodities that had formerly been produced by labor in the home. Both developments helped produce an increase in that class's leisure time.[71] Moreover, owing to the need for most working-class children and women to participate in the labor force, the separation between work and home developed primarily as a bourgeois social formation, in which middle-class women were "free to attend to the concerns of direction, . . . propriety, culture, and sentiment"—concerns that they learned to cultivate through reading and that included reading as an activity marking cultivation.[72] Localizing the cult of domesticity primarily within the middle class, the resulting reconceptualization of motherhood produced a structured bourgeois leisure that shifted domestic time into caring for the health, comfort, and education of children as an identifying mark of the successful middle-class home.[73]

This emphasis constituted part of an especially strong concentration of the ideology of reading within the middle class. The conditions that coded the home as a domestic space of feminine instruction also elevated reading to a defining bourgeois activity for men and women. Education and learning, along with other social signifiers such as dress, housing, and decor, served as markers of one's character and of one's social class. As a result, according to R. Laurence Moore, "the habit of frequent reading" and of systematic, informed reading "became in antebellum America a sign of middle-class behavior," a form of what Pierre Bourdieu has called cultural capital. The goal was not so much social advancement as it was fashioning and maintaining the individual's and the family's bourgeois and urbane status.[74] In conjunction with the economics of access to print and to leisure for reading, such class-conscious inflection of the ideology of reading made the consumption of print, and its growth in antebellum America, a predominantly urban, middle-class phenomenon.

What did all this mean for what was often cited at the time as the most popular form of reading matter: novels and periodical fiction? Traditionally, literary and social historians have echoed the antebellum claim that fiction grew into the most widely consumed form of print, but one historian, Ronald Zboray, has challenged this assumption, arguing that "fiction little benefited from [the] large potential readership" of the time. As an index, Zboray enlists the sales figures of the most popular novel before the Civil War, *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* While Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel reached the unprecedented figure of three hundred thousand copies sold, that number represented only a little over 1 percent of the population in 1852. As further evidence, Zboray cites the holdings of the New York Society Library, in which novels represented only 3.3 percent of its 11,700 volumes.[75]

Two problems, however, inhere in this revisionist challenge. Although the number of copies Stowe's novel sold constituted a small percentage when measured against total population, the same was true of any single volume of the time, with the possible exception of the Bible. By such a measure, no genre could be said to have benefited—a dubious conclusion in the face of the massive increase in the production of books, periodicals, and newspapers in antebellum America. Nor do the *holdings* of the New York Society Library provide an adequate gauge, even if we grant their representativeness. A very different picture emerges, in fact, from the charge records Zboray provides for that subscription library for 1847–49 and 1854–56. Of the 5,688 books checked out in those years, novels accounted for 34 percent of the charges, which was two and a half times the rate for the second most popular genre, travel books. While novels accounted for 21 percent of charges in 1847–49 (highest of all categories), that percentage more than doubled to 45 percent in 1854–56, which was four times the checkout rate of the next category.[76] Such records, in consort with the unprecedented sales figures of novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Warner's *The Wide, Wide World,* and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter,* and the massive increase in novel titles published, suggest that fiction did benefit from the upsurge in literacy and reading in the forty years before the Civil War. However, the growth in fiction reading was no more systemically national than the growth in reading. Instead, the expanding middle-class urban audience provided the bulk and accounted for much of the growth in the readership for fiction.

Although the audience for fiction was more restricted than literary historians have usually assumed, in another sense it was broader than conceived by some antebellum commentators and subsequent historians. The assumption here involves gender, as reflected in the remark of the magazine writer cited earlier who, after identifying ordinary readers as "middle class," contended, "this great middle class is composed four-fifths of women, inasmuch as the hard-working men of the day have little leisure and taste for any thing beyond the sphere of counting-houses." Although literary historians have echoed this assumption, there is no strong evidence to support the claim that the audience for fiction consisted mostly of women.[77] On the contrary, subscription lists for periodicals such as the *Southern Literary Messenger,* which contained substantial offerings of serialized novels and short fiction, included more male than female subscribers. Similarly, leading women's magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book,* which regularly included fiction in their pages, enjoyed a substantial male readership. The charge records of the New York Society Library cited above provide further evidence of gender parity in the fiction-reading audience. Of all charges for men, 33 percent were for novels, while the figure for women was only slightly greater at 36 percent. Moreover, while the percentage of novels charged by women went from 23 percent in 1847–49 to 44 percent in 1854–56, the increase for men over the same period was even greater: 20 to 46 percent.[78]

Resulting in part from the factors that had led to a concentrated increase in reading in general among the urban middle class, the growth in fiction reading among that population also stemmed from a change in bourgeois attitudes toward fiction. The older distrust of novels, which had characterized fiction as lies or simply as a waste of time, gave way in the antebellum era to a public recognition—manifested and conducted most volubly in the periodical press—that Americans were devoting increasing amounts of leisure time to fiction reading. "The mass of American reading consists of newspapers and novels," remarked the *Home Journal.* Numerous periodicals made similar statements, including the *Ladies' Repository,* which announced, "One of the characteristics of the literature of the present time is the prominent position occupied by prose fiction."[79] The vast majority of magazine journalists realized that this phenomenon could not be addressed, as it had in the past, simply by censuring such reading. "The day has passed," wrote the *Southern Literary Messenger,* "when works of fiction would be dismissed with a contemptuous sneer" (May 1842: 342), while another review in the *Home Journal* added, "It is futile to attempt to prevent the young, and the many not young, from the perusal of prose fiction" (Mar. 24, 1855: [3] no pag.). Echoed frequently in the pages of *DeBow's Review, Graham's Magazine, Godey's,* the *North American Review,* and other literary and popular periodicals, such remarks emanated from more than a sense of resignation. In the face of growing demand, editors of periodicals recognized that offering fiction was an effective way to increase subscriptions and boost profits. Redefining fiction as economically advantageous, magazines also reconceived it as a form of cultural capital. Framed within the bourgeois ideology of reading, fiction reading was touted as a vehicle of public advancement and personal education. Hence, while *DeBow's Review* was claiming that "fiction has become the chosen vehicle of information and instruction for the present generation of readers" (Dec. 1860: 745), the editor of *Godey's* maintained that "novels are now the great vehicle of public sentiment, where . . . all new ideas . . . are promulgated" (Apr. 1850: 290). In a virtual about face from earlier censure, a writer in the *Southern Literary Messenger* even claimed that the "influence of these fictitious histories . . . has been . . . on the whole, advantageous to general literature, and of the most humanizing effect upon society" (May 1835: 479). Interestingly enough, the same claims were being made about periodicals.

This connection between fiction and magazines was important, but not simply because periodicals became a major venue for the publication of fiction. Magazines also became important vehicles for thinking about and responding to fiction. In the new mass media that the periodical press was creating, reviews and literary essays served as the primary means of disseminating and assimilating ideas about the relation between fiction and reading practices.

This role carries important implications both for the reception of fiction in antebellum America and for the enterprise of historical hermeneutics. Although fictional texts are made meaningful within a field of reading practices, intersecting ideologies, epistemic frames, and material conditions, an historical study of reception must be grounded in analyses of the particular interpretive strategies preserved in the historical archive. Of the two main types of archival material available—responses contained in letters, diaries, memoirs, and marginalia, and reading patterns informing public reception events—the second provides a more extensive and viable basis for several reasons. As John Frow, John Fiske, Eugene Kintgen, and other scholars and theorists in literary criticism, cultural studies, and book history have maintained, we need to study not just readers but reading, as manifested in interpretive practices and what Frow has called reading "systems." That is, fashioning a historicized sociology of reception grounded in affective practices of shared interpretive codes requires, in Jonathan Culler's words, a focus foremost on "public interpretive practices."[80] Reviews in periodicals provide such a basis for fiction reading in antebellum America. Often appearing in magazines with relatively large circulations or in periodicals with a national reputation, reviews enjoyed a publicly sanctioned authority buttressed by the institutional imprimatur of the publishing industry itself. That status does not preclude letters, diaries, and annotations from having some value for an exploration of antebellum reception events. Indeed, this study makes use of comments in letters and other marks of interpretive activity, when available, in chapters 3 through 6, in part to reveal parallels between private and public responses. But because antebellum reviews were not merely individual responses but expressions whose content was corporate and communal, reviewers formed an interpretive community that played an important role in the collective reception of fiction in the early nineteenth century.[81]

To say this is not to imply that the reading practices of reviewers determined or precisely mirrored the responses of the mass audience. But it is impossible to discount the influence of reviewers, in part because the gap between them and "common" readers was not as large as it is today, owing to what James Wallace has called "the peculiar circumstances of intellectual life in early nineteenth-century America." Most reviewers in the United States were not professional critics but "moral and intellectual leaders of the community" who shared a common "social standing, education, and opinion" with the fiction-reading public.[82] Residing primarily in cities and towns, that public consisted largely of the same middle-class audience that bought and read periodicals. Nor should we forget that to be a member of that class meant defining oneself through the values, habits, and practices of bourgeois culture, including its reading practices. Since a main source of learning about those practices, particularly in terms of responding to fiction, were the magazines written for and consumed by the middle class, the desire for group membership through class identity was a powerful impetus for employing the codes of cultured, bourgeois reading exemplified in periodicals.[83] The result was the creation and extension of a public sphere of interpretation that paralleled and helped form middle-class reading formations for the reception of fiction.[84]

This intersection of periodical reviews, public interpretation, and middle-class reading constituted an important context not only for the reading of fiction but also for its production. At a time when producing literature was becoming a profession, fiction writers were facing a new type of relation with their audience, who had become consumers in the new mass market for fiction. Under such conditions, explains William Charvat, antebellum "writers recognized the new reading class as a force and attempted to adjust themselves to it" by producing novels and tales "written with reference to buyers' tastes and reading habits."[85] In the urban mass market, however, that audience and its reading practices were no longer directly knowable. Confronting a faceless audience, writers nonetheless had a potential index to the reading practices of the day in the reviews and literary essays that composed the public forum of response. This was less a matter of exact equation and more a case of writers locating a discursive space for conceiving their relationship to a readership and anticipating audience response. Many writers were cognizant of the reading practices of magazine journalists and were keenly aware of the potential impact of the periodical press on the response patterns of the mass audience. Poe, for example, maintained that "the popular 'opinion' of the merits of contemporary authors . . . is adopted from the journals of the day."[86] Whether writing popular fictions or advocacy novels or pitching their stories to what Melville would call the "eagle-eyed reader," authors as diverse as Melville, Poe, and Catharine Sedgwick could not ignore this community. An analysis of its interpretive strategies, therefore, is important not only to understanding the reception of fiction in early nineteenth-century America but also for examining the way fiction writers sought to engage the contemporary audience.

Such a bi-directional approach to antebellum reading opens an avenue into the historically constituted interplay of literary reception, interpretive practices, discourse production, and the dynamics of response to the fiction of that time.

It is important to stress that production within that relation involved writers' particular conceptions, embedded within a matrix of ideas about fiction reading, audience engagement, and the function of fiction within the larger culture. Indeed, a writer such as Poe was actually a member of the community of "magazinists," as periodical reviewers and editors were called at the time. For much of the twentieth century, however, literary critics and historians have assumed that major authors such as Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe wrote as oppositional writers by producing novels and tales that disrupted or otherwise challenged the values of the dominant culture. Such writers were thereby conceived to be the opposite of popular authors such as Stowe and Sedgwick, whose texts were said merely to duplicate or accommodate the cultural mainstream. Over the last three decades, however, this dichotomy has been increasingly inverted as revisionist critics have argued that the texts of canonical writers were often accommodationist, while popular women writers produced works that subtly or overtly challenged standard social and ideological formations. Neither of these characterizations is adequate. No text can fully challenge its audience and still remain readable—that is, recognizable in some way within the reading formation into which it is inserted. Similarly, no text can be totally accommodating and still be considered new, offering its readers something they have never quite experienced before. Although all fictions affect their audience through both accommodation and disruption, what needs to be stressed is that such effects are a function of the work readers do on the texts and the interpretive formation(s) in which a novel or tale is always embedded. One purpose of a historical approach to the reception of antebellum fiction is to explore the varied forms that work took or may have taken as a product of the public strategies of interpretation at the time.

The chapters in part 2 of this study seek to provide such analysis by focusing on four writers who have occupied different places within the changing history of readers' assumptions about how their texts function and how they are to be valued. I have chosen authors whose positions have varied in terms of the popular or critical recognition they have enjoyed—or the neglect or marginalization their works have experienced—in their own day in comparison to ours. That is, the writers discussed in these case-study chapters represent each of four positions in a matrix: being popularly and/or critically acclaimed in their own day and in ours, having mixed success in their own day but canonized in ours, being popular and acclaimed in their own day but marginalized today, and experiencing mixed success in their own day and neglect in ours. Although the focus of these chapters is on the relation between these texts and the interpretive conventions of antebellum readers and not on our own contemporary reading codes, the two, as previously noted, are inextricably entwined. Indeed, one of the interesting dimensions of exploring the reception of antebellum fiction is the parallels and contrasts between our own reading formulations and those of the antebellum era.

For the category of dual recognition, several canonical authors could have been chosen, but I have selected Poe, in part because of his own work as a reviewer but also because the dynamics of accommodation and disruption that antebellum readers experienced through Poe's stories could assume such intriguing shapes. By contrast, Melville is a writer whose canonical status today is quite different from his position among antebellum readers; while Melville enjoyed brief popularity from 1845 to 1850, the popular and critical disfavor and neglect that befell his fiction shortly thereafter makes him the only canonical writer to occupy this position. For the other two categories, many choices could be appropriate, but I have selected the novels of Catharine Sedgwick for one of these categories because, while her novels achieved both public acclaim and popular success in the antebellum United States, she has been consigned, despite recent critical interest in her, largely to the margins of the canon over the last one hundred years. For the last category, a chapter is devoted to Caroline Chesebro', who, like many other antebellum fiction writers, received only modest attention in her own day and remains in virtual obscurity today. But because the antebellum reception of her novels reveal significant differences both in itself and in comparison to reactions to her fiction after the Civil War, the reception of her work offers an interesting opportunity to examine divergences and shifts in nineteenth-century interpretive and axiological practices. In conjunction with the reception histories of Poe, Melville, and Sedgwick, those shifting patterns of response provide an additional perspective on the relation between past reading formulations and our modern perceptions of nineteenth-century texts and authors.

Preparing the way for those particular reception histories requires turning first to the specific shape of the interpretive assumptions comprising the public forum of response in the forty years before the Civil War. Doing so constitutes in its own right an important component of the work of historical hermeneutics: addressing the question of what shapes fiction reading, as an interpretive activity, took in early nineteenth-century America. But just as importantly, the shapes that reading took provide a basis for enhancing our understanding of the relation among writers such as Poe, Melville, Sedgwick, and Chesebro', their contemporary receptions, and antebellum interpretive practices.