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## Reading Fiction in Antebellum America

Machor, James L.

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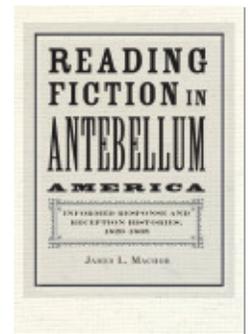
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## American Literary History and the Historical Study of Interpretive Practices

**B**Y THE LAST TWO DECADES of the nineteenth century, when Melville, Sedgwick, and Chesebro' were all but forgotten, a new generation of fiction writers, readers, and magazine reviewers had come to the fore in the United States. My point in referencing that change is not to open the way for a detailed discussion of the shape of reading formations and the reception of fiction after the Civil War, which would require another book. Nonetheless, one facet of postbellum interpretive practices merits some attention here for two reasons. First, it enables us to see the way historical hermeneutics can offer a fresh perspective on a particular diachronic dimension of nineteenth-century American literary history. Second, and more broadly, such reconsideration discloses the potential of reception study in general and of historical hermeneutics in particular to serve as a perspicacious tool for examining issues of genre, periodization, and the relation between the two.

One of the most important and long-lasting paradigms in narratives of American literary history has been the claim that romances and sentimental/domestic fictions dominated the antebellum literary marketplace, but that after the Civil War, realism, and to a lesser extent naturalism, developed and soon became the leading forms of postbellum fiction in the United States. Although Michael Davitt Bell has pointed out that "ever since Howells declared his so-called Realism War in the 1880s, it has been a staple of literary history that the great development in American fiction after the Civil War was the rise of 'realism,'" it was the 1930s and after that witnessed the growing centrality of the romance-to-realism paradigm in academic literary histories of nineteenth-century American fiction.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, some twentieth-century literary critics challenged that paradigm, most notably with the claim inaugurated by

Richard Chase and continued by Joel Porte and others that the American novel throughout the nineteenth century tended toward romance.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, Alfred Habegger and others have argued that realism was already in its early stages of development before the Civil War via the protorealistic domestic fiction of the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>3</sup> A third challenge has even claimed that nineteenth-century American fiction was actually a hybrid “in which mythic and quotidian time, realism and romanticism, the natural and the supernatural, the realistic and the fantastic . . . compete and negotiate with one another.”<sup>4</sup> Despite such challenges, however, the antebellum romance/postbellum realism paradigm has continued in many cases to shape late twentieth- and early twenty-first century conceptions of nineteenth-century American fiction, as evident in major course anthologies, literary histories, and critical studies.<sup>5</sup> Part of the reason for this continued impact no doubt is the usefulness of the paradigm for genre study and for traditional formalist conceptions about fiction. But the power of the paradigm—particularly in its claim about the postbellum rise of realism—also inheres in the way it embodies what Warner Berloff called “fundamental motives to expression”—a phrase that Bell has amplified by explaining that the “terms ‘realism’ and ‘naturalism’ matter . . . for the simple reason that they have been used by generations of American fiction writers, from the 1880s to the present, to describe what they were doing—or at least what they wished others to think they were doing.”<sup>6</sup>

I will return to and significantly extend the last part of Bell’s suggestive comment in a moment, but for now it is worth mentioning that the romance-to-realism paradigm was neither Howells’s creation nor a manifestation only of the 1880s and 1890s. An article in the *North American Review* in 1853 was already making a distinction between the “romance proper” of fiction in the early nineteenth century, which “dealt with an ideal world,” and the trend of fiction “nowadays,” in which “there is no truth but literal truth” and in which “troubles, to touch our hearts, must be every-day troubles.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, by the 1880s, Howells had taken the lead among a group of novelists, magazine reviewers, and early literary historians—a group that included George Curtis, Hjalmer Boyesen, Brander Matthews, James Herbert Morse, Henry Beers, Anna Dawes, Henry James, and Frank Norris—to claim that the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s were witnessing a salutary outpouring of American realistic and

naturalistic fiction to displace the now outdated romances of earlier decades. Morse made the point perhaps most explicitly (and with specific invocation of the Civil War as the pivot point) in a pair of 1883 articles in the *Century Magazine*, in which he asserted that “in the early half of the present century the novelist was left free to range . . . in romance,” but “the war brought a change in the dispensation of the intellectual forces of America,” which “forced the romance out” and witnessed the rise of fictions that “show American life by its facts.”<sup>8</sup> One irony in such formulations was that the claim for and championing of the rise of American realism in the 1870s and after was hardly unanimous. For this was the time when the self-styled “realism war,” which was waged largely in magazines and periodicals, was driven in part by what was seen—and celebrated by its defenders—as a “romantic revival” in American fiction.<sup>9</sup>

The point here is not that this romantic revival, as Nancy Glazener has pointed out, has been virtually erased from American literary histories over the last century or even that claims about its development tacitly call into question the neat historical dichotomy of the romance-to-realism paradigm.<sup>10</sup> The point, rather, is that the shifting critical claims and the occasional silences about the generic profiles of nineteenth-century American fiction begin to reveal the effect of interpretive practices on the ostensible shape of that fiction and our conception of its literary history.

The role of reading strategies in that conception has not been limited to modern literary historians and critics. It was central to nineteenth-century formulations about U.S. fiction. In fact, its importance to the romance-to-realism paradigm that developed after the Civil War as a way of conceiving American fiction is especially visible in the differences between antebellum and postbellum responses to the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne. At first blush, such a claim may seem odd, given that Hawthorne called himself a romancer and that both his and Cooper’s novels were repeatedly described by antebellum reviewers as romances—or in Cooper’s case, “historical romances.” Yet what troubles these historical givens is that before the Civil War “romance,” as a genre marker, was not necessarily opposed to true-to-life fiction, nor did it preclude in readers’ eyes a strong degree of verisimilitude in a novel or tale. That is, romance and the realistic—like the related duo “romance” and “novel”—were hardly clear cut, stable, mutually exclusive

categories in antebellum informed reading.<sup>11</sup> My concern here, however, is not with the instability of those distinctions before the Civil War but, instead, with a series of shifts in nineteenth-century thinking about—or more accurately, reading for—realism, which involved changes in some assumptions about what constituted realism in fiction and a variety of conceptualizations—and reconceptualizations—about what texts warranted the “realist” label.

These reconceptualizations were central to the response to Cooper’s fictions. Despite the romance label attached to many of his novels, antebellum reviewers repeatedly described them as true-to-life narratives. An 1824 review in the *New-York Mirror*, for example, said that in *The Pilot* Cooper “confers reality on all of his descriptions. We hear the roar of the waves—the splash of the oars—the hoarse language of the seamen” to the point where it seems “we actually take part in the proceedings and conversations of the crew.”<sup>12</sup> So different is our view of Cooper today that we forget, as John Anderson pointed out over five decades ago, that “contemporary reviewers overwhelmingly shared the opinion of Cooper’s fidelity to naval life” in his sea novels and spoke with “considerable praise (and no overt criticism) of the realism of his sailor characters.”<sup>13</sup> Yet not only his sea fiction did reviewers view as natural and true to life. A reviewer in the *Port Folio* counseled the novel reader that in *The Pioneers* “[h]is feelings will not be excited by any romantic traits.” Instead, Cooper has written a novel in which “the historian can scarcely find a more just and vivid delineation of the first settlements of our wilderness” (Mar. 1823, *FCCH* 69–70). A *Graham’s* reviewer made a similar claim about *Wyandotté*, asserting that the novel “gives a narrative of fictitious events, similar, in nearly all respects, to occurrences which actually happened during the opening scenes of the Revolution” and possesses a “Robinson-Crusoe-like detail” in its representations (Nov. 1843, *FCCH* 207–8). Another review in the *Mirror* said that in *The Deerslayer*, Cooper’s “descriptions . . . are in his best style, that is, remarkably clear and minute and exquisitely true to nature. We can almost fancy ourselves looking down on the unruffled surface of Otsego” (Sept. 1841, *FCCH* 205). Even Cooper’s Native Americans, which on occasion came under censure for being “romanticized” and unreal, were defended for their verisimilitude. A review of *The Last of the Mohicans* pointed out that in depicting “north American Indians” Cooper “has interwoven with his vision more of

what actually belongs to the aboriginal character than any other writer" (*North American Review* July 1826, *FCCH* 112). Such views continued for a decade after Cooper's death. A retrospective overview of his novels in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862 asserted that "no one has caught and reproduced more broadly and accurately . . . the character of our people." Singling out *The Spy* for having the "charm of reality" and *The Chain-bearer* for being "true to human nature," the *Atlantic* went on to state that "everywhere" in Cooper's fiction "we recognize the substantial truth of his pictures" (June 1862, *FCCH* 52–58).

In the decades after the Civil War, however, public responses to Cooper's novels performed a virtual about-face. Instead of verisimilitude, readers found the idealized and the improbable. An article in the *Critic* in 1889 said that the dialogue between Cooper's characters "is frequently stilted or unnatural" and that a marked development in the current "realistic novel has been . . . in a direction far away from Cooper's" (Sept. 18, 1889: 125–26). An article on "Fenimore Cooper's Rank as a Novelist" announced that it is difficult to imagine a "more preposterous plot than that of 'The Pilot' and that "his Indians and his sailors never had their prototypes on sea or land" (*Literary Digest* Mar. 25, 1899: 339). An article on "The Centenary of Fenimore Cooper" contrasted the "outline drawing of Cooper" with the characterizations of "our contemporary realists" and admitted that "we cannot say that Cooper sketched the . . . real sailor in fiction" (*Century Magazine* Sept. 1889: 796–97). Postbellum biographers and literary historians largely agreed with such assessments. In his 1882 biography of Cooper, Thomas Lounsbury explained, "in all of Cooper's novels . . . the incidents are more than improbable, they are impossible." Readers "are continually exasperated . . . by the unnatural if not ridiculous conduct of the characters." A decade and a half later, Henry S. Pancoast's *Introduction to American Literature* berated Cooper's "romances" for "plots [that] are crudely constructed and improbable" and concluded that Cooper "was incapable of presenting human nature."<sup>14</sup>

Of course, the best known and most devastating reading of Cooper as a bumbling, unrealistic romancer came in Mark Twain's 1895 article in the *North American Review*. Leaving little doubt about his view by entitling his essay "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," Twain dismantled *The Deerslayer* for violating eighteen of the "nineteen rules governing literary art," the most comically desolating of which was Cooper's failure to un-

derstand “that the personages in a tale shall be alive, except in the case of corpses, and that the reader shall always be able to tell the corpses from the others” (*FCCCH* 277).<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, some twentieth-century Cooper scholars have sought to rescue him from Twain’s eviscerating satire by claiming, in a move echoing antebellum responses, that Cooper’s novels are, in fact, quite realistic.<sup>16</sup> Yet as James Wallace has pointed out, such defenses may be missing the point in that “the object of Twain’s attack is not Cooper, after all, nor his works. . . . Rather, Twain was attacking the audience that Cooper had created and that inexplicably continued to prefer the novels of Cooper and his literary heirs to those of the realists” of Twain’s own era.<sup>17</sup>

Although hyperbolic in its claim for Cooper’s single-handed creation of his audience, Wallace’s point carries broader significance. Twain and other proponents of postbellum realism not only were seeking to create an audience but were modeling a way for that audience to read for realism—or its absence—in previous fiction as well as in their own. They were, in other words, promoting a particular interpretive agenda that constituted the generic profiles of novels through the way they were read.

In light of such moves, it is not surprising to find similar divergences between antebellum and postbellum responses to Hawthorne’s fiction. As they did with Cooper, antebellum commentators repeatedly pointed to the historical accuracy and vraisemblance of Hawthorne’s novels. An article in *Church Review*, for example, applauded the *Scarlet Letter* for the manner in which “its scene-painting is in a great degree true to the period of our Colonial history,” while an essay in the *Southern Literary Messenger* claimed that “in developing bravely and justly the sentiment of life it depicts, it is as true to humanity as Dickens.”<sup>18</sup> The *Messenger* review said much the same about the *House of the Seven Gables*, styling it a novel whose “tone and personages . . . are imbued with a local authenticity” so “life-like . . . that they are daguerreotypes in the reader’s mind” (*HCH* 217). With a similar take, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* called the characters in *Seven Gables* “living realities” drawn with such a “genuine expression of flesh and blood, that we can not doubt we have known them” (May 1851, *HCH* 196). Comparable responses greeted the *Blithedale Romance* and the *Marble Faun* in the 1850s in such maga-

zines as the *Christian Examiner*, *Graham's*, *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>19</sup>

Despite such responses, after the Civil War Hawthorne's novels frequently became a point of contrast for characterizing postbellum realistic fiction. As early as 1869, an article in the San Francisco based *Overland Monthly* complained that Hawthorne "never presents what we commonly call a natural character" (Feb. 1869, *HCH* 455), a view echoed a year later by the *Southern Review*, which concluded that Hawthorne "did not depict . . . nor even conceive of men or women as such, but only certain attributes" garbed in "shadowy, unreal" forms (Apr. 1870, *HCH* 465). Such responses continued through the 1870s, during which time the *Springfield Republican*, claiming to quote one of Hawthorne's friends, said, "His characters are not drawn from life."<sup>20</sup> In the same decade an article in the *North American Review*, locating Hawthorne's unique "genius" in anything but realistic fiction, affirmed that "in no American writer is to be found the same preponderance of weird imagination as in Hawthorne" (Sept. 1879, *HCH* 515). It was, of course, Henry James who most markedly and repeatedly identified Hawthorne as the consummate romancer—an interpretive formulation by which James could position Hawthorne as a central figure in a developing American literary canon, while simultaneously using Hawthorne's fiction as a counterpoint to define his own realistic methods. That dual purpose is most evident in his 1879 book on Hawthorne. There James praises the *Scarlet Letter* as one of the finest American novels ever produced only to then explain that its "historical coloring is rather weak than otherwise; there is little of the modern realism of research." Concluding that "the faults of the book are, to my sense, a want of reality," James likewise finds that the "fault" of the *Marble Faun* "is that the element of the unreal is pushed too far." Again and again James locates "the absence of the realistic quality" as the distinguishing feature of Hawthorne's fiction. As if seeking to give his point the force of a finely filed blade, James asserts, "It cannot be too often repeated that Hawthorne was not a realist."<sup>21</sup> Clearly, the Hawthorne of James and other postbellum readers is a very different Hawthorne from the one antebellum reviewers saw.

If these shifts were limited to the reception of Hawthorne and Cooper in nineteenth-century America, it might be possible to dismiss them as

aberrations or at least bracket them as exceptions that prove the rule. But they were neither. The reconceptualizations of Cooper and Hawthorne, which transformed the verisimilitude of their novels into romantic improbabilities and idealizations, marked postbellum responses to Melville and other fiction writers. *Typee* and *Omoo*, which antebellum reviewers profiled as “romances of real life,” became for an *Atlantic* commentator in 1892 simply “romance[s] of the South Sea Islands” (Apr. 1892: 499), comparable, in the words of the *Springfield Republican* to “the vivacious ventures of Robert Louis Stevenson, whose scenes are laid in the same region of ‘lotus eating.’”<sup>22</sup> It mattered little that antebellum readers had found *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* brimming with verisimilitude or that others had felt *Moby-Dick* to be grounded in the true-to-life details of the whaling industry. Rare postbellum comments on Melville’s novels after *Omoo* simply noted that in reading them we feel that “everything about us is wonderful, is marvelous . . . but nothing is tangible, real” (*New York Mail and Express* Oct. 8, 1891, MCH 424). Rebecca Harding Davis’s fiction experienced a similar fate. Although “Life in the Iron Mills,” as Glazener points out, had “drawn praise for its verisimilitude” when it appeared in the *Atlantic* in 1861, James would later dismiss it and her other stories as “all disfigured by injudicious straining . . . which leaves nature and reality at an infinite distance behind and beside them.”<sup>23</sup> And then there was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the changing status of which was epitomized in an article in the *Critic* from 1886: “Not long ago ‘Romola’ and ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ were offered . . . as instances showing the highest power of realism; but Mrs. Stowe’s great story is a picture of slavery idealized down to the lowest terms, not of slavery as it really was. . . . The ‘imaginative lift’ is the dark romance of Uncle Tom” (July 10, 1886: 20).

These genre reclassifications were not limited to responses to fiction written by Americans. Also reread as part of the shifting conceptualizations of realistic fiction were British authors such as Dickens and Scott. Like some of his American counterparts, but even more strongly, Dickens was regularly identified by antebellum American reviewers as a writer whose novels were marked by truth to nature and verisimilitude, particularly in their lifelike characters. As early as 1867, however, Dickens started to be read quite differently via genre distinctions. An article on “The Genius of Dickens” in the *Atlantic Monthly* admitted that Dickens did, indeed, draw on observations for his materials but added, “he always

modifies these materials, and often works them up into the most fantastic shapes." Instead of realism, this reader found "a strong infusion of the melodramatic element" in *Oliver Twist* and *Barnaby Rudge* (May 1867: 549–50). By the 1870s, American journalists, with those from the *Atlantic* leading the way, were regularly labeling Dickens's novels as "specially wanting in that power of real characterization" and locating the fault in his narrative method.<sup>24</sup> According to an article on the "Growth of the Novel," "in proportion as the novelist intervenes, visibly, between the reader and the characters of his story, he detracts from the realness of the latter." Because such intrusive narration "is a prominent defect in Dickens," his fiction "never seems to have clearly taken the direction of clearly outlined truth of character" (*Atlantic* June 1874: 688–89). Howells and James were especially critical of what they saw as Dickens's tendency toward the melodramatic, the fantastic, and the unnatural. In a review of John Forster's *Life of Dickens*, Howells underscored Dickens's "failure" as a novelist owing to "the unnaturalness of his situations" and "the crudity of his treatment of characters" in "his romances" (*Atlantic* Feb. 1873, *DCH* 580–81). By the close of the century, Dickens's novels had been so redefined as the virtual polar opposite of realism that Howells could unabashedly identify Dickens as a "romanticist" and James could rhetorically ask, "Who could pretend that Dickens was anything but a romantic?"<sup>25</sup>

Scott provides an even more telling index of such rereadings because his fictions came to embody for some postbellum proponents of realism a particularly pejorative influence on American fiction. Before the Civil War, Scott, like Hawthorne, had been repeatedly described as a romancer whose novels were, nonetheless, true to life. A review of *Rob Roy* in the *North American* averred that Scott's historical fictions are "supported in some measure by fact, and all are faithful sketches of society and nature at different periods. . . . They have the truth, . . . for men here are grouped and at work, very much as they are in life."<sup>26</sup> As late as 1858, a review of the *Waverley Novels* in the *Atlantic* was claiming that Scott "has succeeded in domesticating his creations in the general heart and brain, and thus obtained the endorsement of human nature as evidence of their genuineness. His characters are the friends and acquaintances of everybody . . . as though they were natural beings" (May 1858: 889). But after the war, Scott's novels came to stand for everything that was wrong with

fiction in the first half of the century. Twain was the most strident here, lamenting that American fiction “forty years ago” was “filled with wordy, windy, flowery, ‘eloquence,’ romanticism, sentimentality—all imitated from Sir Walter, and sufficiently badly done too.”<sup>27</sup> Howells could be almost as caustic, claiming that “the art of fiction . . . declined . . . through Scott,” who made his characters “talk as seldom man and never women talked,” which turned them into “stage players” straight out of “melodrama” and devoid of “verity.”<sup>28</sup>

For some, the damage Scott had done extended beyond literature. Twain, of course, went so far as to blame Scott for the delusions of Southern chivalry, which Twain believed had helped foment the Civil War, but Hjalmer Boyesen saw the effects as a contemporary threat to American democracy. In an article on “The Great Realists and the Empty Story-Tellers,” Boyesen warned that the “romantic fiction” of “Sir Walter Scott and his successors” was contributing to the promotion of the “recent aristocratic development in the United States, with its truly medieval inequality between the classes” (*Forum* Feb. 1895: 730). Through such remarks the postbellum response to Scott became tied to questions of national well-being in a way that enabled defenders of realism to define American fiction after the Civil War as more true to life, more mature, and more egalitarian.

It might be argued at this point that there is nothing particularly troubling in these postbellum rereadings of Scott, Cooper, Dickens, Melville, Hawthorne, Stowe, and Davis, that they can be explained within the romance-to-realism paradigm or at least at the juncture of that paradigm and reception criticism. That is, postbellum reviewers and fiction writers were simply responding to what was there all along in the texts of these earlier writers but had simply been invisible to the strategies of antebellum informed reading. In this logic, the interpretive formulations of postbellum realists were made possible by a more accurate and precise sense of what realism was, what texts had it, and thus which ones belonged to that genre.

Besides the dubious textual essentialism of such a claim, however, two historically specific problems tax its viability. As Bell has pointed out, “it is pretty much a truism that late nineteenth-century discussions of ‘realism’ . . . were far from rigorous and generally rather slipshod.”<sup>29</sup> Even more troubling are the numerous disputes and variations that marked

postbellum attempts to define the generic profile of a particular text or a particular writer's oeuvre. Nowhere is this phenomenon more striking than in the substantial interpretive disagreements over the genre profiles of fiction by writers (both American and European) who were often taken as practitioners of the new realism. For instance, to Howells, Ivan Turgenev was an exemplary realist, but James spoke of that "author's closely commingled realism and idealism."<sup>30</sup> Among continental authors, Emile Zola received the most variform responses in terms of genre placement. On the one hand, some maintained, in the words of the *Overland Monthly*, that "Zola . . . writes realism in large letters" (May 1889: 510). According to an article on "Further Aspects of Realism" in the *Dial*, Zola was a realist because he was an empiricist, and "the method of realism is on the whole the empirical method" (Mar. 16, 1893: 171). For some, the honesty of his gritty depictions of the brutal side of everyday life earned him that status. For others, however, such grittiness was a mark not of realism but of its failure, since, according to a *North American Review* article on "Profligacy in Fiction," the "seamy side of things is no more real than the other, and its delineation no more 'realistic'" (July 1880: 82). Extending this logic, a review of *Nana* in the *Atlantic* claimed that Zola "exhibits most unscientific inexactness in overlooking . . . whatever is honorable in humane nature." Hence, he is not a realist but simply "vulgar" (May 1880: 696-97). Indeed, for some, such vulgarity stamped Zola as, more than anything else, a disreputable purveyor of sensational romances. As an article on "The Decadence of Romance" put it in a far-rago of terminology, "Romance, finding little romance in the real world, has taken two different lines in the desperate effort to amuse us somehow. . . . The disreputable line is Zolaesque beastiality, and forced, unreal, unlovely hysterical sensationalism" (Apr. 1893: 222). Though more tolerant of the "indecent" and the "disgusting" in Zola's fiction, Howells could nevertheless announce that "Zola was never a realist in the right sense" because "the fever of romanticism is in his blood; the taint is in his work."<sup>31</sup> Seizing on these conflicting interpretations of the genre of Zola's fiction, Frank Norris used them to promote his own agenda by claiming that the Frenchman's novels combine the "accuracy" of realism and the "truth" of romance to yield a new, preeminent form of fiction: the naturalist novel.<sup>32</sup>

When it came to determining the genre profiles of postbellum Ameri-

can writers, the same kind of interpretive variation obtained. Consider the case of Twain. Although he was repeatedly called a writer whose stories were authentic and “vividly realistic,” and as Huck Finn put it, “told the truth mainly,” the labels “romance” and “romantic” were also invoked in postbellum remarks on his novels.<sup>33</sup> Howells identified *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* as a “romance” and by 1900 was quite willing to style Twain “our greatest romancer.”<sup>34</sup> Nor was Howells alone in applying that genre epithet to Twain’s fiction. An *Atlantic* reviewer labeled *Prince and the Pauper* a “novelty in romance” (Dec. 1881, *MTCR* 200), an interpretation echoed by the *New York Tribune* and the *Boston Herald* (*MTCR* 215). The *Saturday Review* termed *Huckleberry Finn* a novel from which “the boy of today may get his fill of fun and romance” (Jan. 1895, *MTCR* 260); *Connecticut Yankee* earned the moniker of “romantic tale” from the *Utica Herald* (Dec. 1889, *MTCR* 285) and the *Keokuk (Iowa) Constitution-Democrat* (Feb. 21, 1890, *MTCR* 314), and the *Hartford Times* blithely announced that, on the whole, “probability, inherent and extraneous, is as soon to be looked for in Mr. Twain’s stories as in the *Arabian Nights* (Feb. 1895, *MTCR* 370).

A similar variation in generic profiling marked the postbellum reception of Henry James’s novels. In his responses, Howells epitomized that divergence, calling James a realist revolutionary in an 1882 *Century Magazine* essay but then going on in the same piece to declare, “Mr. James stands at the dividing way of the novel and the romance, and I am sometimes sorry that he declared even superficially for the former. His best efforts seem to me those of romance.”<sup>35</sup> An essay on American literature in the “First Century of the Republic” in *Harper’s* grouped James with Melville, William Gilmore Simms, and Louisa May Alcott as “writers of romantic narratives” (Mar. 1876: 529), and a reviewer of *Portrait of a Lady* in the *Atlantic*, though not invoking a label, made clear what genre he believed James’s fiction fit by complaining that, while his “people walk, and sit, and talk,” they “are not bodily shapes, for the most part, but embodied spirits,” whose artificiality makes a reader feel that he is watching them “upon a stage” (Jan. 1882: 128).

Perhaps surprisingly, the novels of even that ostensible arch realist, Howells himself, earned similar characterizations. In a letter to Howells, James remarked, almost in a cautionary manner, that while “I regard you as the great American naturalist . . . you are haunted with romantic

phantoms.”<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, an article in the *Critic* entitled “The Analysts Analyzed” asked, “Is Mr. Howells a realist to the total exclusion of the romantic element of art?” But instead of claiming that Howells’s novels were a generic hybrid, the analyzer took the dean to task as a poser, announcing that, in actuality, “Romance *disguised* as realism . . . constitutes a large part . . . of Mr. Howells’s fiction” (July 10, 1886: 21, my emphasis).

Taken together, these widely divergent responses to both antebellum and postbellum fiction call into question the idea that nineteenth-century America witnessed a marked shift in genre forms that depended on a correct way of seeing what realism actually entailed. That is, it was not a matter of postbellum readers and writers developing a set of reading strategies that enabled them to determine accurately the genre profile of any fictional text as romance, realism, naturalism, or sentimentalism, based on its intrinsic qualities. But what, then, was going on? In light of such variations, we might be inclined to evoke a different formalist—or, more accurately, textualist—explanation: what Jacques Derrida called the “law of genre.” According to Derrida, “a text cannot belong to no genre” under that law, which also says that “genres are not to be mixed.” But “within the heart of the law itself” lurks “a law of impurity or principle of contamination . . . decomposing, perversions,” which turns every text into a generic melange that “never amounts to belonging.”<sup>37</sup> As enticing as this deconstructive principle is, there are, however, several problems with it. In continuing to attribute generic features—or what might be called generic heteroglossia—to texts themselves, it subscribes to a problematic textual essentialism that historical hermeneutic theory severely questions. Moreover, by treating all texts as inherently multi-generic, the poststructuralist law of genre divorces genre from the contextually specific, historically changing ways texts are interpreted within shifting conceptions of genre categories. Consequently, such a move severs the analysis of genre from other poststructuralist positions relevant to questions about genre and their relations to reading and interpretive practices.

Those questions are precisely the ones Tony Bennett and John Frow have taken up and addressed in offering a more historically informed conception of genre. Bennett has argued that genres are not so much entities as they are “definitions” that engage in “the tracing of boundaries rather

than the discovery of an essence." As part of that tracing, "a text's generic belongingness . . . is determined not by its semiotic properties but by its uptake in particular reading practices." Because such uptake operates through "culturally specific knowledges, associations and assumptions which inform and animate particular reading practices," particular genre categories and "genre distinctions which are operative in one society may not be so in another, with the consequence that the same text may be subject to different genre classifications in different social and historical contexts."<sup>38</sup> Frow has made a similar point in his recent book-length study of the nature of genre. Unlike "traditional genre theory," which "turns genre into something really existent," Frow's position identifies genres as interpretive heuristics or protocols that "systematically form the objects of which they speak." In other words, "genre is not a *property* of a text but is a function of reading"; it "is the category we [as readers] impute to texts, and under different circumstances this imputation may change." Reconceptualizing genre as a function of reception, Frow argues that "in dealing with questions of genre, our concerns should not be with matters of taxonomy ('which classes and subclasses are there? To which class does this text belong?') . . . but rather with questions of use: 'What models of classification are there, and how have people made use of them in particular circumstances?'"<sup>39</sup>

What are the consequences of such a reception-oriented view of genre for the romance-to-realism paradigm? Conjoined with the kaleidoscopic whirls in nineteenth-century American claims about the generic profiles of specific fictional texts and their authors, a reception-based conception of genre lets us see the postbellum era as one marked by a shift not so much in genre forms as in reading formations. Let me make clear here that to reconceptualize the romance-to-realism paradigm in this way is not to claim that there was not a realist movement or that writers such as Howells, James, Chopin, Jewett, Twain, and others did not believe that they were writing realistic fiction. A realist agenda did develop after the Civil War, but at its core were public patterns of reading by reviewers, essayists, and fiction writers such as Howells, James, Twain, and Norris, who sought for various reasons to pull the puppet strings of that agenda by reshaping the interpretive practices of magazine- and fiction-reading audiences. Such a view of the postbellum "rise of realism" offers an important reconceptualization of the history of nineteenth-century Ameri-

can fiction by incorporating changing reading and interpretive strategies as a central, contouring component of that history.<sup>40</sup>

To speak of this as a “change” may, however, be the wrong word because postbellum reading for realism constituted less a rupture with antebellum strategies of informed reading and more of a redeployment of many of those interpretive codes. These included identifying a text as true to life and realistic if it privileged—or more precisely, was read as privileging—character over plot; employed a geographically specific setting; possessed authenticity of historical representation and a recognizable typicality in its characters; and avoided narrative intrusion by showing rather than telling.<sup>41</sup> It is just that these and other assumptions were given a new emphasis and redeployed for purposes that fit the realist agenda. For instance, as Bell and Glazener have explained, a primary function of privileging such elements after the Civil War involved gender identifications, since such elements were repeatedly singled out as markers of authentic, masculine writing as opposed to effeminate artistry and feminine romance.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, in the 1870s and after, realism and the realistic went from being a trait defining particular elements of a work of fiction (and thus interpretable as *vraisemblance*, naturalness, or truth to life), as was the case in the antebellum era, to being a mark of a text’s defining generic status and of authorial identity, as manifested in one’s overall practice as a fiction writer.

If we ask why these alterations and redeployments developed in the 1870s and after, several answers are possible. One was the changing literary marketplace after the Civil War, which witnessed the professionalization of reviewing in the United States and a backlash by male writers against what they saw as the excessive dominance of women in the production of fiction. Other factors were the sobering effect of the war, the struggles of Reconstruction, and the acceleration of urbanization, industrialization, and national expansion (along with regional differentiations) that followed the war. That is, many of the same economic, political, and cultural developments that literary historians have identified in the traditional narrative about the rise of realism as a genre form could be cited as factors in the rise of the realist agenda as an historically altered interpretive formation.

An exploration of this complex subject of causes would, like a detailed discussion of the strategies of this formation, be impossible in—and in

fact, extraneous to—a comparatively brief final chapter of a book about the reception of antebellum fiction and informed reading. Instead, in the remainder of this chapter, I want to return to the problem about historical hermeneutics that I raised in chapter 1.

Among the criticisms that have been leveled against response and reception study, the most problematic has been the charge that it is incoherent or self-contradictory. While reception *theory*—particularly in the version that I have called historical hermeneutics—calls into question positivist and essentialist assumptions of intrinsic textual essences and attributes structures and meaning not to texts themselves or to authorial intentions but to historically specific responses within particular interpretive formations, reception *practice* examines evidence of those responses that are encoded “in” texts as their authors’ (i.e., the readers’) intended meanings. Seeking to counter essentialist claims about what texts supposedly say and do, reception study turns out to be, in Dominick LaCapra’s words, a “neopositivistic . . . return to a narrowly documentary mode of knowledge” that is not on all fours with its own principles.<sup>43</sup> Such a critique raises, in effect, a question about historical hermeneutics that might be phrased as follows: How does it account for the authority, the accuracy, the veridicality of its historical analysis of reception practices in the face of its anti-essentialist claim that texts are not ontological essences but the creations of interpretations? To put the query another way, are not its historical accounts of interpretive activity trapped in the hermeneutical circle—or more accurately, in the infinite regress of historically specific acts of interpretation?

The issues raised here, we should recognize, are not unique either to reception study in general or historical hermeneutics in particular. Rather, they are a specific version of a larger question historians have been grappling with in the face of what has been called the “linguistic turn” in historiographical theory—that is, the issue of the status and nature of history and historical inquiry in the wake of poststructuralist theory.<sup>44</sup> In that wake, it is no longer possible to invoke history as an authoritative register that provides an unmediated pathway to knowledge. Derrida’s oft-cited assertion that there is nothing outside textuality, that all is constructed discourse, has led to the recognition—to use the formulation that has become the virtual calling card of New Historicism—that all history is itself textual and all textuality, including that of historical

practice, is historical. Since history is what the present seeks to make of the past, Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, among others, have called this formulation the “interpretive turn” in history—a turn that, as Mary Fulbrook has pointed out, “indicates that historical interpretations are essentially constructions in the present, not—as traditional historians would claim—reconstructions of the past.” The interpretive nature of history extends even to supposed historical “facts,” in that the doing of history, as Hayden White has observed, “hinges on conceptions of membership in communities” that “control . . . not only ‘what are the facts’ but also and most important ‘what counts as a fact.’”<sup>45</sup> To do history is thus already to be embedded within a system of interpretive strategies that constitute the thing they purport to describe.

Despite such a recognition, however, historians have disagreed about its consequences for historical practice. Michel de Certeau has asserted that the linguistic/interpretive turn in historiography has “transformed the search for meaning unveiled in objective reality into an analysis of the options or organizations of meaning implied in interpretive operations.”<sup>46</sup> More frequently, other historians, including LaCapra and Keith Windschuttle, have asserted that poststructuralism has created a “crisis in history” that some have lamented because, in Windschuttle’s words, it is “murdering our past.”<sup>47</sup> Others have pointed out that this crisis is hardly a fault of poststructuralism, since the problems it raises have their own history reaching back to the 1930s relativist arguments of Carl Becker and Charles Beard, which themselves developed in part out of the “crisis in history” that had been materializing in Europe since the late nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> That pedigree, however, hardly alters the fact that poststructuralist theory has given strong pause to the assumption that a turn to history can provide an avenue out of the regress of interpretation or a space outside presentism. In light of that recognition, we are left with the question of what kinds of claims history can legitimately make and what justifies the continuation of historical practice. Or, to ask the question differently, why bother to do history—and more specifically, a historical version of response-and-reception study—in the first place?

One answer is that despite poststructuralist theory, histories continue to be produced. That is, as several historians have pointed out, despite the linguistic/interpretive turn in historiographical theory, in practice historians continue to make claims about the past as an entity that can

be discovered and described. Hans Kellner, for instance, has observed that, while it “is difficult to find any proponents of naive realism in historical practice,” who believe histories can “present the past as it actually was, . . . historians just as routinely behave as though their research were into the past, as though their writing were ‘about’ it, and as though ‘it’ were as real as the text which is the object of their labors.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as Nancy Partner notes, the linguistic/interpretive turn in historiography seems to have been a “revolving door” through which “everyone went around and around and got out exactly where they got in. For all the sophistication of the theory-saturated part of the profession, . . . [t]he theoretical destabilization of history achieved by language-based modes of criticism has had no practical effect on academic practice because . . . all historians—Marxist, feminist, old historicist, new historicist, empiricist—still speak the same basic language of evidentiary syntax, logical grammar, and referential semantics.”<sup>50</sup> Though the claim that poststructuralism has had absolutely no impact on historical practice is questionable, it is clear that even those who have approached the question of history through poststructuralist theory have continued to make historical claims. Hence, even as he deconstructed history, Derrida could assert that “the history of the West, is the history of . . . metaphors and metonomies.”<sup>51</sup> Likewise, Hayden White could produce poststructuralist metahistories of historical discourse by making referential assertions about that discourse. We can find the same thing in the writings of the New Historicists, from Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose to Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease.

What all these instances provide are concrete manifestations of a theoretical point Stanley Fish articulated two decades ago when commenting on the New Historicists and the warrant for historical inquiry itself. According to Fish, the fact that history is an interpretation all the way down does not preclude our ability to ask and answer the question “What happened?” because the principle of “‘wall to wall’ textuality”—and the constructed status of all historical facts—operates on a metacritical level that is different from the level on which questions about historical occurrences are answered. Consequently, the metacritical principle of historical constructedness can have no practical consequences for historical practice.<sup>52</sup>

Fish’s argument is, of course, a version of the theoretical “against

theory” position, but a version that does not deny the power of theory by undermining its claim to govern practice from the outside. Instead, Fish claims that theory is so powerful that it must be declared irrelevant if investigation of the past is to proceed. Such an argument is not only functionally attractive; it is also reasonably convincing, particularly in its claim that no matter how much we may believe in the constructedness of all historical interpretations and all historical facts as products of particular contextual conditions, the knowledge produced by those interpretations remains cogent for us as long as those particular conditions are not challenged. Furthermore, even when such a challenge occurs, “the result will not be an indeterminacy of fact, but a new shape of factual firmness underwritten by a newly, if temporarily, settled perspective.”<sup>53</sup> What is unsatisfying about Fish’s argument is the claim that the principle of historical constructedness has no consequences for practice. The danger of such a position is that it becomes a warrant for doing business as usual without concern for the theoretical implications of the way practice is pursued. Its implacable differentiation between theory and practice also ignores the fact that practice is always informed by a set of assumptions that function as theory. The interconnections between theory and practice, along with the recognition that our histories are inherently interpretive and textual—and thus inevitably the products of our own contemporary perspectives—leads, however, back to the question of why do history at all.

Several answers are possible. One is to recognize that the constructed nature of history is perhaps less a liability than a strength. Here a remark by Raymond Williams is relevant. In the *Long Revolution*, Williams pointed out that “we tend to underestimate the extent to which the cultural tradition” and our collective sense of the cultures of the past are “not only a selection but an interpretation. We see most past work through our own experience, without even making the effort to see it through the original terms. What analysis can do is . . . to make the interpretation conscious” by creating “historical alternatives; to relate the interpretation”—both our own and that constructed in the past—“to the particular contemporary values on which it rests.”<sup>54</sup> The value of such analysis lies in its potential to defamiliarize our own ways of reading, through alternatives that constitute an otherness by which we can test and redefine our relation to texts from the past.

Such a claim, it seems to me, is especially attractive because it suggests that there is something supreme about invoking history to study interpretation. In fact, in addressing the question of the warrant for and value of the historical study of reception a number of years ago, I made precisely that claim while arguing that, whether we realize it or not, we cannot avoid constructing texts and producing readings from within a historically particular interpretive formation. But in light of that recognition, I asserted, what makes historical reception study a superior activity is that it deliberately incorporates that principle as part of its analytical practice. By this logic, accepting the metacritical principle of the historicity of textuality makes the investigation of response as an historical activity our most viable critical strategy. I no longer, however, find this claim tenable, primarily because it asserts as fact what is itself an interpretation formed within a particular reading formation—that of historical hermeneutics itself. That is, such a defense now strikes me as tautological, since it enlists its own position to justify that position.

I want, therefore, to offer a different answer by arguing that historical hermeneutics provides not a superior form of analysis but a form that is valuable in its own right because of the distinctive advantages it holds. More specifically, historical hermeneutics has the virtue of demonstrating, both by what it says about the past and in its own practice, the contextual and historically specific conditions of reading, response, and interpretation—a situation that applies to the method's own claims as historically conditioned acts of historiographical interpretation. From this angle, reception study in general and historical hermeneutics in particular could be said not to reveal—or claim to reveal—the past as an unmediated thing in itself, but to stage versions of the past via representations of how reading and interpretation may be said to have transpired. The value of such historical representations is that they offer us a different way of seeing the past and of seeing reading as contextual interpretive encounters—a way that is distinct from what other theoretical perspectives and critical practices offer. In this sense, the value and justification of historical hermeneutics resides in its utility as a unique method that takes into account and focuses on the centrality of response and reception as historically specific components of the way texts work on readers by virtue of the work readers do on texts.

Such work is valuable, in part, because thinking—and interpreting—

historically is unavoidable. That is, “historical consciousness,” as Fulbrook reminds us, “is not a choice; it is an inevitable part of the human condition,” because we “act, as human beings, in the knowledge or perception of what we think has gone before and in the light of what we think of it. We inhabit human worlds which are intrinsically suffused with a sense of history and a placement within webs of historical significance.”<sup>55</sup> Recognizing the unavoidable historical dimension of our consciousness also means recognizing that the historical study of reception can function as a discourse of intervention for understanding ourselves as subjects embedded in our own histories.

In that sense, Frederick Jameson’s well-known injunction to “always historicize” can be seen less as a call to action than as a *fait accompli*. As readers and discourse users we always already historicize because we cannot escape our own historical embeddedness. The question, then, is not whether we *will* historicize but whether we do so rigorously and self-consciously—whether we approach the historicity of reading, response, and reception in a way that seeks to address the manner in which that history includes our own practices as historical readers. Such a potential is what historical hermeneutics offers in that, unlike the unacknowledged, muffled presentism of response and reception criticism of the last quarter of the twentieth century—as well as much of the scholarship over the last two decades in the history of reading—a theoretically informed historical hermeneutics has the capacity to enhance our awareness of our present and of our presence as interpreters of our own constructed histories.

What such self-conscious reflection might consist of can be neither proscribed nor prescribed. It might take the form, as it has in the last several paragraphs of this chapter, of seeking to unpack the theoretical premises and problematics that underscore and constitute a particular method, such as historical hermeneutics. Or it might involve an analysis of otherwise unacknowledged dimensions of the strategies of a practice, its rhetorical moves, and its hidden assumptions. For example, for this study I might point out that I can now see each of my four case-study chapters as having a shape that I did not intend nor one that I recognized until I had written all four, in that each tells a common story. That is, the chapters on the antebellum receptions of Poe, Melville, Sedgwick, and Chesebro’ offer narratives colored by repeated failures, disappointments,

and frustration in those four writers' relationships with their contemporary readerships. I might also point out that this feature of these chapters may be an unacknowledged function of my own sense of the unavoidable nature of author-audience relations—specifically, that writers can never shape, yet alone control, those relations and that as a result they will always involve interpretive disruptions and authorial failures.

I could continue such analysis by invoking White's four-fold modal and topological model to describe my four histories of antebellum reception as ironic narratives emplotted as tragedies. Or I might acknowledge that my entire approach has been driven not only by my belief in the centrality of interpretation and reading to nearly everything we do but also by my desire—professional and personal—to construct something new and to re-cognize something not previously seen, a desire rooted at once in private satisfaction, disciplinary conventions, professional and institutional expectations, and a sincere commitment to the goal of creating new knowledge. Ultimately, however, whatever form my and other self-conscious gestures might take, they will always consist of a further interpretation that must itself be interpreted by other readers, whose readings of readings of (my) readings must themselves be interpreted as historically specific ways of interpretation.

To make this point is not to claim some timeless longevity for this study or for historical hermeneutics as a practice. It is, instead, to offer one final reminder that reading and response—including our own interpretations of our own interpretive premises and practices—are historically constituted activities and that historical approaches to the hermeneutical practices of reception mark out analytical pathways that criticism and scholarship can ill afford to ignore—or even avoid.