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## Reading Fiction in Antebellum America

Machor, James L.

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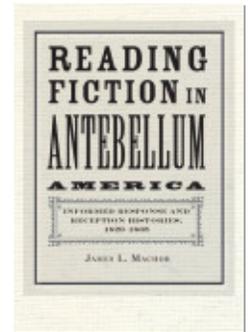
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## Interpretive Strategies and Informed Reading in the Antebellum Public Sphere

ALTHOUGH ACCEPTANCE OF FICTION as a popular form of reading and as an object for public discussion and interpretation in the periodical press rose in the forty years before the Civil War, neither developed without reservations. Reviewers, editors, and other magazine contributors remained somewhat chary about fiction reading as a danger to individual and social well being, in part because they assumed that writers could wield tremendous power over readers. As a reviewer for *Godey's Lady's Book* explained, the “thrilling stories” of many novels create a “fascination . . . that carries the reader along a willing slave” (July 1848: 59). In more general terms, reviewers repeatedly spoke of novel readers being “under the spell of a great master” (*North American Review* July 1836: 136) and of popular novelists such as Walter Scott being “enchanter[s] whose spell has entranced thousands” (*Ladies' Repository* Sept. 1848: 265). What concerned magazinists was that this “controlling power of authors,” according to the *Southern Literary Messenger*, “is perhaps no where more evident [than] in our country, where the people are emphatically a reading people” (Apr. 1840: 289). Unfortunately, warned reviewers, novelists too often abused this power as a kind of black magic under which “the novel reader,” as the *Ladies' Repository* lamented, “behaves little better than a lunatic, and passes his hours in dreams of rapture and anguish” (Sept. 1844: 248).

Although such remarks sought in part to encourage better fiction, reviewers did not believe that the problem or its solution rested solely on the shoulders of fiction writers. Whatever authors may do, “the purity of literature,” noted *Graham's Magazine*, “depends on the decency of its readers” (Mar. 1851: 159). Believing, as the *Southern Literary Messenger* announced, that “every step taken by the mass of readers in defiance or

disregard of any of the forms of excellence, becomes a stride in the downward pathway that leads to vandalism and ignorance” (Mar. 1845: 172), reviewers held that the failure to read fiction carefully, thoughtfully, and responsibly posed the true threat. As another reviewer in the *Messenger* put it, “It is the *abuse* and not the *use* of novel-reading which we reprobate. . . . [W]henever we abuse this privilege, then it is that works of fiction become productive of many grievous evils” (June 1839: 421). In this conceptualization, reviewers shared a concern with many educational reformers in this period, in that both groups, despite promoting literacy, believed that in the absence of public control, the freedom that reading offered could run rampant, threatening educational advancement and social stability.<sup>1</sup>

Into such a potentially inflammatory scenario, reviewers and editors thrust themselves, not to oppose fiction or even primarily to change it, but to mediate its relation to middle-class readers. Acting as surrogates and guides, reviewers and editors directed that audience not only to read certain types of fiction but to read fiction in particular ways.<sup>2</sup> As one writer for the *North American Review* explained, “Reviewers are supposed to know more than most people about new publications. . . . We are proxies for the public, who now . . . trust to newspapers, magazines and reviews” for their ideas about fiction (Apr. 1847: 403). Reviewers who addressed this issue repeatedly identified a similar objective. While “it has been our constant duty to guide our readers aright in their choice of literary amusement,” announced *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, it is also the concern of periodicals to let readers see “that this ‘delight’ or amusement should be guided by sound principles” (Mar. 1863: 304). A review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* similarly asserted that “a Review now” is far more than “what it used to be in the old days”: “[F]rom being a mere guide and director of the reading public, in the choice of books, . . . it has risen to a higher position, and considers it to be now its duty to form and correct the taste, by pointing out beauties and defects, and by analyzing the one and the other till the origin and nature of both are made apparent. More frequently, too, leaving behind it the paths of pure aesthetic criticism, it brings into more prominent notice new and important views or exposes rash and improper deductions” (July 1852: 177). In this role, reviewers thought of themselves as partners with the middle-class periodical- and fiction-reading audience, which they inferred as one that

desired such a tutelary relation. As the *New York Review* explained, “We address ourselves . . . to the genial reader. . . . We suppose him . . . to ask of us some hints, at least, of the criticism which he requires; to furnish him with a guide, who shall be qualified to lead him” (Jan. 1838: 56). The motor driving such remarks about reading and guidance was the idea that magazines, and particularly their reviews, were to act as avatars of response by directing and refining the fiction-reading practices of a middle class that sought such guidance, so as to bring those practices in line with the strategies of reading epitomized in the reviewers themselves.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense reviewers conceived of their roles as conservative and even, to an extent, regulatory. But to designate reviewers, editors, and other magazinists as “watchdogs,” as several literary historians have, is to overstate and oversimplify the relation among this interpretive community, antebellum culture, and the fiction-reading audience.<sup>4</sup> Although operating through varying degrees of (sometimes unacknowledged) ideological conservatism, magazinists by and large subscribed to and championed the notion that reading was becoming democratized and believed that no one could or should dictatorially proscribe practices for “the people.” As the *North American Review* proclaimed, “the great problem of the age is not how to repair the old barrier against the power of the people,—this would be impossible and preposterous, even if it were not an unrighteous, attempt—but to make the power of the people more salutary . . . by enlightening the great mass” (Oct. 1837: 484). Reviewers conceived their role as part of a democratic process because they assumed they were part of the “people,” acting as its informed agents. This assumption entailed, on the one hand, practicing methods of response consonant with what the “people”—that is, the urban, middle-class audience of periodicals and fiction—already subscribed to and, on the other, modeling strategies as a form of guidance, reinforcement, and refinement of those methods. Sharing with educational reformers a commitment to managed democratic education, reviewers envisioned their role less as watchdogs and more as tutelary agents empowering the reading public. This idea is precisely what the *New-York Mirror* articulated in 1835 when it explained that the task of reviewers was to “enlighten the public mind, . . . that each may become the judge of what he reads.”<sup>5</sup> Implicit in such a view was the assumption that reviewers and editors were to act as cultural stewards of the public, its reading, and its welfare—to

act as social and, as they sometimes referred to themselves, “literary philanthropists.” And as *Godey’s* made clear, the duty of the “literary philanthropist” was “to strengthen the bands of society by instruction” (Sept. 1857: 275).

How far the middle-class audience accepted this role is, of course, difficult to say. Most magazinists believed such acceptance was widespread, in part because reviewers assumed that they and the middle-class audience were virtually of one mind. In the words of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, “the benefits and glories of the press are familiar to every mind. . . . Being a universal mental aliment, it moulds, and fashions, and directs the thoughts and feelings of the man. Thousands and thousands of minds are developed by its effects” (Jan. 1835: 222). *DeBow’s Review* likewise asserted that “the tone of the public mind is at this era of the world’s history almost entirely directed by the periodical press” (Dec. 1860: 793), while one novel reviewer in *Saroni’s Musical Times* even claimed, “The only difference between critics and other readers is that the former *print* their opinions. Oral and published criticism generally agree” (Sept. 29, 1846: 6). Nonetheless, it is evident that the influence of reviewer responses and their affinity with middle-class reading practices were never total, since reviewers sometimes complained that readers were reading the wrong kinds of fiction or were reading it improperly. Nor did magazinists naively believe that they exercised complete sway over the middle class or that their responses were in exact harmony with those of the fiction-reading audience as a whole. This recognition, however, was hardly a stumbling block for most reviewers, since their goal was not to achieve the impossible task of exact conformity between their response to a particular work and those of the broader fiction-reading audience but to guide that audience’s reading experiences by inculcating particular and general reading strategies. Some readers accepted and desired such guidance, as evidenced by an anonymous letter from a subscriber to the *Home Journal*. According to this reader, the public wanted “the sturdy stalwart and responsible critic [to] step forward . . . and be to those of us who need it an intellectual guard and guide—a literary conscience so to speak—in whom we can put our trust” (Aug. 16, 1856: 2 [no pag.]).

In fulfilling this capacity as guides and exemplars, reviewers discussed fiction by reading it through an array of interpretive strategies that con-

ceptualized fiction as a semantic and formal discourse. Included in this activity was the articulation of a poetics of fiction that emphasized such structural elements as plot, character, and narrative, which were conventional categories that reviewers had inherited from the classical tradition and from their eighteenth-century British predecessors.<sup>6</sup> However, that poetics itself was integrated into a reading formation that included strategies for determining how and when particular principles applied and for conceptualizing the elements of fiction as operative features in the first place. Poetics thus slid into hermeneutics in mutually constitutive ways. Such connections obtained because reviewers assumed that both the form and content of a work and the audience itself played a role in the experience of fiction. Subscribing to an interactive model of the relation between a work of fiction, its author, and its audience, reviewers not only spent substantial effort attending to that relation but specifically advocated the need to do so. “In literature, indeed, where the author and the public reciprocally act and react without intermission among each other,” explained the *Southern Literary Messenger*, “it becomes of especial importance that we should examine the peculiarities of the reader, with the same care with which we determine the characteristics of the writer” (Nov. 1844: 673).

This emphasis upon readers’ interaction with and role in fiction emanated from a virtually universal belief among reviewers that fiction reading and writing possessed inherent social implications. An important element of this assumption was the conception that fiction was inherently instructional, either for good or bad. As a reviewer in *Graham’s Magazine* asseverated, “a novel should be more than a mere piece of intellectual mechanism, because if not, it is injurious. . . . A fiction which does not do good does harm” (May 1848: 298). While providing entertainment through a good story was generally taken to be the essential feature of all fiction,<sup>7</sup> its instructional capacity, as the *Graham’s* remark indicates, was both inseparable and important. Hence, while “the didactic purpose of the novel . . . should be only incidental,” explained the *Ladies’ Repository*, it should “not, therefore, [be] subordinate or secondary” (Feb. 1860: 125). One characteristic of this assumption was that it functioned simultaneously as a descriptive, a constitutive, and a regulatory convention.<sup>8</sup> In describing fiction as an inherently didactic discourse, reviewers both constituted the reading experience as essentially instructional and

prescribed the need for it to be salutary. Since all novels and tales were deemed educational in some way, this tutelary relation meant that for reviewers the reader of fiction was inherently susceptible to and in need of instruction from novels and tales.

While this relation was assumed to exist in many types of discourse exchanges, reviewers tended to ascribe to the audience for fiction a lower reading competency than that possessed by readers of history or philosophy. As a reviewer for the *Christian Examiner* maintained in a kind of Bunyanesque allegory, “It is easier to read a novel than to study political economy or theology, and while there are few who are willing to travel along the hard and difficult path to truth, there are thousands ready to lounge along the broad highway” (Nov. 1855: 355). Epitomizing this idea, the *Ladies’ Repository* proclaimed that “we live in a fiction-reading age,” in which the “masses must have easy reading, or they will not read at all” (Apr. 1865: 202–4). But if fiction readers as a whole possessed shortcomings, especially problematic were “the large class of readers who crave and seek to stimulate their palled [*sic*] appetites with something highly spiced” (*American Review* Mar. 1846: 244–45). Characterizing this group through a type, which we might call the “indiscriminate reader,” reviewers frequently lamented this audience as one that “cannot understand or appreciate . . . refined or elevated sentiment, original and profound thought,” and for whom “the commonplace, the superficial, the sensual, the gross, and the gaudy, are alone adapted to their torpid intellectual tastes” (*DeBow’s Review* Nov. 1859: 516). Such readers were guilty of consuming fiction indiscriminately without regard for its moral probity and capacity for truth. Instead, they “fall, with a wolf-like appetite, on husks, which, if the lower animals were readers, would appear intended for creatures much lower than mankind” (*North American Review* Apr. 1846: 102). “Ravenous” for the kind of sensationalist fiction that “deprave[s] the taste, and too often the morals” (*Graham’s Magazine* Feb. 1846: 95), these indiscriminate readers, according to reviewers, devour fiction with an indulgence that “is [the] diseased . . . consequence of fever and delirium” (*Southern Literary Messenger* Sept. 1844: 540).

Taken as a group, these remarks about indiscriminate readers and fiction readers as a whole seem both curious and problematic when considered vis-à-vis the periodical-reading audience that reviewers were addressing. If the audience for periodicals was largely the same as the

audience for fiction, would not such unflattering characterizations of fiction readers offend and alienate the very readership on which periodicals depended? Would not such remarks consequently be counterproductive and even in conflict with magazinists' conceptions of their self-appointed mission?

Several answers seem possible. One is that American reviewers were simply imitating a practice of British periodicals, which also characterized the mass of fiction readers in this way.<sup>9</sup> Incorporating the same principle into their own conceptions of the audience for fiction, American magazinists may have been unaware of its implications for their rhetorical (and socioeconomic) relation to their own reading constituency as well as the incompatibility of such a conception with their support for the value of the supposed democratization of reading within the United States.

However, when we consider the reviewers' conception of their role as guides within the larger context of middle-class cultural formation and the bourgeois ideology of reading that had developed at this time, it seems more likely that this unflattering picture functioned as a means of catering to and reshaping the bourgeois fiction- and periodical-reading audience. For one thing, reviewers recognized that not all fiction readers were middle class, that some short fiction and serialized novels were being consumed by the working class through penny-issue story papers such as the *Flag of Our Union* and the *New York Ledger*.<sup>10</sup> Such readers may well have been the group reviewers had in mind when talking about the "mass" of fiction readers; that is, "mass" referred less to numbers than to what reviewers conceived as the untutored *hoi polloi*—the "uncultured, every-day people" the *Ladies' Repository* described when referring to "the masses [who] must have easy reading." If such a conception were at work—and reviews such as the one in the *Repository* suggest that it was—then such remarks and their invocation of the mass, indiscriminate reader served as vehicles for inscribing and reinforcing a differentiation and hierarchy among readers that would appeal to bourgeois class status. It was, moreover, a differentiation that could suit bourgeois reading practices in that the mass reader or indiscriminate reader could function as a cautionary model of what not to do.

The indiscriminate reader, however, was only a part of a larger configuration of reader types that reviewers used to conceptualize another

public strategy for reading, one that involved reader roles. If reviewers conceived the relation between text and audience as interactive, it was also for them reciprocal. Some novel readers might lack intellectual rigor, seek the easy read, or savor sensationalism and frenzy while reading, but novels and tales provided what such readers wanted and were pitched to such expectations. Since “the *masses now* read,” explained one reviewer in *DeBow’s*, “[e]verybody tries to write *down* to them, to indulge in ‘ad captandum’; to clothe vulgar, sensual ideas in slipshod, careless, gaudy style; to shun what is true, and seek what will ‘take’” (Jan. 1860: 82). Although disagreeing over whether the fault lay with readers, who encouraged such kinds of fiction, or with texts that produced such reading practices, reviewers did conceive novels and tales as addressing particular types of readers through form and content. Assuming that all fictions assigned a role to their readership by what they did and said, reviewers’ frequently discussed the nature and appropriateness of the reader’s role that a particular text was supposedly implying.

For reviewers, this implied reader was sometimes an overt feature of texts, manifested in direct address to the audience in the narrative or in a preface.<sup>11</sup> For example, a review of James Kirk Paulding’s *The Puritan and His Daughter* in *Graham’s Magazine* noted that “the work is dedicated . . . to ‘the most high and mighty sovereign of sovereigns, King People,’ and scattered through the novel are abundant pleasant impertinences, sufficiently marked by individual whim and crochet, that stimulate th[at] reader” (Dec. 1849: 380). Their remarks also indicate that reviewers conceived the implied reader as an intrinsic but at times covert element of any work. Because this strategy of reading was a product of the supposed inherent didactic relation between fiction and its audience and the moral implications ascribed to instruction, reviewers frequently couched their observations about implied reader roles within judgments about a work’s probity and propriety in addressing an audience.

Lauding texts of salubrious morality and deriding those with dangerous moral tendencies, reviewers determined any particular tendency by linking it to the type of reader they inferred the text to be addressing. A properly ethical novel implied an audience for whom the experience of reading fiction would be morally uplifting. A review of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Kavanagh* in *Graham’s Magazine*, for instance, approvingly noted that “the effect of the whole is not to thrill or exalt the

reader, not to inspire terror or awaken thoughts ‘beyond the reaches of his soul,’ but to fill him with the highest possible degree of intellectual and moral comfort” (July 1849: 71). More explicitly, *Godey’s* said of *The Castle Builder* that “the high moral and religious tone of this work will be its surest passport to the hearts of all pious and reflective readers” (June 1855: 564). Conversely, a work that encouraged sympathy with rogues, cutthroats, and reprobates, or in other ways inculcated dubious ethics, was assumed to address a reprobate readership or to encourage the mass of readers to become so. Such logic lay behind a review in *Graham’s* that characterized *Wuthering Heights* as “a compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors” written “for the education of blackguards” (July 1848: 60) and another in the *North American Review* that complained *The Lady Alice; or the New Una* “seems adapted to minister to the lowest possible passions, and to justify the lowest style of manners and opinions” (Jan. 1850: 235). At work here is not simply an objection to the moral tenor of particular fictions. The operating principle is an interpretive notion of textual strategy: because such works offer an unsavory role to their audiences, their fault lies in their orientation to the wrong kind of implied reader.

An additional factor in this attention to implied readers was the supposed lack of intelligence of many novel readers. Although the assumption that fiction should be instructive caused reviewers to admire texts of intellectual substance, they were skeptical of subtlety because such a quality posited an audience that did not match the reality of some novel readers as conceived by reviewers. Caution especially arose when the text’s moral relation to its audience was at issue, as it was in a review of George Sand’s novels in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. Addressing an ongoing debate regarding the morality of Sand’s fiction, *Harper’s* intoned, “It has been frequently urged, in defense of her novels, that they do not assail the institution of marriage, but the wrongs that are perpetuated in its name. Give her the full benefit of her intention, and the result is still the same. . . . Her eloquent expositions . . . have the final effect of justifying the violations of duty. . . . The bulk of her readers—of all readers—take such social philosophy in the gross; they can not pick out its nice distinctions, and sift its mystical refinements. It is less a matter of reasoning than of feeling” (June 1850: 95). One interesting feature of this response, which was reprinted in the *Home Journal* (June 22, 1850:

1 [no pag.]), is its interpretation of the relation among author, text, and the implicit address of the audience. Although reviewers generally ascribed the creation of an implied audience to authorial intention, they also assumed that the former need not depend on the latter: implied audience was a feature of the free-standing text, a function or result of its discourse, its characterization, or its “exposition,” and took its particular shape regardless of—and sometimes contrary to—what an author may have intended. Thus, despite the good intentions of Sand’s “eloquent expositions,” her novels’ implied audience failed to square with the limited capacities of the mass audience as reviewers conceived them. This separation of text and author, however, was not total because reviewers assumed that authors were responsible for creating this distinction in the first place. As the *Harper’s* reviewers explained, “a writer who really meant to vindicate an institution [in this case, marriage] against its abuses, would adopt a widely different course; and it is only begging George Sand out of the hands of the jury to assert that the *intention* of her writings is opposed to their *effect*.” Failing to unite intention with effect, Sand could only imperil individual readers and—in a telling though not unexpected turn of response—society as a whole because she had created a text that defined the reader’s role in a way that would encourage “violation of duty” while “sap[ping] the foundations upon which the fabric of domestic life reposes.”

Reviewers’ connections between interpretations of implied readers and assumptions about actual audiences extended to reading formulations that did not entail questions of morality. In commenting on Washington Allston’s *Monaldi*, the *North American Review* objected that the novelist would “have done better to draw out the varied passions of the story at greater length . . . and then to explain and justify the overwhelming catastrophe” rather than relying on “many hints and intimations,” which only “the observing reader notices in a second perusal” (Apr. 1842: 400). In this case, the inference of the novel’s projected reader comes into play for a purely formal dimension—the development and unraveling of the plot. Because of the way it is structured, *Monaldi* fails with “the great mass of readers, who never take up a book but once” and thus “will remain discontented with the manner in which the destinies . . . are wrought out.” According to this reviewer, Allston had written for an implied reader who looks for subtle connections and “intimations,” but such

a strategy was misguided. Instead, the novel should have addressed an audience that needs the plot connections developed more fully—the audience reviewers assumed most readers comprised.

In one sense, these remarks about Allston's and Sand's novels are somewhat curious when considered in relation to the way reviewers characterized the mass audience for fiction. When reviewers conceptualized that readership as lower in intellect and desultory in its reading habits, they were not only supposedly describing it but lamenting these traits as needing correction through education in more attentive and subtle reading practices. A writer in the *North American Review*, for example, who referred to the "multitudes" who devour fictions indiscriminately and superficially, contrasted such readers to "intelligent persons" and praised the "mature" novels pitched to them (Apr. 1846: 102). According to such a strategy, Sand and Allston should have been praised for refusing to pander to the mass or indiscriminate reader rather than censured. Yet censure is precisely what marked reviewers' responses. Sand or Allston—or any writer for that matter—seems to have been put in a double bind: Write for the mass audience and be damned for addressing the wrong readership or write for the discriminating and be criticized for making their novels problematic for improperly educated readers. What were Allston and Sand to do, assuming they were listening? And what did reviewers expect writers to do in dealing with this problem?

Magazinists seldom if ever offered answers, at least in specific terms, and their silence, as well as the internal contradictions in their responses, would seem to promise only confusion and frustrations as guides to writing—that is, as a poetics of audience engagement. But when we recall that reviewers were as much, if not more, interested in the reader's role in the transaction between text and audience, their remarks take on a different coloration. Since reviewers were engaging in hermeneutical practices that modeled and implicitly encouraged particular strategies of fiction reading for their middle-class audience, whatever problems such interpretive practices might cause for a writer was, in a sense, beside the point for reviewers. Good writers supposedly would find a way to deal with and overcome these problems. The main goal of reviewers was to provide readers with strategies for making sense of a text's status vis-à-vis audience(s) and thereby empower readers as properly educated partners in the transaction with the text.

In treating response and the relation between readers and fiction, reviewers thus engaged in a reading of reading that encompassed but was not limited to the responses of the “mass reader” or the “indiscriminate reader” and constituted a kind of “informed” reader capable of exerting control over the textual experience. Moreover, whether they spoke about readers or not, reviewers were giving to their audience the implicit message that the reviewers’ own strategies could serve as a master code for informed response by middle-class readers.



As a reading formation, the antebellum informed code of response consisted partly of the global strategies reviewers practiced for the relation between author/text and audience. The informed reader would be expected to pay attention to that relation, to decipher a reader’s implied role in a work, and to distinguish whether that role was appropriate and acceptable. Such global practices depended, however, on more specific responses to a text’s form and content that included attention to generic distinctions, formulations of character and action as meaningful units, notions of authorial authority, and conceptions of novels and short stories as tutelary narratives. It included as well many of the elements of reviewer poetics that John Pritchard, Nina Baym, and others have documented, since these poetic principles often emanated from hermeneutical strategies.<sup>12</sup> For example, the frequently invoked principle that character and action were to be judged by their naturalness was based on the strategy of reading character experientially by reference to an observable reality; the idea that plots were to be unified drew on a probabilistic code of meaningful recurrence, sequential linkage, and causal relations; and the assumption that narrative voice should be consistently under control depended on reading according to codes of unity, coherence, and candidness. The capacity to exercise judgment in these areas and in the relation between text and reader suggests that an informed reader was to be more than a passive recipient of fictional discourse. In the implicit dicta of public reading formations, an informed reader participated in the reading experience by exercising choices, including the choice to accept or reject a particular role that a text “implied” for its audience.

At the more general or foundational level of reading principles, reviewers advocated thoughtful, intelligent, and even dedicated engagement with fiction—a willingness to stay with a text, to move through it

carefully, to contemplate its shape and implications, and to read it more than once if necessary. A review in *Harper's* of George Curtis's *Trumps, A Novel* virtually defined such attentive reading as a desideratum by contrasting it to its inadequate opposite: "In spite of its popular form and brilliant entourage, 'Trumps' is one of the novels which challenge a deliberate and faithful perusal for its full appreciation. It abounds with beauties which do not reveal their whole power without study; many of its fine successes are in the form of evanescent suggestions, which appeal only to the sense of the sympathetic reader; and its frequent passages of combined wisdom and pathos are lost upon impatient and superficial seekers of mere literary entertainment" (May 1861: 844). Significantly, the sympathetic reader is not delineated as one in emotional tune with the text but is conceived in terms of an intellectual kinship that this novel requires from its addressed audience. In this instance, the sympathetic reader is envisioned as a version of the informed reader. But if all serious fiction required such responses, one had to know which novels or stories were serious and mature in the first place. By implication, therefore, all fiction required some careful thought and analysis as part of the reading dynamic. The editor of *Godey's* made this point explicitly: "In reading any work, it greatly conduces to the development of the judgment, to make frequent pauses, and trace out the inference, and the particular bearing and tendency of detached portions of it; and upon its completion, to consider the general scope, its moral tone, the correctness of the sentiments advanced, and the character of the style" (Apr. 1838: 191).

Such thoughtful, careful reading required an educated audience that had learned to exercise analytical and critical-thinking skills and to apply them to fiction. But the informed reader was also expected to come to a text with a broad knowledge of previous fiction and literature. Sometimes reviewers simply assumed that knowledge of a particular author or text actually was widespread, as did a commentator in the *Home Journal* who referred to "that large class of readers who never tire of Defoe" (Oct. 6 1840: 2 [no pag.]). Similarly, *Godey's* claimed that "there are few readers who are not, more or less, acquainted with the Fairy Queen [*sic*]" (July 1840: 31). Often this competence was demarcated through repeated references in reviews to textual elements used by previous authors. A review of Robert Bird's *Calavar* in the *North American Review*, for example, praised the novel's "power of seizing on the prominent features of

a scene, and of thus giving a picture of the whole” by paralleling this quality to descriptions in works by Shakespeare and Scott with which readers would have an expected familiarity. “Those who recollect the words of King Duncan as he enters the castle of MacBeth” or who know *Rob Roy*, explained the reviewer, “will require no explanation of our meaning” (Jan. 1835: 258). Somewhat more indirect in connecting informed reading to literary knowledge was a review in the *Home Journal*. After briefly discussing the disquisitions on clothing in *The Lady Alice; or the New Una*, the reviewer asserted, “We need not point out to the informed reader in how far this ‘majestic principle of drapery’ may have sprung from that great modern thinker, who found all philosophy concealed under the philosophy of clothes” (June 7, 1848: 3 [no pag.]). Such allusions indicate that this literary competence as intertextual knowledge among fiction readers was to encompass a variety of genres and areas.

Among the more specific codes that constituted higher levels of reading competency, strategies for dealing with plot were frequently exemplified by reviewers. To confront plot in the first place meant, of course, that informed readers would share with mass readers an elementary recognition of plot as a structural feature—that is, they would read a work of fiction to look for connections between events that formed some kind of linear, developmental pattern. Reviewers in fact seemed to have assumed this capacity as an inherent part of any reader’s experience with fiction, in part because plot was conceived as the distinguishing structural feature of narrative fiction.<sup>13</sup> One went to fiction to experience first a good story that aroused uncertainty and suspense. As *Graham’s Magazine* put it in a review of *Mercedes of Castile*, “we want, indeed, all that exciting suspense, without which a novel is worthless” (Jan. 1842: 48). Yet reading to take in, or be taken in by, plot was only the initial step in dealing with this element of fiction. Informed readers also needed to possess a working conception of what plot was as a formal feature. Hence readers were instructed that “plot . . . properly defined, is *that in which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole*, . . . in which none of the *leading incidents* can be *removed* without *detriment* to the mass” (*Graham’s Magazine* Apr. 1841: 197–98). Similarly, as the *Southern Literary Messenger* reminded readers, “It is a rule of art . . . that a work of fiction should be so joined together, that every passage and incident should bring about an inevitable though unexpected catastrophe” (Oct. 1852: 631).

Such an understanding was necessary to enable readers to make informed judgments about the success or effectiveness of a particular work's story; plot was to be an object for examination and analysis. Response here involved several interpretive strategies. The first was a principle of unity and coherence. Informed readers would pay attention to the difference between plot and a mere sequence of incidents, even if the latter were individually thrilling. Reviewers inculcated this idea by repeatedly pointing out "ill-jointed" plots, as the *North American Review* remarked about James Fenimore Cooper's novels (July 1850: 71), or deriding novels in which incidents failed to cohere into plot, as *Graham's* did in describing *Henry Esmond* as a "story [that] has . . . no development of plot, no unity of purpose" (Jan. 1853: 103).

Even a coherent plot was not necessarily to be viewed uncritically since informed response to plotting entailed assumptions about verisimilitude. In responding to plot, readers needed to decide if individual events or the overall shape seemed far fetched or natural, in the sense of being either true to life or probable within the sequence of occurrences in the story line. As *Godey's* put it as one of "our simple rules" for reading, "plot and incident[s] should be probable, at least possible, and arranged with a thought to the ordinary sequence of events" (Feb. 1852: 147). Thus, an informed reader would recognize that a novel such as Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* succeeded because "the whole story . . . is so well woven together, that one part seems to follow the other like real life" (*North American Review* Oct. 1840: 358). Reviewers implied that recognition, analysis, and judgment of pivotal developments were especially important. Models in this area were provided by reviewers such as the one in the *Southern Literary Messenger* who castigated Edward Bulwer-Lytton's reliance on "the introduction of some extraordinary agent who suddenly appears, just in the nick of time, like Jack out of the box, or *Deus ex machina*" to solve in a jerry-built, unrealistic manner the complications of his plots (Feb. 1859: 155). This privileging of verisimilitude explains how reviewers could sanction tight plotting and still censure such a practice for its own sake—a principle articulated, for example, in the *North American Review's* comment that "so far as the novel is intended to be a reflection of life," a "plot, too regularly contrived, may be the ruin of even an able author" (Oct. 1842: 292). If loose plotting displayed an inability to handle the tools of art, excessively refined plot-

ting, it was assumed, constituted a failure to match artistic form to the purpose of fiction: to reflect real life so as to instruct the reader.

One way to judge a plot's probability—and unity and coherence—was through a code of causality. As the *North American Review* explained, “The successful novel of the present day . . . must be able to prove its conclusions follow fairly from its premises, to show that its effects proceed from sufficient causes. Too many liberties with probability are inadmissible for the purpose of bringing about the catastrophe” (Oct. 1856: 342). Another method was through recognition of previous plot patterns or conventions—a strategy that again connected reading plot with the assumption that informed response was, in effect, intertextual. If a novel or tale used a standard plot pattern, the expectation was that it would follow and fulfill that pattern through the course of the story. The most common pattern to which readers were alerted was the love story and marriage plot, which, once begun, needed to be carried to its logical conclusion. Hence, a reader should recognize that a novel such as John Cooke's *Ellie* was a failure, since “if ever there was a young female that deserved a husband . . . it was Ellie. Yet the last we see of this tender Genvieve she is looking out of the carriage window . . . with never a love to bear her company.” Continued this reviewer, “we submit that Ellie has been badly treated and the reader defrauded of a pleasurable excitement that by every rule of fictitious composition he was entitled to expect” (*Southern Literary Messenger* Aug. 1855: 519). Recognition and judgment about the love-and-marriage plot was important because, according to reviewers, it was such a staple of fiction.

The recognition of regularity, however, carried further implications for responding to fiction. A novel or tale that consistently handled a plot pattern could still be judged inadequate if it was formulaic. Informed readers needed to be able to recognize plot patterns as a way to orient themselves to a work by grouping it in a familiar type and as a step for judging a work's unity, but they also needed to take into account originality. By “beginning with a family at home, and ending with wedding-time,” the *Elder Sister*, as the *Home Journal* reminded its readers, was simply one of “the orthodox sort of novels” (Oct. 20, 1855: 3 [no pag.]). Readers ought to recognize that “the plot is a hackneyed one” when it simply is “depicting the various fortunes of a heroine, from the days of school-girl propriety, through numerous reversals and trials, to a happy denoue-

ment" (*Harper's* Nov. 1854: 859). By contrast, an informed response to novels such as Augusta Evans's *Beulah* would give "double praise" according to *Godey's* because, while the "heroine of the story is taken as a child from the depths of poverty, and brought, through a variety of moral and mental struggles, to an elevated womanhood," Evans "succeeded in investing an old and almost wornout [*sic*] subject with fresh interest" (Dec. 1859: 560). Such remarks were not just judgments about particular works or plot patterns. They were strategies of informed response designed to provide readers with ways for thinking not only about how fictions handled plot but also about how texts engaged their audience through plot. Within informed reading, audience was conceived as an agency of plot.

The reason for this conception was that in the interpretive practices of reviewers effective plotting was as much an affective as an aesthetic issue. Original plots were valued as a tool for engaging audience interest, and creating interest, as the *North American Review* noted, depended on the way the "mysteries of the story are developed" (July 1834: 192–93). The creation of mysteries, in the general sense of "uncertainties" and their resolution, constituted the essence of determining effective plotting to the degree that such structures induced suspense for readers. In this area, informed response took shape as a version of what Roland Barthes called the "hermeneutic code," which consists of "the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed," so as to "structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its fulfillment."<sup>14</sup> This code was to be a functioning component of informed response from the moment the reading experience commenced. For example, in recounting the plot of *The Betrothed* and its effects upon the reader, a reviewer in the *North American* explained how the "first scene [which] is the meeting of Don Abbondio with the bravoës" stimulated the reader to pose a series of questions. "From this moment you are interested for Lucia and her lover. Who are they? What is the meaning of this tyranny? What is there in a simple country girl, that a noble of the land should resort to such high handed measures in order to prevent her marriage?" (Oct. 1840: 358). As they invoked this code, informed readers needed to determine if the plot of a novel or tale effectively elicited such engagement. When fictions "throw a . . . mystery over the issue of every event," explained a writer in

the *Southern Literary Messenger*, readers should decide “if the disclosure be made artfully” so as to engage the audience’s “own superior discernment” (Nov. 1838: 729).

Pacing, as an interpretive assumption, also was an important issue to consider. As we might expect, a laborious plot was considered defective, but informed readers would realize that a loss of interest could also result if the plot were too fast paced or contained excessive uncertainties. One fault of “excessive rapidity of movement,” as the *North American Review* explained in commenting on Y. B. Saintine’s *Chrisna*, was that “the reader has no repose” (July 1859: 262). Readers needed to feel an occasional loosening of the emotional squeeze of suspense or run the risk of the emotional overindulgence so often disparaged as a mode of indiscriminate reading. Moreover, excessive suspense through rapid pacing threatened to close off analysis and thoughtful consideration, as a review in *Godey’s* suggested when explaining that “the incidents” in *The Second Marriage* “are introduced so rapidly as to leave little time to the . . . reader for profitable reflection” (July 1856: 83). By contrast, prolonged uncertainty could create its own tedium, a point made in an article on Bulwer-Lytton in the *North American Review*: “Mr. Bulwer makes a plot, but . . . has one artifice, which, we think, has an effect contrary to his intention. He apparently pleases himself with mystifying the reader, by way of working up his interest, instead of which he fairly runs down his curiosity. He is kept in the dark so long that he becomes indifferent to it” (Apr. 1837: 433). Another strategy linked assumptions about pacing with the hermeneutic code of mystery/solution. Exemplifying this move, a review of the *Marble Faun* in *Littell’s Living Age* read Hawthorne’s novel as one that “tantalizes us . . . but . . . defeats our expectations by sketching out a plot that comes absolutely to nothing.” The review explained further: “A mystery is set before us to unriddle, and at the end the author turns round and asks us what is the good of solving it. Mr. Hawthorne really trades upon the honesty of other writers. We feel a sort of interest in the story . . . because our experience of other novels leads us to assume that, when an author pretends to have a plot, he has one. A story-teller who ends up asking why he should clear any thing up is not dealing quite fairly with us” (May 1860: 323). An interesting feature of this response is the way it combines strategies for reading plot with interpretive assumptions about literary competence, textual famil-

arity, and a writer's obligations in dealing with audience. This version of informed response sees Hawthorne as less than honest by unfairly denying closure to the reading experience, which readers rightly expect from their knowledge of previous fictional plots.

Paying attention to issues of plotting, meant, of course, that readers needed to be able to decide upon the key elements of any fictional narrative to build a sense of plot. This capacity was part of a larger set of codes of recognition, and one component of this category of response consisted of codes of privileged position. To decipher a text correctly, readers were to pay special attention to certain components, especially the ending, the beginning, and the title, which were seen as keys to a text's unfolding pattern. "One is apt to form some opinion of a work from its title page," explained the *North American Review* (July 1825: 84), adding a few years later that "the title of a book, like a lamp at the street-door, is expected to throw some light on what we enter" (Jan. 1847: 237). Such a response could be linked to the hermeneutic code, as the *Southern Literary Messenger* demonstrated in reviewing Bulwer-Lytton's *What Will He Do with It?*: "the reader very naturally asks, what will *who* do with it? Who is the hero?" And what is the *it*? (Sept. 1859: 213). Beginnings were interpretively privileged because, as *Graham's* explained, in the opening of a novel, "the author works busily for a chapter or two with a view of bringing matters in train for a certain end" (Nov. 1841: 248), while conclusions were important because they were regarded as a key to a work's artistic merit in achieving reader engagement and satisfaction through proper closure.

Close attention to conclusions could, moreover, work with other interpretive strategies, particularly those concerned with a novel's moral tendency and tutelary obligation. A good novel concluded by properly distributing rewards and just punishments. Linking this interpretive principle with assumptions about verisimilitude, the *North American Review* explained that "so far as the novel is intended to be the reflection of real life, its aim is . . . the carrying [of] its characters to a certain point, where the ends of poetical justice having been accomplished, they are to be left forever" (Oct. 1842: 292). That reviewers practiced this combination—and promoted it as a strategy of informed reading—is evident, for instance, in reviews of *The Scarlet Letter*, which, despite objecting to the dangers Hawthorne's story posed in invoking sympathy for the morally

problematic Hester, praised the novel because of its acceptable moral closure.<sup>15</sup> This strategy, which can be termed the code of “final authority,” also came into play in determining whether that authority was properly handled in relation to the rest of the work. Generally, the kind of thing the *North American Review* found acceptable in Hawthorne’s novel was decried within the logic of informed reading. As a review in *Godey’s* asserted, “where we are made to feel interest in a guilty character, and to pardon easily his transgressions, there is a moral fault in the book, no matter how it ends” (Apr. 1860: 368). Similarly, a reviewer in *Graham’s* explained, “Neither do we like the convenient morality of an author in writing a book directly injurious, and then hoping to atone for it all by a page of morality at the finale” (Sept. 1840: 144).

On a lower or more general level, rules of notice could help readers decipher or position a fiction according to its type. Distinctions among genres at this time, as several modern critics have demonstrated, were often idiosyncratic, inconsistent, and frequently in flux.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, among the generally agreed upon categories were domestic fiction, historical fiction/historical romance, and advocacy fiction,<sup>17</sup> each identifiable through certain features in form and/or content decipherable through rules of notice—for example, the presence of historical events and actual historical agents or, for domestic fiction, a plot pattern “beginning with a family at home, and ending with marriage.” Reviewers were especially adamant about the need to distinguish between what they considered fictional and nonfictional forms and to admonish stories that mixed the two. Speaking of G. H. Lewes’s *The Three Sisters*, a reviewer for *Graham’s* wrote, “Fine as the novel undoubtedly is, the author has not given it the requisite artistic finish to produce a harmonious impression. Speculations on matters connected with literature, art and politics, essays on passion and the will, appear in their naked character amid romantic incidents and imaginative representations” (Dec. 1848: 368). For reviewers, the problem with such fictions was that their authors, by creating a generic cacophony, were botching their relation to audience. Hence, a reviewer for the *North American* faulted Cooper’s later fictions as “not novels, or romantic fictions, in the proper sense of the term, but tedious arguments, or querulous pleas addressed to the community’s sense of justice” (July 1850: 123). By mixing “imaginative incidents” with polemical essays, political treatises, and philosophical disquisitions, novelists

such as Cooper, according to this logic, were creating roles for readers that would lose the mass audience or be aesthetically crude to keener sensibilities.

Advocacy fiction posed somewhat different problems for reading. Since novels and tales designated by that term were using made-up incidents and characters to advocate a particular and often controversial real-world belief, practice, or reform, such fictions were at best inherently incapable of proving their truths or at worst culpable for tendentially misleading readers. The *Southern Quarterly Review* articulated precisely this response in warning its readership about the sophistry of advocacy fiction: "To make truth depend upon a fiction or to argue a truth by means of fiction, or to endeavor to inculcate a body of moral opinion through the agency of a tale which requires the invention of facts, is a very doubtful, if not dangerous practice. Art will sway . . . and the truth will become as clay in the hands of the potter" (Jan. 1853: 266). Besides involving a misguided attempt to solicit readers' acquiescence, advocacy novels were the most striking instance of generic hybrids that readers were urged to regard as distortions of the very nature of fiction. Hence, the *Southern Literary Messenger* reminded its audience in the strongest terms that when a novel begins "mingling in the fumes and gross odours [*sic*] of political or polemical dissension," that "novel . . . has . . . assumed to itself a more vulgar mission, incompatible with its essence and alien to its original designs" (Dec. 1852: 721).

Reviewers did not denounce all social criticism or reform as inappropriate for fiction, but such advocacy was to be judged through an awareness of what constituted legitimate targets. Subjects such as dueling, intemperance, child labor, and the plight of the working poor were acceptable. *Graham's Magazine* could recommend T. S. Fay's *The Countess Ida* for "teaching morality and not polished villainy" by imparting the "maxim that dueling is unnecessary" (July 1847: 47), while *Godey's* lauded Charles Burdett's *The Elliott Family; or, the Trials of New York Seamstresses* for being "well calculated to awaken the deepest sympathy in behalf of our oppressed and suffering class of females, hundreds and thousands of whom may be found in our cities" (July 1850: 60). Controversial issues or those too close to home, however, were viewed as anathema because they threatened dissent and social disharmony. Consequently, reviewers denounced Cooper's diatribes against the Ameri-

can legal system, while Dickens's attacks on the British judiciary, safely across the Atlantic, deserved praise from readers. *Godey's* made a general point that combined this criterion with the assumption of the caustic nature of such fiction by objecting that "the form of the controversial novel, where circumstance, characters, and arguments are purely the creation of the author and yet profess to imitate a state of things actually existing, is peculiarly adapted to misrepresenting an opponent's opinions, and for venting all the bitterness of sectarian animosities" (Mar. 1857: 274).

These interpretive paths had an additional twist, however, in that controversial subjects could be included in fiction provided they were handled in a way that, according to reviewers, was uncontroversial. Even slavery was acceptable if the novel or tale avoided advocating a particular position. This was the governing principle in a *Home Journal* review of the *Master's House*, which praised the novel for presenting "the incidents of Southern life . . . as they most naturally arise, developing the various social relations, enlightenments and clearances, belonging to a story of mixed interest. We cannot discover that the writer inclines to either side" (July 15, 1854: 2 [no pag.]). Similarly, *Godey's* approved of the *Planter's Daughter* because "the author has taken care not to introduce any of those modern devices . . . which have rendered so many works, north and south, . . . destructive to those fraternal feelings which should knit together all sections of our common country" (Jan. 1858: 85). Even religious fictions deserved censure when they fomented controversy by advocating one set of tenets over another. For according to another review in *Godey's*, "satirical representation" of competing creeds or denominations exacerbated "the bitterness of sectarian animosities" among readers (Mar. 1857: 274-75).<sup>18</sup>

This last remark from *Godey's* points to another strategy of informed response: reading for satirical elements in fiction. This strategy sometimes connected a work to comparable texts that were supposedly more familiar to the audience. *Harper's* recommended *Peter Schlemihl in America* as a novel in which "the satire is equal to that of Don Quixote. . . . The hits at society in this country are admirable and well pointed" (July 1848: 57). Reviewers did not stop, however, at simply invoking the term or referring to previous examples; recognizing that the fiction-reading audience might not know what satire was, reviewers sought to provide a workable conception. According to the *Home Journal*, satire

entailed “bringing our sham-festivities, and our fashionable follies, into contempt” (May 20, 1854:2 [no pag.]). More specific was a *Harper’s* reviewer, who instructed readers that satire, as exemplified in Thackeray, “does not mainly consist in the creation of oddities of manner, habit, or feeling; but in so representing actual men and women as to excite a sense of incongruity in the reader’s mind—a feeling that the follies and vices described are deviations from an ideal of humanity always present to the writer” (Feb. 1853: 207). Playing a role here was a working conception of irony, since satire, according to this reviewer, operated through an implicit comic “antithesis of actual and ideal” that “suggests a standard higher than itself, *not* by any direct assertion of such a standard, but by an unmistakable irony.” That such irony would be “unmistakable” assumes, of course, a fiction- and periodical-reading audience that already shared a common set of ideal standards.

Informed readers, however, needed to do more than have a working sense of satire and irony and be alert to their presence in fiction. Like other strategies of response, reading for satire was both a descriptive and proscriptive convention that would enable readers to decide when a work’s satire, sometimes called comic “hits” or “sarcasms,” was appropriately handled. Determining the difference between legitimate satire and invective or personal attacks was one strategy, as exemplified in a review of the *School for Politics* in *DeBow’s Review*. “This is an admirable hit at the tergiversations and somersets of the politicians of the day,” explained the review, because the “author . . . disclaims all intention to be personal in his delineation of the characters.” While “the characters are, in truth, so well-delineated [*sic*] that every reader will fancy that the author had some particular individual in his eye,” the informed reader will recognize that this novel is truly satiric because “the individual is but a type of this kind; and a description sufficiently correct to lead us to a knowledge of the genus cannot but be recognized as a faithful portrait of every individual of the family” (Nov. 1854: 543). Even “legitimate” satire, which ridiculed types and foibles rather than individuals, could be interpreted as a failure if it seemed misdirected or too dominant. A reviewer in the *Southern Quarterly Review* exemplified this move in responding to *Bleak House*: “The error of Mr. Dickens is in allowing his *satire* to get the better of his *fiction*. The joke, which concludes two such monstrous volumes, should have been a more pregnant one. We see that there is a

terrible satire in a finale to a case which has had so many victims; but we feel how pointless and ineffective it is, when addressed to the ear of a Lord Chancellor, whose big whig must effectually keep it out" (Jan. 1854: 228). Two criteria are at work in this judgment. One is the inherited idea that satire is ridicule designed to correct by holding up the type as a mirror. According to this reviewer, Dickens's satire fails because it holds the comic mirror up to those who will refuse to look and thus is directed at the wrong audience. The second criterion relates to the code of generic uniformity. While satire may be an acceptable part of fiction, *Bleak House* had gone too far. By "allowing his *satire* to get the better of his *fiction*," Dickens had turned his novel into a satire, thereby positioning it in a genre that it could not occupy and still remain fully true to its status as fiction.

One thing that these conceptions of and responses to satire, advocacy fiction, and genres as a whole make clear is that informed reading required attention to both form and idea. The two were, in fact, inextricably intertwined because, in responding to plot patterns and irony as formal elements, reviewers had to create meaning and sense from these elements. In this regard, it is necessary to revise substantially Nina Baym's assertion that "never—not in a single instance—did [reviewers] talk about the act of reading novels as one of producing meanings, interpretations, or readings."<sup>19</sup> Whatever reviewers may or may not have said, they clearly *practiced* interpretation. Their repeated emphasis on unity of plot, on attention to beginnings and endings, and on the need to examine the role texts created for the audience depended on interpretive strategies of decoding, selection, and amalgamation. More importantly, it is evident that most reviewers assumed that fiction did possess a meaning that informed readers would ferret out.

Whether dealing with plot, character, or the text as a whole, thematic interpretation was deemed essential to deciphering a work's purpose. Though seldom invoking the words *meaning* or *theme*, reviewers often spoke about the "ideas," "philosophies," "doctrines," "reasonings," or "theories" in a novel or tale, as did one reviewer for the *North American Review*, who wrote of the novel *Margaret*, "One of the doctrines intimated in this work is the sufficiency of every mind to itself, thus implying that every human spirit can solve for itself the problem of existence" (Jan. 1847: 104). A concern with thematics punctuated a *Home Journal*

review of Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*, which explained that "the doctrine of the book [is] that the highest scientific attainment, or amplest culture of the understanding . . . involves and requires the negation of human passion and affections" (Sept. 13, 1856: 2). Other examples abound. A *Graham's* reviewer pointed out that "to the thoughtful reader," Hawthorne's stories "are not merely tales, but contributions to the philosophy of the human mind" (Apr. 1842: 443); *Godey's* commented on the "sagacious reasonings upon many evidently important questions of philosophy and social life" in John Sterling's *The Onyx Ring*, noting in particular its "great truth that every one should be contented with his own mental and physical qualifications" (May 1856: 472); and a reviewer in the *Southern Literary Messenger* offered a brief reading of Herman Melville's *Pierre* as a cautionary tale, explaining that "the purpose of the Ambiguities . . . we should take to be the illustration of this fact—that it is quite possible for a young and fiery soul, acting strictly from a sense of duty, and being therefore in the right, to erect itself in direct hostility to all the universally-received rules of moral and social order" (Sept. 1852: 574). At times reviewers even invoked the terms *meaning* and *theme*. *Godey's* noted that Caroline Glover's *Vernon Grove* made "love its principal theme—not love the guilty passion but that love . . . of duties fulfilled" (July 1859: 85), while a review in *Harper's* commented about the *Marble Faun* that "its theme is properly the elevation of a being, not quite human, through suffering" (June 1860: 128). Asserting the practice of thematic interpretation as a general principle, *Graham's Magazine* intoned that fiction reading "unravels the web of an author's mystery to interpret his meaning" (Jan. 1842: 69).<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, the extensive thematic analysis that characterized much twentieth-century academic criticism rarely marked antebellum reviews, but to juxtapose the two is to draw a false comparison. Antebellum reviewers responded to thematics in a manner more analogous to that of modern reviewers in national or regional magazines oriented to a general, educated audience. Like their twentieth- and twenty-first century counterparts, these earlier reviewers did not privilege exegesis; they did, however, make attention to theme a significant part of their interpretive strategies. Moreover, they encouraged readers, in the words of *Godey's*, to "take pleasure in solving the philosophy of fictions" (Apr. 1855: 370). Where antebellum reviewers differed from their modern counterparts

was in the tendency to equate theme, as a principal of fictional form, with a story's message—a practice consistent with the nineteenth-century assumption that the aesthetic and the didactic were interconnected in the reading process.

Despite this difference, the conviction of antebellum reviewers that themes, ideas, or doctrines emanated from the form of a novel or tale indicates that they shared an assumption with many modern critics regarding the relation between theme and action or plot. According to Wolfgang Iser, “plot is not an end in itself—it always serves a meaning, for stories are not told for their own sake but for the demonstration of something that extends beyond them.”<sup>21</sup> Whether Iser's comment identifies a truth about this relationship is not the issue. The point is that his remark instantiates an interpretive assumption common to modern critics *and* to antebellum reviewers. For example, a reviewer in *Godey's*, in commenting on Sarah Wentz's *Smiles and Frowns*, noted that “there is, besides, a leading *idea*, not set forth in so many words, but interwoven with each separate history [of the events in the characters' lives], that love and marriage are not to be looked upon simply as an addition or completion of earthly happiness, but as part of the discipline which is to prepare us for the truest joy” (July 1856: 94). Similarly, the *Home Journal*, after discussing the philosophy of clothing contained in *The Lady Alice; or the New Una*, added, “We dwell upon the philosophic peculiarities of this curious book because . . . the heroine is a ‘new Una’—a very new one. She, like the Elizabethan heroine, is meant to typify faith in distress, and the glorification of loving and sorrowful purity; and she personifies it by refusing to marry her lover because he is a Catholic” (June 2, 1849: 3). Another review in *Godey's* maintained that the plot of Cornelius Matthews's *Big Abel and Little Manhattan*, with its “minute account of the nooks and corners of the city . . . [is] merely an . . . undercurrent to the main thesis,” which articulates “the true value of the savage and civilized states” (Nov. 1845: 218). As these remarks indicate, plot and action were not to be read merely for suspense or unity. Because “idea, plot and character” are “mutually dependent,” as an article in *Littell's Living Age* explained, the interaction of characters and the unfolding of plot constituted elements in which readers were to discover themes, ideas, and doctrines (June 1860: 718).

Readers needed to be aware, additionally, that the interrelations

among action, character, and meaning could require a particular type of reading: allegorical interpretation. A reviewer in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, for instance, pointed out that F. W. Shelton's *Crystalline: or, the Heiress of Fall Down Castle* should be understood as a "sustained allegory" in which "the author aims . . . to recreate a sort of fairy tale, with an undercurrent of much deeper meaning than anywhere appears upon the surface" (June 1850: 382), while a review in *Godey's* asserted that Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story* "is, in fact, an allegorical work," since it employs the "chief characters of the work" for "illustration of the grand moral which he has striven to inculcate" (May 1862: 510). Often reviewers seemed to believe that drawing attention to the presence of allegory was enough and that readers would be able to decipher allegorical meaning on their own. Occasionally, however, a reviewer would explicitly draw out the allegorical implications, as a review in *Godey's* did in designating *Salander and the Dragon* "a very interesting little allegory . . . illustrating the danger of uttering, or of lending a willing ear to, unkind words and insinuations against the reputations of neighbors and acquaintances" (May 1851: 333). The comment in the *Messenger* about *Crystalline* as a "sustained allegory" indicates, moreover, that allegory was not necessarily conceived as a device that could be easily decoded by reading action and character as transparent vehicles for meaning. Since the significance of an allegory could consist of a "much deeper meaning," allegorical reading required close analysis and attentive penetration in the process of response.

Such an assumption obtained in part because the model of reading as an interaction between text and reader did not assume that the search for meaning, including allegorical significance, was necessarily governed by authorial intention. Reviewers assumed that a reader could legitimately infer a particular allegorical significance in a work of fiction even if the author was not fully aware of its presence. After explicating the "allegory of the crystal mountains" in Hawthorne's "The Great Carbuncle" as "a damper to all imagination that would with the lofty sanction the low," a writer in *Littell's Living Age* pointed out, "No such intention may the allegorist have had; but at least he might have guarded against so justifiable a gloss by using a more intelligible cipher" (July 1853: 156). A similar strategy was at work in a review of Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, which read the plot relations between

characters as a parallel to the relation between readers and the text. Noting that the character of Dalibrand trains Lucretia in metaphysical speculation without regard to morals, the reviewer warned that the novel tries to do the same thing to its audience: “While the mind of the reader or spectator is assiduously engaged in the recognition of the metaphysical phenomena, the strictness and the intensity of the abstractions which such contemplation requires must keep out of vision the accessory, but more important considerations, which address themselves to moral feelings. . . . For it was exactly by this process, as represented in the novel itself, that Dalibrand was enabled to infiltrate his corrupting venom into the mind of Lucretia” (July 1848: 397). One interesting feature of this response is the way it marks the presence in informed reading of a particular kind of allegorical interpretation—that is, reading a novel or tale as an allegory of reading. In this instance, the allegory of reading in *Lucretia* not only exists as a feature of the text that perforce is deciphered, it also needs to be judged within the frame of proper reader-writer relations, which identifies the allegory as a moral danger to readers. More tellingly, after speculating about how much Bulwer-Lytton was “aware” of this dangerous allegory, the review asserts that the novelist should have noticed it, since “there is no excuse for even a momentary failure to take note of it.” In light of the reviewer’s example, the same applies to the informed novel reader, who has no excuse for failing to decipher this insidious allegory, resist it, and censure Bulwer-Lytton and his novel in the process.

While allegorical interpretation could take several forms, a related strategy of reading that did not appear to be part of informed response was reading a work symbolically—at least in the modern sense of reading images, characters, actions, or scenes as both significant in themselves and resonant with multiple, even contradictory, meanings inseparable from the symbol. While several reviewers did employ the designation “symbolic” or “symbolical” in discussing texts, their comments indicate that they conceived symbolism as an allegorical device. In speaking of the method of “allegorists,” *Littell’s Living Age* explained that when “the places of the human actors are perhaps occupied by appropriate symbols of some predominant sentiment or characteristic which each of the group subsequently embodies,” then “the tale seems allegorical” (Jan.–Mar. 1861: 220). In other cases, reading symbolically meant read-

ing emblematically, in the sense of interpreting an element of a text as typifying a single, abstract (often larger) idea, condition, or value—much as flower books deciphered particular flora as emblematic of peace, hope, or innocence.<sup>22</sup> Such a strategy is instantiated in a *Harper's* comment on *Little Dorrit*, which explained that “the stupid confession of the important young official, who lives in precedents and an agonized and reverend chaos, when he drops his eye glasses . . . is symbolical of the entire humbug of the system of which he is a cipher” (May 1856: 848). In a like manner, an article in *Littell's* explained that Hawthorne's Pearl is a character “who, by a suggestive symbolism, is made to typify in her nature the mixture of conflicting influences which her parents seem to have bestowed” (June 1860: 716). In these kinds of interpretive moves, Pearl and Dickens's young official are treated as emblematic of a particular abstract value possessed by other elements in their respective novels.

Although reading for theme, idea, or meaning was deemed essential to any informed response, reviewers recognized that some fiction made ideas a central concern of their narratives and that in some cases those ideas were complex. Most reviewers, however, treated such learned fiction as problematic. For one thing, learned fiction looked too much like an essay or a philosophical treatise and thus violated the code of generic uniformity. Another problem entailed assumptions about the limitations of the mass audience: since philosophical issues and complex ideas had to be treated with subtlety to do them justice, reviewers assumed most readers would simply be baffled—or bored—by them. Even Dickens, otherwise praised for his accessibility, came under rebuke in this area. According to *Godey's*, the *Haunted Man*, though “admirably written,” will have “not so much honest interest to the great mass of readers.” Having “more philosophy in it” than Dickens's other Christmas tales, “it will be a mystery to those who do not read it carefully”; hence, concluded the magazinist, “we do not like this story so well” (Mar. 1849: 222). Another problem was that learned fiction, whether through its ideas or through other marks of erudition, could become pedantic. Such was the conclusion of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, which complained that the *Caxtons* “is charmingly cursed with one of Bulwer-Lytton's greatest faults, his pedantry. Proud of his extensive and varied reading, . . . he is forever thrusting fragments from out of the way authors under your nose, and with juvenile conceit, looking up in your face, as it were, saying ‘Haven't

I read a quantity?’” (Jan. 1862: 13). Taught to view intellectualized and erudite fiction as a roadblock to effective engagement of the audience, antebellum informed readers were encouraged to be on guard for its various problems and to be skeptical of its merit.

Like other interpretive conventions, reading for ideas or themes—whether emblematic, learned, or neither—was not advocated for mere intellectual or aesthetic purposes, however. Because of the didactic and social implications attributed to fiction and its relationship with readers, reviewers advocated thematic awareness as a means for determining the ethical orientation and value of a novel or a tale. If fiction reading were to serve its instructional purpose in an uplifting and legitimate way, readers had to understand the leading ideas of texts to allow them to perform their appropriate cultural work, particularly by maintaining and reinforcing traditional values and institutions and curtailing dangerous new ideas. Such logic is evident in the review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* that read *Pierre* as a tale cautioning against the pitfalls of a commitment to a personal sense of duty which contravened “universally-received rules of moral and social order,” as well as in a review in *DeBow’s Review*, which punctuated its remarks on Alice Haven’s *The Coopers* by explaining that “the moral of the tale is to be found in the practical workings of married life, the experiences of which are truthfully delineated” in the actions and characters (Oct. 1858: 490). Such readings not only identified certain fictions as appropriate but served as models for how to interpret the sociothematic worth of such texts. Accordingly, by this logic *Godey’s* could recommend *The Blithedale Romance* as a worthwhile fiction for its audience because “in [its] serious lessons on the mental follies . . . of the times,” it “may, in some manner, be relied upon for its influence in checking the exuberance of ‘new ideas,’ and in bringing back bewildered, but well-meaning people to the usages and requirements of common sense” (Oct. 1852: 311). Thematic reading was thus a means of defusing potentially subversive texts by turning them into advocates of “common sense”—the very “foundation,” according to Barthes, “of the bourgeois statement of fact.”<sup>23</sup> In this way, reading for meaning could aid readers in resisting texts that might be construed as challenging middle-class ideology. At the same time, such thematic reading offers one of the clearest examples within antebellum informed reading of the way an interpretive formation functions by interpreting itself. In this instance,

self-interpretation entailed privileging foundational values of middle-class culture and applying them through an interpretive move that constructed *Blithedale* as a textual embodiment of those values.

Such formulations rested, of course, on the assumption about the instructional and moral obligations of fictional texts and fiction readers and the determination of a fit between the two. A central conviction was that fiction must be evaluated by how well it balanced instruction and formal control and whether that balance created a proper role for its audience. Narrative technique was a factor in this area in that reviewers, as Pritchard and Baym have demonstrated, distinguished between fictions that engaged in appropriate instruction through the dramatic situation and those that merely layered such instruction on the narrative proper.<sup>24</sup> Though maintaining that an uplifting, tutelary relation was intrinsic and necessary to fiction, reviewers directed readers to look for and sanction the relation that was subtle and consistent rather than overt, intrusive, or intermittent. We should recall here the objection of the *Graham's* reviewer cited earlier who complained, "Neither do we like the convenient morality of an author in writing a book directly injurious, and then, hoping to atone for it all by a page of morality at the finale" (Sept. 1840: 144). One reason for such objections was that intermittent preaching, particularly at the close of a novel, was inadequate for achieving a proper moral relation with readers whose interest depended on plot and characters—in other words, the weak-minded mass readers.

At work as well in strictures against intrusive narration was a concatenation of more general interpretive assumptions about authorial authority, implied readership, and proper narrative technique as features of effective communication. Moralistic intrusions marked only one instance of the ineffectiveness that resulted when a narrative was seen as attempting to overdetermine the reader's response. That problem could also proceed from excessive exposition. As a writer in the *Southern Literary Messenger* pointed out in condemning the way G. P. R. James's *The Smuggler* handled its description of the hero's military prowess, "If we are told of his profound and skillful 'combinations' once, we are told of them fifty times." In the grip of such expositional redundancy, "the reader can have no possible escape; he is held by the button until he yields a ghastly admiration" (Sept. 1847: 535). Since reviewers repeatedly emphasized that good fiction united subtle artistry with exemplary in-

struction, a novelist who relied on heavy-handed intrusions or excessive dramatization inadvertently exposed the machinery by which the novel was expected to do its work. According to this interpretive logic, such techniques prohibited an author from retaining his or her rightful authority with readers, whether they were the “mass” fiction readers, who would be put off because they lacked the patience for dealing with overt instruction and dramatic redundancy, or more informed readers, who would interpret these elements as technical blunders.

The underlying assumption of authorial authority in the handling of narration carried with it other strategies for treating this dimension of fiction. Throughout the antebellum period reviewers assumed that novels were narrated by the author, a conviction that identified narrative voice and point of view as an authority readers could—and would—trust.<sup>25</sup> This assumption, however, included a recognition of variation. Although never using the term *point of view*, reviewers reminded readers that fiction could be delivered through different narrative agents. Amid the general belief that authors were their narrators, reviewers recognized that some fictions used first-person narrators, which they called “autobiographical” fictions, a term that seems to have marked the source of information in a work and maintained in an indirect way the continuity between narrator and author.<sup>26</sup> But what, then, of the possibility for an unreliable narrator? Because of the author-narrator affinity and the principle of trust reviewers ascribed to that link, the idea of an unreliable narrator seems not to have been part of their analytical lexicon.<sup>27</sup>

Yet in regard to this protocol, several qualifications need to be made. Despite the general assumption of reliability, reviewers occasionally questioned whether a particular type of first-person narrator was a legitimate choice. For example, a reviewer in the *American Whig Review* found Hawthorne’s Miles Coverdale “a most repulsive being . . . who forsakes the rough, healthy life of Blithedale because he pines for Turkey carpets and a sea-coal fire.” But instead of seeing these traits as a conscious artistic strategy by which to undermine the reliability of Coverdale’s narration, this reviewer disdainfully concluded, “Such is the man upon whose dictum Mr. Hawthorne would endeavor covertly to show the futility of the enterprise in whose favor he once enlisted” (Nov. 1852: 419). In effect, this reviewer judged Hawthorne in error for mishandling the “proper” relation between reader and text by choosing a narrator who

could not effect the authoritative voice required for fiction. By implication, informed readers would conclude the same.

Other reviewers' comments, however, reveal a turn in the 1850s in treating autobiographical narration, as some reviewers sought to instruct readers in a more subtle and complex response to this type of fiction. Commenting on Thackeray's method in *The Luck of Barry Lyndon*, a reviewer in *Graham's* pointed out that "as the story is told in an auto-biographical form, the author has an excellent opportunity to exhibit . . . the whole psychology of villainy." The reviewer added that Thackeray's method of choosing a narrator whose ethics and entire view of life are questionable enabled him to produce "a masterly satire [that] holds up cruelty, selfishness, hardheartedness and impudence to mingled execration and derision, by ironically stating their claims to respect and admiration" (Mar. 1853: 363). Similarly, another review of *The Blithedale Romance* (this one in the *Southern Literary Messenger*) asserted that the "interest" of the narrative "is mainly kept up by the fact that the story is told by one who had been only a looker on, and not an actor, and the results are thus invested with an extraordinary effect . . . on account of the supposed ignorance of the narrator" (Aug. 1852: 512). By the 1850s reviewers were beginning to define narration as a technique in which deliberate unreliability was a legitimate aesthetic strategy and to alert their readers to use that interpretive paradigm for making sense of potentially problematic and disruptive texts.

This attention to narrative reliability incorporated more than aesthetic and cognitive principles. Believing that the relation between fiction and its audience always entailed ethical issues, magazinists extended that principle to the relation between readers and narrators. To understand what a novel or story presented required understanding its point of view and making informed judgments about the morality, immorality, or amorality in the narrative perspective of the work. Here the strategy of informed reading gave audiences a choice. The reader could censure a novel for its improper point of view, either because it was immoral or because the point of view failed to match the work's instructional aim. In the 1850s, however, formulation of the concept of unreliable/ironic narration gave informed readers the option to "rescue" a text by turning its ostensibly dangerous message into a covertly palatable one. What united these two options was the imperative to control texts that other-

wise would be subversive and dangerous. As a product of the reviewers' cautionary attitude toward fiction reading and their belief that it should enhance traditional values and social stability, the concept of unreliable narration developed as an interpretive strategy by which readers could construct a text and its relation to the audience in conformity with the ideology undergirding informed reading.

Because of the underlying equation of narrators and authors, responding to the relation between readers and narrators inevitably led to conceptions of the audience's relation to the author. Readers were expected to take from a work of fiction some sense of who the author was—above all as an artist but also, if possible, as a person.<sup>28</sup> Affirmative judgments about the unity of plot, proper handling of the reader's role, choice of narrators, and other elements would be interpreted as indices that the writer was a successful artist. The moral tone of a novel or tale and the ethical relation it established with its readers were to be taken as indices to an author's moral character. As the *North American Review* explained, “novelists who would induce us to take the murderer and pirate to our hearts, show very plainly where their affections lie” (Oct. 1844: 435). Fiction that was too learned or cabalistic in its erudition could hint to readers that the writer was egotistical or pompous. What was true of ethics and erudition, moreover, was applicable to any ideas a writer embodied in a novel or tale whenever those ideas had some impact. According to *Harper's*, “Every author, indeed, who really influences the mind, who plants in it thoughts and sentiments which take root and grow, communicates his character” (July 1857: 279). Accordingly, “to a discerning reader,” noted the *Southern Quarterly Review*, “the work will serve an important purpose,—that of revealing the character of the writer's mind” (Apr. 1846: 509).

While this knowledge frequently was advocated as a means for readers to make proper judgments, in the 1840s some magazinists began arguing that one needed to know the author for full enjoyment and understanding of a fictional work. Called by its proponents “reproductive criticism” or “aesthetic criticism”—and by its detractors the “transcendental-Boswell” or “Sub-Goethian” method—this strategy of response involved abjuring or at least bracketing judgment in favor of entering through the text into the mind of the author to experience the work in a manner similar to the way it was written.<sup>29</sup> Anything less, according to its advocates, left

the reader deprived, as *Godey's* argued: "When a critic cannot get out of himself to . . . read another's work in the very atmosphere it was written, he will not show us the truth" (Jan. 1847: 52).

Although some magazinists continued to champion this strategy into the 1850s, it is fairly clear that the reproductive response obtained among only a small minority of reviewers and thus served as a minor strategy of informed reading. Part of the problem, according to its opponents, was that the reproductive method was inadequate for dealing with the relation among author, text, and reader and represented an abandonment of the reader's responsibility to make informed "objective" judgments. Another difficulty was that readers could not be sure they had gotten at the true experience of an author and his or her purpose, since works of fiction—or at least some of them—were hardly transparent windows to the author's mind. "When we know exactly what an author aims at, we have a specific standard . . . of the excellence of the performance," admitted the *North American Review*, "but when his purpose is so obscurely shadowed forth, as to leave the most painstaking reader in doubt whether he has any definite object, the book can be judged only by the general impression it produces, its obvious moral tendency, and the skill it shows in its construction as a work of art" (Apr. 1856: 368). The injunction for informed reading here seems to be something like this: employ a reproductive response if the work is clear, but, if its purpose is more "shadowed," use external standards, which in turn will enable you to decide if the shadowing is a mark of subtlety or of turbidity. What drives the logic in this case is the reviewer's implicit adherence to the idea that intention does not govern significance and performance. Hence, while admitting that "we may thus misjudge the author's intention" by abjuring the reproductive strategy, the reviewer in the *North American* remarked that we "shall perhaps arrive at a truer valuation of his work, because, not being in his secret, we shall not incur the risk of being misled by any fancied connections between the mark and the precision of the shot."

Although in theory any feature of a novel or tale could serve readers as an index to the author's ability, temperament, mind, or moral character, one of the primary vehicles to which readers could attend was the work's characters. The type of characters presented, the way in which they were developed, and the sympathy (or lack) with which they were treated could be read—and were read by reviewers—as revealing signs of an author's

own character. The facility with which this move was made is evident in an article on the novels of Fredrika Bremer in the *Southern Quarterly Review*, which noted that “the mind which could originate such a character [as Elsie Frank, whom the reviewer styles “the good mother”] must be full of beauty” (Oct. 1843: 504). Not that reviewers equated fiction writers with their characters. For the most part they did not, no more than reviewers or academic critics do today. But just as some novel readers today conflate the opinions or ideas of characters (or the values they embody) with those of the author, so apparently did a segment of the antebellum audience. Or at least, some reviewers believed readers did so and encouraged them to recognize that the “ideas a particular character expresses should not be taken as universal truths” espoused by the author. Rather, “[e]ach character . . . speaks for itself” (*Littell’s Living Age* Nov. 1844: 182).<sup>30</sup> Informed readers needed to understand that the presence of a reprehensible character did not inherently indict an author as a person of questionable repute or as a poor artist. What mattered was how the author treated that character. Attending to that treatment would give readers not only a window for determining and judging an author’s moral probity but also an index to a writer’s artistic success or failure in creating an appropriate role for readers vis-à-vis such characters.

Reading through character to get to the author was, however, only one strategy for conceptualizing and dealing with this element of fiction. That conceptualization consisted most basically of treating characters as amalgams of traits that readers could assemble into identifiable representations. As such, it was grounded in the same assumption that guided responses to plot: the idea that fiction was a mimetic medium referring to an empirical reality outside the text. One dealt with a character by getting to know him or her in the same way one got to know a person: attending to traits and qualities as indices for deciphering the character of a character.

Because they assumed that any action, speech, or thought performed by a character or any narrative comment about him or her could disclose a trait, reviewers did not articulate a precise typology of such indices. Their practices nonetheless drew attention to some strategies. Attention to characters’ names, for one thing, could be important. Read through a rule of notice, “names,” as a reviewer in *Graham’s Magazine* pointed out, can “be indicative of peculiarities of person or character”

(Nov. 1841: 252). Names might be taken as emblematic, as a review in *Godey's Lady's Book* explained by noting that in *Lorimer Littlegood* "the name of the principal character foreshadows the nature of his exploits" (Dec. 1856: 563). Or names might simply be suggestive, as the *Southern Quarterly Review* illustrated in discussing the method of Dickens in *Bleak House*, where the characters' "hideous attributes," whether of "decay, bad passions," or other "personal deformities," are "sufficiently indicated . . . in his names of persons" (Jan. 1854: 226). Another strategy consisted of reading character through principles of accumulation and juxtaposition. A series of actions that accorded with one another could collectively indicate a particular trait in a character. According to *Harper's*, for instance, in finding a character who "is ready to give up her fortune to the poor little sister" and "will cheerfully die for the lover to whom she hasn't a kind word to say," readers could rightfully conclude that that character "is as generous as the sunshine" (Oct. 1857: 661). An incongruity between what a character does and says or between what she thinks and says also could be telling. Such was the case, according to a review in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, in *Adam Bede*, in which "the contrariety between thought and speech" in some of the characters reveals a gap between "the heart within and the mask without, which we call a face" (Sept. 1859: 232).

While we might be tempted to call such responses a "natural" way of reading character, they were also practices emanating from shared cultural codes common to the interpretive community of antebellum reviewers. The logic for such conceptualizations of character inhered in the need to justify fiction reading as a worthwhile activity that would inform the reader about real life. This principle was as much a prescriptive as a constitutive strategy within informed reading, as reviewers made clear by repeatedly gauging characters according to their perceived verisimilitude. Readers were told that Cooper's "personages are mere wooden images, with no semblance to life" (*North American Review* Oct. 1838: 489), but that in Thackeray's *The Newcomes* "the great charm of its portraits is their perfect naturalness" (*Home Journal* Oct. 6, 1855: 2 [no pag.]). Woodenness or unnaturalness could be detected in a number of ways, but the most commonly invoked method was to ask if a character was idealized or stereotyped. A character lacking "shadowing," as it was called, by being all good or all bad was unacceptable. Thus, read-

ers needed to understand that in *Who Shall Be Hers?* “the characters of Rosiland and Vivian are almost too perfect, as is that of Cottrell too bad” (*Godey’s* Mar. 1841: 144). Driving such a response and the criterion of verisimilitude in characterization was the assumption that short stories and novels, as the *North American Review* expressed it, “are patterns of life and that characters presented in them must have that diversity and even contrariety of feeling, motive, and conduct . . . which are daily written among our friends, or we do not acknowledge the fidelity of the imitation” (Jan. 1838: 21).<sup>31</sup>

Besides invoking fidelity as a mark of verisimilitude, reviewers instructed readers to look for consistency as an index to true-to-life characterization. Using this strategy, the *Home Journal* objected to the “inconsistency and indelicacy of the portrait” of Laura in *Pendennis* because, though “possessing every generous feeling, every good gift,” Thackeray makes her “faithless to that first affection for Pendennis (July 14, 1855: 1 [no pag.]). At times within informed reading, such a flaw could mark only a single characteristic, but more frequently the strategy of consistency was invoked in relation to the full assemblage of traits constituting character. Periodical readers learned, however, that looking for consistency was a tricky strategy. Was a reverend rake such as Arthur Dimmesdale or the taciturn yet garrulous Natty Bumppo to be viewed as an inconsistent and thus implausible character or were such diversities of feelings and conduct faithful to life? And what of a character who seemed consistently inconsistent? According to some reviewers, such a character could still be natural. At least that is what a review of *Jane Eyre* in *Littell’s Living Age* explained to its audience. Jane may be “zealous and fanciful, yet cool and prudent, impulsive yet deliberate, foreseeing yet not calculating” and thus “molded from a heap of opposites, but her composition being once admitted, she is consistent in every act and thought” and thus is true to nature (Feb. 1848: 324). Reading for consistency was clearly a slippery procedure that informed readers could not expect to employ without some second-guessing and uncertainty.

Somewhat less problematic was the strategy of looking for change in character. Change was not required for verisimilitude, but it also was not objectionable as incompatible with consistency. Although reviewers often conceptualized change in terms of the process by which an increasing number of a character’s traits became known to the reader, reviewers

also noted that some characters undergo alterations in their established character because of turns in the plot. Such change might take the form of a reversal, either “upward” (for example, an inebriate is reformed or a coquette becomes a dutiful wife) or “downward” (for instance, a believer loses faith). But reviewers also reminded readers that change could be lifelike through the growth of some embryonic laudable trait or the festering and deepening of some flaw. According to the *Southern Literary Messenger*, such characterization was precisely the strength of Maria Edgeworth, for “it is in tracing the gradual evolution of some original fault or vice of character by the action of circumstances, that she displays the most consummate ability. . . . With the most minute observation she follows the progress of some pernicious propensity . . . [and] depicts its natural development [*sic*] in the ordinary course of events” (Sept. 1849: 582). What readers needed to watch for in determining verisimilitude was whether change was effected in a plausible manner—that is, in the “ordinary course of events,” and gradually rather than abruptly. Thus a review in *Godey’s* alerted readers to be chary of the “astonishing” and “sudden alterations of characters” in some novels (Feb. 1850: 151).

Any change, according to reviewers, had to be properly motivated as well, but this principle was a particular form of a more general criterion of motivation as a gauge of effective characterization. A character was expected to act in a way that was appropriate to the circumstances of the plot and setting and that resulted from sufficient cause. Readers, that is, were to attend to the way an author develops “his personages by unveiling the process of their thoughts, taking up the train with events that suggest it, and following it down to the act that results from it” (*North American Review* July 1853: 206). The idea that proper motivation would combine causal relations and a delineation of characters’ thoughts and feelings meant that readers needed to read with an eye for the inner dimensions of character.

In drawing attention to inner characterization, however, reviewers modeled several different and ostensibly conflicting codes for informed readers. On the one hand, inner development was viewed as superior to other forms of characterization. In part this was a function of a link within informed reading between character development and types of fiction, and the valuation of some types over others. As *Littell’s Living Age* explained, “a sensation novel, as a matter of course, abounds in in-

cident” but lacks “[d]eep knowledge of human nature, graphic delineations of individual character, vivid representation of . . . the workings of the human soul—all the higher features of the creative art” (June 1863: 437). Another factor in the valorization of inward characterization was the belief that it was more true to life, constituting a method, as the *Southern Literary Messenger* explained in speaking of Balzac’s fiction, by which “readers [can] participate in the essential life and not merely behold the outward experience of his characters” (Feb. 1859: 84). What is curious is that amid such approval, reviewers also berated inward characterization, thereby suggesting that readers were to find something amiss in this method. Dismay with authorial expression and exploration of a character’s inner traits formed the core of a comparison between Fielding and Thackeray in the *North American Review*, which proclaimed that Fielding “exercises over his characters an absolute right of property. He establishes himself in the inmost recesses of their minds, and displays the secret thoughts which no conjecture founded on action will reveal.” In contrast, “Thackeray takes no such unfair advantage of the offsprings of his imagination” but positions his readers in a more lifelike relation to his characters. “We open one of his books, as we enter a company of strangers. What we first notice is their . . . features and dress, their occupations and their peculiarities of action; and on these observations we found our conjectures as to their characters” (July 1853: 207–8). Such devaluation of inner characterization was repeated by a review in *Littell’s Living Age*, which informed its readership that if an author is to achieve effective characterization, “it will be by a close study of human nature from its objective side, and by checking the propensity to dive into psychological problems and the complex mechanism of motives and feelings” (Jan. 1862: 316).

What appear as incompatible strategies in these responses, however, may have been part of a more subtle set of distinctions within informed reading. The objections to inner characterization seem directed not against reader access to that dimension of character but against the methods some writers used to achieve it. Developing a character’s inner traits through narrative comments constituted a failure because it was an instance of intrusive narration that sacrificed mimesis to diegesis. Hence, the objections in the *North American Review*, cited above, to Fielding’s methods. According to the logic of informed response, read-

ers should rightfully expect more subtle techniques of revealing inner traits through outward means, such as a character's actions or speech. Suggestiveness was one key here, as indicated in the *North American Review's* praise of Thackeray's ability to present characters in such a way that readers could productively speculate about and thereby gain insight into characters' inner beings.

This is not to say that reviewers did not struggle with reading characters through the code of verisimilitude. Especially troubling was the matter of deciphering the status of allegorical or emblematic characters. Reviewers held that allegory was a particular type of fiction that had certain principles or necessities for characterization built into the nature of its form. Readers, accordingly, needed to give a certain allowance to allegories by regarding their characters, despite their thinness or lack of shading, as legitimate if they contributed to the instructional goal of the allegory or were interesting. This was the case with Hawthorne's works, according to the *North American Review*. The "figures" in the *Twice-Told Tales* "are not persons, they are passions, emotions, spiritual speculations"; nonetheless, they "hold the mind with a Lamia-like fascination" (Oct. 1864: 545). Even so, reviewers conveyed the idea that because such characters lacked verisimilitude, they could never be fully satisfying or adequate when considered within the overarching principles of naturalness and individuality. This was a typical problem, according to *Graham's Magazine*, with Bulwer-Lytton's characters, which lack "personal identity—they are only embodiments of certain passions or peculiarities. His actors are like the knights of Spencer [*sic*], mere stalking horses for particular vices or virtues" (June 1842: 355). These various remarks constituted part of a two-tiered strategy for responding to such characters. An article on "Fiction" in the *Ladies' Repository* explained the basis for this strategy in these terms: "characters in second-rate fictions are ideas; those in novels of a more artistic grade are real people, used as lay figures, to exhibit metaphysical fabrics upon" (Apr. 1865: 205). Informed readers were to grant leeway to characters presented primarily as vehicles for ideas when such characterization was either necessary to the form or functional for a work's thematic purpose; however, readers were at the same time to view such characters as inferior within a hierarchical scale of representation.

Besides responding to characterization within codes of representation

and aesthetic competency, informed readers needed to decipher their own relation to characters of a novel or tale. Most basic was determining whether characters, especially the protagonists, were interesting. This quality could take any number of forms, from characters being “natural” and thus like actual people, to having an aura of mystery about them, to being striking in a way that made them different from other fictional characters. Hence, *Harper’s* explained that Currer Bell “is so direct, life-like, and human . . . and withal keeps you in such provoking, yet delightful uncertainty, with regard to the real characters of her heroes and heroines—that her writings exercise a relentless fascination” (Apr. 1853: 714). The interest readers can take in the title character of Marian Harland’s *Miriam* results because “[s]he is altogether different from the namby-pamby class of girls which novelists too frequently consider as being especially qualified for heroines. Miriam is characterized by energy, strength of purpose, dignity, and rare intellectual gifts” (*Godey’s* Jan. 1863: 97). At times, as such remarks indicate, interest was linked to admiration. But a character could also be interesting when, according to reviewers, he or she merited censure. Perhaps the most noticeable examples of this principle were reviewers’ fascinated responses to Hawthorne’s Arthur Dimmesdale and Thackeray’s Becky Sharp, but characters by Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens, Edgeworth, and a number of other writers also received similar reactions. The *North American Review*, for example, pointed out that in Bulwer-Lytton’s *Last Days of Pompeii*, “Abraces, the Egyptian, . . . is the most striking personage” precisely because “as a man skilled in all learning of the day, and deeply read . . . even in demonology,” he is “a cool and calculating impostor. . . . Subtle and unprincipled, he is checked by no scruples; and . . . withheld by no fear of retribution” (Apr. 1835: 451–52).

Readers were to consider a character’s capacity to be interesting through another criterion—whether he or she evoked sympathy or empathy in the audience. According to the *Southern Quarterly Review*, readers must ask of any novel or tale, “Do we sympathize with the actors? Do we enter into their feelings, link ourselves with their destiny, and anticipate . . . the result?” (Jan. 1854: 19). Invoking the same principle was a review in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, which reminded readers, “We must have something in common with the *dramatis personae* or we will care nothing about them” (Oct. 1853: 647). Sympathy depended first

of all on recognizing traits shared alike by characters and the audience and thus was a function of reading for verisimilitude. But beyond that link were the ethical tones decipherable in characters and the implications those tones had for reader sympathy. Readers were encouraged to attend to such indices as a character's actions or speech or to a narrator's comments to determine whether a character was laudable or not and consequently deserving or not deserving of sympathy. Though assuming that in many cases this would be an easy task for readers, reviewers also recognized that deciphering a novel's or tale's moral inflection of its characters could require attentive, close reading. Such was the strategy needed for reading *Martin Chuzzlewit*, according to the *Southern Quarterly Review*. Urging readers to "look at" the text's "words in consecutive order" as they describe Pecksniff and his daughters, the reviewer pointed out that "there is not one word of this to be taken in its true and literal meaning." Paying attention to Dickens's "delicate vein of irony" would reveal to readers that the text "gives the leer to the hypocritical gravity of his portrait[s]" for a purpose quite opposite to "preserv[ing] the respect of the reader for them" (Oct. 1843: 296).

Readers were to recognize, however, that such markers of sympathy or repulsion, empathy or derision, had to be read in consort with other codes. Texts, in other words, could not be granted sole or final authority by which readers should determine their alignment with characters; readers had to decide whether a text's attempt to create sympathy or identification was appropriate or not, especially when a character's ethics were at issue. If a text promoted sympathy with a disreputable character, that sympathy was to be resisted as a violation of fiction's ethical obligation to its audience. Relevant to this area were codes involving character change, final authority, and implied audience. A reprehensible character, for example, still might legitimately warrant reader interest and sympathy if in the course of the work he or she reformed, but readers needed to be aware of how the shift in reader response was evoked. If a novelist encouraged both admiration and disgust before the change—and especially if what inspired admiration also prompted the disgust—readers were to see this as a moral problem in characterization and reader engagement, and draw back. This point was the gist of a review in the *Southern Literary Messenger* that inveighed against the "much graver error" of *Guy Livingston* "in drawing the picture of a dashing, devil-may-care young

gentleman in colors so attractive that we cannot but admire while we condemn him, and after leading him through the world of fashionable vice and debauchery, presenting him to us as extremely repentant and purified" (Oct. 1857: 319).

Reviewers recognized, in other words, that determining one's emotional relation to characters—especially when ethical issues were involved—required a certain amount of sophistication and thoughtful weighing and balancing of several different factors. And once again, verisimilitude came into play. If characters were to be truly natural, even admirable individuals would have faults; conversely, even reprehensible ones might possess traits that readers should be rightfully drawn toward. Such was the point of a comment in the *North American Review* about Walter Scott's Highlander in the Waverly novels. Though emphasizing that, as a matter of principle, "we would say nothing in defense of any doubtful character" in fiction, the reviewer pointed out that readers had to approach the Highlander by recognizing that "Scott has recommended him to our compassionate respect and not as an example." Extrapolating from this instance, the reviewer added the following as a general principle "with respect to characters": "as long as we have to do with mixed characters"—that is, characters that are natural and life-like by being morally shaded—"we must regard them with mixed feelings" (Apr. 1843: 414). The key was in recognizing what one's response should be to the various shades of a character to avoid blurring distinctions and/or to recognize and censure fictions that problematized the reader's ability to do so. That possibility was one about which readers needed to be chary in responding, for example, to *Vanity Fair*; according to a reviewer in *Littell's Living Age*. Thackeray's novel was one of a class of "distressing books" in this area because, ironically enough, the "personages are too like our everyday selves and neighbors to draw any distinct moral from. . . . Palliatives of the bad and disappointments in the good are perpetually obstructing our judgments" as readers, explained the reviewer. Consequently, "We cannot see our way clearly" (Mar. 1849: 448). In informed response, reading for and sanctioning verisimilitude in characterization was appropriate, but readers were to understand that when it left the audience morally adrift, verisimilitude had gone awry.

Amid this careful rounding up of variations, this repeated effort to cover the contingencies of potentially disruptive relations between char-

acters and readers so as to keep both in conformity with the bourgeois ideology of reading, reviewers nonetheless believed that it was appropriate for a novel or tale to use characterization to challenge readers in some ways. Creating uneasiness in readers could be appropriate work for fiction because experiencing that uneasiness could help readers learn more about themselves and their relation to others. According to a review in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, our experiences in life cause us “chiefly to consider the differences between ourselves and other men, often utterly forgetting the grand fact of an underlying unity,” but “good novelists” unsettle this way of thinking. When we read such texts we “hear the author exclaiming, ‘You see all those people that appear to be different; I tell you they are alike. You despise that wretch; thou art the man. See what a monster I have painted; I am that monster’” (Sept. 1859: 230). Such disruptions of the reading self, however, were not conceived as challenges to the reader’s beliefs so as to cashier or deform the core of middle-class values and the dominant ideology of antebellum America. Instead, challenge was conceived in such encounters as a way for readers to reestablish their connection to traditional, “universal” truths, as the *Messenger* reviewer made clear by adding that the reminder that we too are wretches and monsters “is but a secular rendering of the deepest sentiments of Christianity . . . which teaches us . . . that we all have got an evil corner in our hearts.” What readers were supposed to learn from such fiction was the underlying veracity of established truths somehow forgotten or their own failure to live by those truths.

Reviewers did not assume, however, that in responding to character or to plot, theme, methods of audience engagement, or other elements of a novel or tale, informed reading should proceed in exactly the same form for men and women. Subscribing to a representational poetics in which fictional value was determined by its fidelity to an empirical reality built on sexual difference, the informed code of reading posited that responses to fiction should at times take a distinct shape for women. Although all readers were to derive instruction from fiction and to judge it by how well it reflected life, its utility for women depended on their ability to extract practical information relevant to their social roles. Thus a reviewer in the *Southern Literary Messenger* recommended *The Image of the Father* because “our lady friends will find in the character of Mrs. Farquhar . . . a bright example of an obedient and *useful wife*” (Nov.

1848: 704). Although such criteria were to guide women's responses to domestic fiction especially, the informed woman reader was expected to glean practical benefits from novels and stories that did not overtly provide them. Historical fiction was especially touted for this advantage; as another reviewer in the *Messenger* asserted, "One of the most beneficial and interesting modes in which fiction can be employed, is that of illustrating historical events" (Sept. 1839: 632). For readers of fiction, and especially women, explained another writer in the same issue, "the advantages of correct knowledge of history must be obvious," primarily because such knowledge can "invigorate the sentiments to virtue." For this reviewer, history in the guise of fiction was important for a woman as a means to cultivate those virtues necessary to her state—a state in which "her vocations are domestic and her duties solitary" (598–99).

The gendered inflection in informed reading appeared most noticeably, however, in reviewers' conceptions of emotional response and didacticism. The concern with readers' sympathy toward characters indicates that emotional response was held to be an important part of the fiction-reading experience for all. But reviewers assumed that women readers were more naturally inclined to respond emotionally to fiction. The "genius" of woman, explained *Godey's Lady's Book*, lies in the way "she could enter into and appreciate as a man could not, the struggles of the spirit"; thus, a novel such as *Silverwood*, with its "vein of religious feelings," would be especially appreciated by women, "who sympathize with affliction" (Apr. 1848: 247; June 1857: 564). Nonetheless, when discussing emotional response, reviewers sometimes criticized it as femininely inferior. One writer for the *Southern Literary Messenger* looked forward to the day when the novel-reading public would no longer be deluged "by tears which have fallen from the eyes of every grade of society, from the countess who sobbed herself to sleep . . . over the Children of the Abbey, up to the seamstress in her garret, or down to the scullery maid . . . who wiped her eyes on the duster, at the sorrows of Malvina" (Jan. 1862: 11). Another reviewer similarly complained about the "sentimental propriety which claims . . . the female mind" when reading (*Christian Examiner* Jan. 1860: 120). Such contradictory remarks about emotional responses were paralleled in reviewer's comments about reading didactically. Though generally critical of overtly didactic fiction as unpalatable to the truly informed reader, reviewers' comments indicate that such didacti-

cism was another matter when the gender of the reader was a factor. One reviewer for *Graham's*, though complaining of “a consistent intrusion of ethical reflection” in Bulwer-Lytton’s *Harold, the Last of the Saxon Kings*, nevertheless affirmed that such passages “will doubtless much edify all young ladies” (Sept. 1848: 179). Gendered assumptions about sympathy and didacticism as principles of informed reading underlay an essay in the *Southern Literary Messenger* that offered an ironic bit of advice about how to cope with and avoid heavy-handed passages. Speaking of such moments in the novels of G. P. R. James, the essayist quipped, “We were once greatly assisted in avoiding them by reading one of his books after a lady, who had drawn pencil lines about every such passage as an expression of her sympathy and admiration” (Sept. 1847: 534–35). What is telling about this flippancy is that it comes at the expense of the very role reviewers identified as appropriate for the female audience. As such, it signals the presence of contradictory scripts that were provided ostensibly to educate women but seemed designed, simultaneously, to immobilize their response.

An adequate understanding of antebellum informed reading, however, needs to recognize that it did not develop along a fault line of gender. The vast majority of the interpretive strategies within this reading formation were promoted as a means to empower both men and women of the middle class as active, informed participants in the culture of fiction.<sup>32</sup> In practicing and disseminating a rather uniform version of informed reading for character, plot, meaning, and other elements of fiction, reviewers did not, however, promulgate a rigid pattern of codified response; many recognized that diverse types of fiction existed and that audiences needed to adapt. In one sense, this principle of adaptation was implicit in the various categories reviewers used to classify fiction. Because correct response depended on knowing the type of fiction being read, poetics in this area dovetailed with hermeneutics. But the criterion of adaptability extended to other areas, since one assumption of informed reading was that if a work of fiction failed to display control or merit in one area, it nonetheless could compensate by satisfying other interpretive expectations. As a reviewer for *Godey's* explained in evaluating Ann Stephens’s *The Heiress of Greenhurst*, “although many of the incidents of this volume are scarcely within the bounds of probability, there is yet

a lively interest created and sustained by the animated descriptions of scenery and character” (Aug. 1857: 181). Reviewers assumed that truly informed readers needed to recognize and give credit to a writer who violated reader expectations, provided that the work offered something in return. Cognizant that the novel was a protean form, informed readers were expected to approach fiction with an horizon of expectations flexible enough to account for and appreciate noteworthy variations in a work that might otherwise trouble standard response strategies.

This flexibility, moreover, was not to be applied only when responding to texts of unusual merit that seemed to disrupt some interpretive criteria. The need to adjust reading codes was also imperative for other dimensions of response, including reading fiction for its moral tendency. This strategy is typified in the objections, cited earlier in the *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* reviews, to the immorality of novels that nonetheless ended morally—objections that privileged one reading code by bracketing another. In lieu of employing the code of final authority, the reviewer in *Graham’s* implicitly told his audience what the reviewer in *Godey’s* made explicit: that “the morality of a narrative” has “little to do with . . . how it ends,” and that readers instead needed to be aware that “it is the prevailing impression, not the catastrophe, that is important” (Apr. 1860: 368). For responding to certain works, particularly where the question of ethics obtained, the strategy of final authority may need to give way to a code of “prevailing impressions” for determining the role such texts implied for their readers. Flexibility was thus a convention with multiple strains within informed reading.

By practicing these interpretive conventions as a means to encourage readers to activate such codes in their response patterns, reviewers espoused a conception of literary engagement that both reflected the continuing impact of Enlightenment defenses against the potential antisocial threat of fiction and anticipated what Daniel Schwarz has called the “humanistic formalism” that dominated Anglo-American criticism through most of the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> For the modern and Enlightenment traditions enclosed the antebellum period within a set of assumptions which maintained that fiction has a social function because human behavior is the central concern of its representational mode. Yet reviewers hardly saw their interpretive strategies as a historically constituted

set of procedures. According to reviewers, the conventions they proffered supposedly constituted a natural, timeless way of responding to fiction that readers should follow as an informed audience.

Given the way reviewers conceived of themselves as caretakers of culture, such an approach was almost inevitable. Dedicated to preservation, not creation, to replication, not rupture, reviewers did not define fiction reading as an experience that produces self-revelation and startling insights. Nor did reviewers envision it as a means to create new strategies for interpreting texts that might productively challenge old assumptions. Instead, fiction reading was to be a form of self-validation and confirmation of the already known. Through a strategy of informed reading that was essentially conservationist, reviewers sought to multiply their practices as incarnations of bourgeois culture, which middle-class readers could employ as a means of socializing the discourse of novels and tales while valorizing order and control in the production and consumption of fiction.

The interpretive conventions of antebellum reviewers thereby formed a potentially powerful vehicle for configuring fiction and its reception. However, neither readers nor writers before 1865 monolithically followed the model. Reviewers and middle-class readers who employed the codes of informed reading inevitably differed among themselves in the way they combined and privileged specific interpretive strategies. For such strategies and the experience of reading fiction intersected with political allegiances, ideologies, and varying social formations that made informed reading a patchwork of overlapping—and at times divergent—interpretive experiences rather than a seamless whole. At the same time, while fiction writers had to be aware of these strategies and to accommodate them in order to be read, the very demand for novelty and originality in fiction encouraged writers to try to find fresh, viable ways to engage the expectations and assumptions of this bourgeois reading formation. In the context of these interpretive strategies, therefore, the relation between antebellum fiction and its audience transpired as a process of reconciliation and transgression that took shape most visibly in the public sphere. In that process, the formulations of informed reading constituted both challenges and pathways to the forms fiction and its reception could take in early and mid nineteenth-century America.