Novels, Readers, and Reviewers
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The reader was an aspect of the novel's form, to these reviewers, because among literary genres the novel conformed most immediately to the shape of a human emotional experience: the action that structured the plot and the characters who carried it out interested, attracted, stimulated, intrigued, intensified, and finally satisfied such basic human drives as curiosity, affection, dislike, hope, and fear. Because works that called out these basic emotions were fun to read, people went out and bought them. The reader in the text of the nineteenth-century novel is a real person who buys novels and likes to read and own them. Reviewers frequently conclude reviews by advising a reader to "purchase" the novel; a pleasant physical appearance—a handsome cover, good paper, nice print—and a reasonable price frequently figure as elements in a positive review, especially in the women's magazines.

The reader was not in the text as constructor of meanings, interpreter of value systems, or supplier of bridges over gaps in signification. These concepts of reader behavior lay far in the future, and they imply a profoundly different kind of activity from that assumed in nineteenth-century reviewing. For one thing, our current academic theoretical concepts of reading do not imagine it as pleasurable. It is not merely that the construction of meaning is an "academic" activity, it is even more that the concepts of reading in use today do not imagine anybody voluntarily purchasing the books she or he reads. The kind of novels that are still bought and read for pleasure are not considered worthwhile—indeed, one aim of the college literature teacher (like that
of some nineteenth-century reviewers) is to improve taste, to detach students from preferences for inferior works of fiction; accordingly, the activity of reading for simple pleasure receives no weight in literary-academic descriptions of reading or the reader. That this should be the fate of the novel is particularly ironic, since the reason so much contemporary critical activity centers on novels to the exclusion of other genres is precisely that, historically, the genre crowded out the others by virtue of its powerful emotional appeal.

A second important point in which the reader-concept of today's academy differs from the reader-concept of these nineteenth-century reviews is that the activity of reading was seen to take place at a much higher level of organization than the meaning-construal basis of most postmodernist criticism, including structuralist, reader-response, and deconstructive. That is, these modern theories locate the reader activity at the level of getting meanings out of individual lexical units, in understanding language at no more than the level of the sentence. Attempts to go beyond the sentence do not work very well because at least one and possibly several hierarchical layers, with their own organizational rules, have intervened. The reader in nineteenth-century novel reviews is thought to be responding to a very high level of the structure rather than to the lowest level. And of course you must be responding at a high level if, as a reader, your experience is controlled by the knowledge or expectation that the work you take up is in fact a novel and not another literary mode. If you ground your theory in the lexical or sentence level, that is, you cannot distinguish a novel from any other literary form, and indeed you have a theoretical apparatus to prove that such distinctions are untenable, regardless of what people do or say.

The classroom teacher who has not yet absorbed, or who has decided to resist, today's advanced theoretical approaches usually conceives of her or his activity as helping students learn how to get the themes out of novels; themes are taken to make the novel worthwhile, and finding them makes reading a worthwhile activity. The classroom teacher, then, is a clear descendant of those nineteenth-century reviewers who were engaged in the campaign to improve fiction. But there is one striking, perhaps all-important difference—that while nineteenth-century reviewers discriminated worthwhile from worthless fiction on the grounds of
moral content (which we now call theme), they did not think of reading novels as the process of retrieving such content from the work. The promise of retrieving a moral meaning from a novel could never explain the novel’s appeal—even the appeal of better fiction.

This view of reading holds whether or not the nineteenth-century reviewer was an academic (though few were). Of course, contemporary novels were never taught in the college classroom in those days. Reviewers today who write for the popular press retain much more interest in such aspects of the novel as story, character, and excitement than professors do, so that the contemporary discourse about novels is partitioned. The rather striking hostility toward the literary academy expressed in popular novel reviews and by many successful practicing novelists as well may be a reaction precisely to the methods by which novels are taught (and hence constituted for students) in the classroom. Other novelists, of course, depend on the explications of professors (and the sales to students) for what currency they have. But the results of professorial explications, ingenious as they are, all too often produce students who, believing that novels exist to embody hidden moral messages, will never read one after graduation.

No matter what kind of novel the nineteenth-century reviewer liked best, she or he invariably assumed two things. First, novels were read because they were novels and not something else. Second, novels were constituted as such by their character as invented stories of a certain length, narrated in prose. No narrative in verse, and no unnarrated story (like a play), qualified as a novel. And a minimum length, though never specified, was required if a work was to be acceptable as a novel. These limiting conditions follow from the understanding that narrated plot is the formal essence of the novel. An author choosing verse as the medium signaled to the reader that beauty of diction, splendor of imagery, and elevation of sentiment—in a word, matters of style and thought—were to receive more attention than in a novel. An author choosing the drama form signaled, of course, the absence of narration. The tale and “nouvelle” belonged to the same family as the novel, as house cats and lions are related, but their brevity necessarily involved radically simplified plot structure. Tales were more commonly associated with unplotted sketches; the two types often appeared in a single volume and were
thought of in the same terms, because plot requirements were less stringent in shorter forms.

It is impossible, because the point is iterated so often, to overlook the assumption that plot was inseparable from the idea of the novel in these reviews. One sees it in the North American for July 1822 as an issue on which there is already consensus, in this commentary on Irving's Bracebridge Hall. "We have no hesitation in pronouncing Bracebridge quite equal to anything, which the present age of English literature has produced in this department. In saying this, we class it in the branch of essay writing. It may, perhaps, be called a novel in disguise; since a series of personages are made the subject or authors of the sketches of life and manners, which it contains, and it is conducted to a wedding, the regular denouement of a novel. The plot, however, is quite subordinate." In a January 1838 review of Cooper, the North American said that for a novel "unity of action is essential; the story must have a beginning, middle, and end. A string of events, connected by no other tie, than the mere fact, that they happened to the same individual, or within a given period of years, may constitute a fictitious history or memoir, but it does not make a novel."

The Mirror, on December 8, 1838, called Cooper's Home as Found "an imposition upon the public, put forth, as it is, in the form of a novel, when it has about as much claim to be ranked under the head as a fourth of July oration, or a book of travels. . . . There is neither plot nor interest in the narrative." A Knickerbocker review in August 1839 of Joseph Holt Ingraham's Lafitte: The Pirate of the Gulf observed that "it is not a novel, proper. There is no regular tendency of incident to a single point; the events are not made to conduct to a general end. Scenes are introduced that do not, in our judgment, seem necessary to the progress or interest of the story." It said that "as a novel proper" Cooper's Home as Found was, "to say nothing of more venial faults, plotless and desultory," and it referred to "the art of the novelist, in the conduct of the story proper" in a review of Afloat and Ashore (September 1848, December 1844). In Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables, it said, "the story is regularly convergent to a denouement, after the manner of a novel proper" (May 1851).

In May 1842 Godey's complained about Cecil and Cecil, a Peer:
“the provoking manner in which the reader is tantalized with the expectation of coming to something like a denouement—something having the elements of consistent action—something like unity and design—is past all endurance. The parts are well enough executed. . . . But as a whole, each of the books is a failure. That learned critic, Dionysius of Helicarnassus, says that a history should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. So should a novel; and we would suggest to the author of Cecil the propriety of taking a few lessons in the art of constructing plots, before he attempts the concoction of another work of fiction.” An Editor’s Table in Godey’s for March 1855 sets out a concise and standard definition: readers are accustomed to apply the term novel “to a series of adventures, having one plot and one interest.” The Literary World for December 16, 1848, borrowing from the Westminster Review, said, “the first and obvious business of the novelist is to tell an amusing or interesting story; this alone is his peculiar province; and if certain gifted minds have embellished and dignified this task with jewels borrowed from the wardrobe of poetry or philosophy, it may perhaps be said that in so doing they have wandered out of their sphere, and ceased to be mere novelists.” It characterized Longfellow’s Kavanagh as “a thread upon which to hang some very pretty pearls, with an occasional sketch or suggestion of character, rather than such elaborate handling as we are accustomed to on the broader canvas of the modern novel” (May 26, 1849) and thought Lady Alice; or, The New Una “a genuine novel, with a plot and a catastrophe” (July 7, 1849). Its issue for November 22, 1851, found the problem with Moby-Dick, as well as “one or two other of Mr. Melville’s books,” to lie in “the double character under which they present themselves. In one light they are romantic fictions, in another statements of absolute facts.”

To the Democratic Review for March 1849, The Prince, by Henry Cockton, was “rather a series of amusing anecdotes than a novel.” Graham’s on Longfellow’s Kavanagh said that “considered as a novel, it must be admitted that the story is but slight, the characters hinted rather than developed, and the whole framework fragile; . . . the purpose . . . was evidently not the production of a consistent novel, but the illustration of an idea through the form of a tale” (July 1849). “As a novel,” it said again of Kingsley’s Westward Ho!, “the events have little connection
with each other, having no other bond than the casual one of the presence of the hero in each” (July 1855). The Tribune, writing on Kimball’s St. Leger, felt that “judging this unique composition by the ordinary rules of novel-writing, most readers would pronounce it barren of incidents, and without a sufficiently developed plot to give it the excitement demanded in a work of the imagination. . . . It is not to be read for the interest of the story” (December 25, 1849). Plot here is identified as a sign of the work’s status as an imaginative (rather than intellectual) product. In Alice Carey’s Married Not Mated, according to the Tribune, “the plot is destitute of consecutive interest. . . . As a collection of sketches, the work merits more cordial approval than as an attempt at connected novel writing” (May 3, 1856). Plot as connective distinguishes the longer from the shorter fictional form, allows for the creation of interest and excitement, and also demands a degree of skill in execution in which claims for the status of novelists as artists can be grounded. On March 24, 1860, the Tribune commented again that Compensation, by Ann M. H. Brewster, was “without ambitious pretensions as a novel—the simple and inartificial character of its plot almost taking it out of all that class of literary productions.” A Putnam’s reviewer wrote that Oakfield, “having for its end an important moral rather than an agreeable narrative, will not elicit the admiration of regular novel readers” (November 1855).

In the Christian Examiner for July 1849, Kavanagh received standard treatment: “those who expected a novel which would illustrate New England character and life have not been gratified. Kavanagh is a sketch, and not properly a rounded and completed story.” Kingsley’s Hypatia was not “properly speaking, a novel; indeed, to an inveterate reader of novels, the plot must seem provokingly simple” (January 1854). In this commentary the reader envisioned is different from the voracious novel devourer described in chapter 2. This is a connoisseur who reads for the exciting story but is also a sophisticated judge of plot artistry. Connoisseurship is based on pleasure; a badly plotted novel will not produce excitement or interest. Attacking Thackeray in May 1856, the Christian Examiner appealed to this sophistication. “We think it questionable whether the popular ‘novelist’ can be called a novelist at all, in the pure, artistic meaning of that term. We do not see any quality, in the quantity he has written, that proves
the ability of composing a thorough novel, properly so called. That class of works . . . must have a carefully arranged opening, development, and winding-up. . . . It must be a whole, with complicated and interlacing parts. . . . A series of events, set in single file upon a highway, with nothing to look at on either side of the road, can hardly be called a novel. . . . Mr. Thackeray is nothing so much as a sketcher.”

A formal distinction between story and plot seldom functioned in this criticism, though on occasion one reads something like this from Arthur’s Home Magazine on Mrs. Moodie’s Mark Hurdlestone: “regarded artistically, it betrays evidences of a hand unaccustomed to novel writing; while, as a story, it is singularly full of interest. The great defect of the work arises from the perfect nonchalance with which the authoress deals with her characters and incidents. Personages who were alive and in famous health to-day, are found killed off tomorrow . . . with far less than the ordinary amount of preparation. . . . We have always hitherto been accustomed to be forewarned. . . . So with the incidents; they are introduced with the same unexpectedness, take place just in the very nick of time, and are always found to be of the kind exactly suited to the wants of the moment” (October 1853). Plot, as distinguished from story, is an arrangement that simultaneously satisfies such formal conventions as foreshadowing and also conceals its artifice. This novelist, failing to understand the relation of artifice and artlessness in a novel, produces a bad plot behind which one can still see an interesting story.

More frequently (as in several extracts above), reviewers used the terms plot and story interchangeably but then discriminated the plot as a well-managed—a good—story. We see this in a Putnam’s comment on Bleak House: “the thing which Dickens has yet to do, is to write a good story. Hitherto he has attained his brilliant successes by the production of novels, which have lacked one of the essential qualities of that species of literary manufacture” (November 1853). And in its claim that neither Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin nor her Dred were “stories, in the proper sense of the term; that is, they have no plot which begins, and develops, and culminates. . . . Both of Mrs. Stowe’s novels are a series of sketches. . . . There is no story, no novel . . . no artistic sequence or unity. As a work of art, therefore, or as a pleasure to mere story readers, Dred is not successful” (Novem-
ber 1856). The assumption of plot’s double function as a source of artistry and of pleasure should be noted. The *Atlantic*, in December 1858, grumbled that in Robert Lowell’s *New Priest in Conception Bay* “a fair proportion of the novel might be called with strict propriety a series of sketches connected by a slight thread of narrative. . . . The faculty of making a well-constructed story, in which every event shall come in naturally, and yet each bring us one step nearer to the journey’s end, is now one of the lost arts of the earth.”

The concept of plot distinguished novels from other literary modes and, within the mode, identified artistic success. It was neither good nor bad for a work to be, or not to be, a novel. Some of the reviewers thought that the formal necessity to feature plot made the novel inferior to such genres as philosophy or poetry. Others thought the prominence of plot made the novel superior to the more desultory sketch or tale. But they were less concerned to arrange modes in a hierarchy than to establish whether a given work belonged to the genre. Such a desire derived partly from the taxonomic enthusiasm that gripped all fields of thinking in the middle of the nineteenth century. It also derived from the desire to make sure that the work was properly—one should note the recurrence of the term “novel proper” in the extracts—approached by readers. If a work signaled itself as a novel and then produced a bad plot, the reviewer was bound to fault it; if a good work of another sort might mistakenly be read as a novel, then it was the reviewer’s job to provide the appropriate context. If the work was understood not to be a novel, then the reader, freed from expectations regarding plot, would be able to appreciate the work on its own terms.

Major authors like Cooper, Dickens, and Thackeray were said on occasion to have written books that were not “proper” novels. Even Sir Walter Scott, acknowledged by most critics to be the founder of the modern novel, did not escape this criticism. “The standing objection to Scott’s novels,” wrote the *North American* in a retrospective on the Waverley novels in April 1831, “is their want of a story consistent in all its parts. . . . We have certain traditional notions of the unity required in a poem or novel, which are regularly insisted on by critics, and as often disregarded by every successful writer.” Given the marginal success of most writers who ignored genre rules and the tremendous
popularity of any number of modestly talented writers who wrote to rule, the *North American* seems wrong here. But it is pointing to the obvious fact that the "great" writer can generally ignore rules or remake genres without suffering. The great writer gets an audience even when breaking rules. Perhaps even by breaking them.

In fact the truly great writer was expected to transcend (not transgress) the limits of genre, and even a lesser, but good writer marked his or her works with traces of individuality. The criterion that enters here is, of course, the nineteenth-century idea of genius, which exists in interesting and productive tension with the idea of genre. On the one hand, that the novel had so few genre requirements made it a particularly suitable form for displays of genius. On the other, the very paucity of formal requirements made reviewers likely to insist strongly that its *one* requirement, a plot-grounded form, be fulfilled if a work was to be thought of as a novel. But again, they did not limit their search for genius to the novel form and did not feel (as critics tend to today) that they first had to call a work a novel before they could allow that it was the product of genius. Thus, identifying boundlessness as the property of genius rather than genre, they could impose definitional boundaries on the novel form without thereby disabling themselves as critics in search of artistic excellence.

If narrated plot defined the form of the novel, plot itself was defined by various formal features: a completed action with beginning, middle, and end. Because it was lengthy, it was complicated; complications meant that the plot did not consist of "a series of events, set in single file upon a highway, with nothing to look at on either side of the road" but was made up of events whose linear relations were not always immediately evident. The mark of a good plot, however, was that ultimately all events were seen to cohere; the denouement gave them significance. The denouement functioned doubly (as so many terms in this discourse do) with respect to the action and the reader, completing the action and satisfying the reader's curiosity.

As the *North American* put it early on in a review of John Galt's *Laurie Todd*, plot was "a concentration of action and incident to [a] particular consummation, at which the interest terminates . . . one series of action, with a uniform tendency, disguised until the denouement explains all" (October 1830). Events in-
teresting in themselves would cease to hold the reader’s interest if they did not somehow, mysteriously, gesture toward a denouement; thus denouement was the final cause, in an Aristotelian sense, of the novel, controlling every aspect of the action as well as of its presentation. The “want of unity” in Bulwer’s *My Novel*, the *Southern Literary Messenger* said, “materially mars the symmetry of that work. We look in vain for that central conception from which all the minutiae should emanate as their source, to which they should tend as their result, and from which they should obtain their vitality” (May 1854). In like manner, the *Christian Examiner* complained of a novel that “there is no intricacy of plot, and no development of plot, and the denouement is not provided for in the elements of the story. Some personages who seemed to promise very well disappear very soon, and others annoy us all along as disagreeable and intrusive. Though spun out to an intolerable length, the story is not finished after all. It stops short just where the interest begins to revive and there are signs of a fascinating complication” (January 1858). In fact, the process of reading a novel, for the nineteenth-century reviewer, is the process of plot construal (rather than meaning or theme construal). And hence the reading experience is inseparable from the form and genre of the work.

“Denouement” and “interest” (and their synonyms) are the two most active critical concepts in discussion of plot; they are terms oriented toward both the text and the reader, denoting the reader’s engagement in plot as well as the plot line itself. Here is a statement of the concept from a discussion of *St. Leger* in *Graham’s*, where the reviewer is distinguishing the German from the Anglo-American novel. German novels, so-called, “have no regular sequence of events—no relation of parts to a whole—no dramatic bearing of character upon character, to produce an ultimate result—no apparent effort to close the story at the very start, which an influx of conflicting circumstances alone prevents, and toward which it ever struggles, overcoming obstacles and softening down discordances, until the end is gained by an unforced blending into one harmonious mass of all the opposing elements of the plot” (April 1850). A critique of *Vanity Fair* from the *Democratic Review* clearly connects interest and denouement, reader and form. Midway through the work “the story becomes dilatory, diffuse, and its loses much of its interest. . . . Laugh as
we may at Aristotle and the classic school, some unity is absolutely necessary to make a plot interesting” (October 1848).

Another good example of the intertwining of closure and interest is this from Putnam’s in April 1854, unfavorably reviewing *The Barclays of Boston* by Mrs. Harrison Gray Otis. “Everything turns out not just as it should be, in a novel, but just as it should not. In these perversities Mrs. Otis has shown a lack of true artistic management of her puppets, for the reasonable anticipation of the reader must not be disappointed in the denouement of the story, or his feeling will be one of disappointment and disgust instead of pleasure. The perplexities of the reader must arise from the developments of the plot, from the unanticipated events which the art of the writer uses to bring about the denouement which all parties anticipated at the outset. In the *Barclays* there is no plot at all, and the surprises are in the denouements which are constantly happening, and destroying the interest which should be felt in the final explosion of the last chapter.” A reviewer in the *Tribune* stated the criterion succinctly: “a deftly constructed plot enchains the reader in a delightful suspense, until the various and apparently conflicting lights of the scene verge toward a common focus in a brilliant denouement” (December 6, 1855).

Examples abound. “It has become quite too common to interpolate a string of unconnected events upon a pre-conceived nucleus, with no bearing on the main plot, but which are introduced for the mere purpose of bringing in characters and conversations, which only serve to distract the attention, and lessen the interest, of the reader” (Knickerbocker, April 1837). From *Graham’s*, approvingly, on *Bleak House*: “the moment we discern the blind way in which so many separate and separated characters are working to one result, we feel a new and more eager interest in the story” (December 1853). From the *Southern Literary Messenger*, on John Esten Cooke’s *Henry St. John, Gentleman*: “the plots of Mr. Cooke’s novels are singularly ill-contrived. He is not wanting in invention . . . but the reader is kept in no state of pleasing and excited doubt, alternating between satisfaction and despair, as to the fate of the heroine” (October 1859).

Reviewers did not often try to uncover the psychological basis of this need for closure that dominated the conception of plot. On June 26, 1858, the *New York Ledger* reprinted a moving explanation of the phenomenon by Charles Kingsley, which it titled
“Novels and Romances.” “A novel,” Kingsley had written, “is a species of drama, or complete history. . . . It is this which distinguishes the drama from history or biography. . . . The life of any one individual leaves a most unsatisfactory and deep void, which makes it appear like a mere episode or fraction of history, terminating without a consummation or winding up either the affairs or the principles on which the life was engaged. . . . It is very different with a novel, romance, or a drama; in these, there is a completeness—a winding up of all affairs. The whole subject-matter of the plot is explained; the mystery is unriddled. . . even the most trifling circumstances are discovered to have a meaning. . . . In reading a novel, it is the belief of this completeness, this final winding up, that creates the interest in our minds. Were we not assured, from experience, that every difficulty would be removed at the conclusion of the tale, we should not have any interest whatever in reading it. The interest is a pure offspring of faith—faith in the completeness of the history and the importance of all the incidents as they occur in succession.”

Kingsley went on to say that “nothing is more common amongst skillful novel-readers than to exercise their ingenuity in attempting to divine what may be the consequence of such apparently trifling circumstances in the commencement of a play or tale. . . . But it is generally acknowledged, that the plot which conceals itself to the very last scene of the piece is superior to that which is easily detected before the general consummation takes place. . . . The love of perfection, or completeness, is at the root of the passion for novel-reading.” The Ledger was at this time the nation’s most popular fiction weekly, claiming an amazing circulation of some 400,000. We may be sure that this extract corresponded to an acceptable ideology among its many readers.

It is noteworthy, then, that the grip of the novel is located in its formal rather than its representational character; the formal aspect is seen to correspond to a fundamental human need, so that form is a function of the human psyche. The remark about the superiority of plots in which the mysteries are not guessed before the author chooses to reveal them shows how plot, in this conception, turns as much on the interaction between reader and author as it does on the sequence of narrated events in itself; or rather, it iterates the congruence of plot design and reader response. If plot is structured as mystery and clarification, these
Plot, the Formal Principle

terms acquire meaning only with reference to a reader who is first mystified and then enlightened. Plot is fundamentally a matter of secrets withheld from the reader; this configuration may be represented in the action by plots of concealment and revelation, but such plots are imitating the reader’s desires rather than external reality, or more precisely are instances of the novel’s content imitating its form. Indeed, Kingsley makes clear that in his view external reality does not possess a satisfactory shape and that the novel is appealing because it repairs a damaged real world. Verisimilitude in the novel would produce no pleasure without the novelist’s skill in imposing the corrective of plot on recalcitrant reality so that we appreciate not reality itself, but reality made better. If we prefer “true-to-life” novels to improbable ones, it may be owing to the very improbability of their achievement.

However this might be, the formal principle of the novel had little to do with verisimilitude and much to do with desire. *The New York Review* said about a Balzac novel that “the interest becomes thrilling, when the reader finds himself among a world of human hearts, linked together by an invisible chain, a mystery half palpable, half volatile, of which the enigma is the author’s secret” (April 1839). The *Tribune*, reviewing Edward Grayson’s *Overing*, wrote approvingly of “the numerous threads crossing and intertangling with each other in a way that requires a dexterous hand to prevent confusion—but in the sequel, all apparent mysteries are happily cleared up, and the connexion of events which at first seemed to have no bearing on each other is explained to the satisfaction of the reader” (January 1, 1853). Reader, text, and author (not narrator) are all implicated in the notion of plot, for the test of authorial skill and the artistic challenge of the form involve presenting material in a way that maximizes the reader’s inherent pleasure in following increasing complications to their effective resolution.

Individual segments of the plot were called “incidents,” and plot artistry consisted of two specific achievements: first, inventing incidents; second, arranging and proportioning them with respect to the winding up. Some of the more theoretical reviewers distinguished novelistic talents into the “inventive” and the “combinative” faculties. Although the inventive was the rarer and greater talent, it was the combinative that made effective
novels. The most common criticism has to do with the placement of the denouement. It may come too early in the action, eliminating interest in the later pages. Or, if the insertion of irrelevant incidents has surpassed the capacity of the work to sustain interest or the complications introduced betray too clearly the author’s desire to keep the plot going, it may be felt to come too late.

The more common of these two errors was the premature denouement. The Mirror, reviewing G. P. R. James’s The Robbers, noted that “there is much that is artist-like and dramatic in the introduction of the characters and the disposition and management of the various scenes. The climax, however, occurs about the middle of the second volume, in the discovery of the parentage of the hero, and all that comes afterward is wearisome and forced” (June 2, 1838). The North American observed in a plot summary of George Sand’s Lélia that “the novel should end here, for the point of interest on which the whole plot turns . . . is now exhausted, and no apparent obstacle remains to the union of the lovers. But the writer injudiciously protracts the story” (July 1841). The American Review explained that in Kavanagh the early love of Alice Archer, “crossed by that of her friends, and ending in death, constitutes the romance proper of the tale; but her death, instead of being reserved for the denouement, occurring as it does in the middle of the book, and at a time when other interests are paramount, the little sympathy which her ill-fated passion has excited is lost, and she forgotten” (July 1849). Protracted denouements created another kind of tedium. The plot of an anonymous novel called Blanche Dearwood, according to Putnam’s, “is utterly improbable, and full of mystery where there need be no mystery; yet the incidents are developed with dramatic skill. But as one sees the end a long way ahead, the details of the last chapters are painfully protracted” (June 1855).

Another common plot defect was the crowding of incident. Knickerbocker, reviewing Rombert, said, “the plot is overcrowded, overcharged, and to a certain extent, unintelligible; there are half a dozen heroines, and twice that number of heroes, circumstances which destroy a connexion of interest, and prevent the reader from knowing exactly whom to follow with his good wishes” (February 1835). It criticized William Gilmore Simms’s Melichamp on the same grounds: incidents “are literally crowded
into the narrative, from the commencement to the close. Many of these are almost entirely disconnected with the main plot, and tend, as we think, to distract the attention of the reader” (December 1836). The Mirror said of Hamilton King, “the action is too crowded, the characters too numerous, and the plot too confused and compound. Mysteries, involvement, and desperate adventures, which lead to nothing, and have no dramatic adaptation to the story, follow one another in a whirl, which at last dizzies the attention” (October 5, 1839). Godey’s observed of Howard Pinckney that “one half the incidents in a practiced hand would answer the purpose” (November 1840). Blanche of Brandywine, by George Lippard, introduced “such a crowd of events and characters... that the unity of the story seems to have been somewhat neglected” (Democratic Review, October 1846). Harper’s complained that in Carolyn Chesebro’s Getting Along “the materials employed in the construction of the plot are sufficient for half a dozen novels. Such a profuse outlay on the part of the writer indicates a consciousness of power, of a rich store of resources—but not the talent for organization which is essential to the success of a great imaginative work” (May 1855). It found the plot of Kingsley’s Two Years Ago “encumbered by a variety of characters, which serve only to distract the attention without conspiring to the unitary impression of the whole. Indeed, the plan of the work embraces the materials for no less than three distinct stories, and the attempt to combine them in a single narrative was injudicious” (May 1857).

One particular kind of crowding was known as “hurrying,” a crowding near the denouement that signaled the writer’s impatience or fatigue. The North American wrote of Cooper’s The Spy that “nothing but unpardonable haste can account for that sad huddling into confusion, toward the end, of a plot so well laid at the outset” and, in a review of Sedgwick’s Clarence, noted more generally that “the denouement of a novel is the part which most severely tries an author’s ingenuity; for it is very possible that a story may have been skillfully constructed to a certain point, and then be wound up in the most hurried and clumsy manner” (July 1822, January 1831). Graham’s complained that Dickens, in Hard Times, “evidently was tired himself of his materials and huddled them up to a conclusion long before his original intention” (November 1854); the Tribune thought the catastrophe of Little
Dorrit was “hurriedly and obscurely worked out” (June 23, 1857).

These comments focused on the need for the writer to identify and highlight a unitary plot if reader interest was to be engaged and maintained and implied the importance of pacing and of the positioning of incidents along the route to the denouement. A novel might also err in its plotting at the other extreme by being too simple or sparse in incident to create curiosity or suspense. A Knickerbocker reviewer doubted whether a simple “succession of events converging to a final point” could really be called a plot, since such a structure lacked complication; and another raised the same point in a review of Kavanagh, which could “hardly be said to have any plot proper,” since it proceeded by “regular convergence to the end” (July 1837, June 1849). The operative word here is “regular”; matters untoward or unforeseen must be introduced if novels are to be interesting. “There must be unity with ever shifting changes,” the Christian Examiner explained, “a regular progress through the midst of doubts and surprises; various clews running tortuously to meet in the same point of common effect; some ingenuity of contrivance to keep the mind of the reader suspended and engaged, and swept forward, while it is swayed to and fro, by curiosity and emotion, and a constantly heightening sympathy” (May 1856). For a North American reviewer Hawthorne’s works continually missed the mark: “his plots are seldom well devised or skillfully developed. They are either too simple to excite curiosity and attract interest, or too much involved for him to clear them up to the reader’s satisfaction” (January 1854).

The artistic arrangement of incidents in plot did not extend to breaches of chronological order; in fact, departures from what was called (naturally) the “natural” order of events were perceived as signs of lack of skill. An additional criterion—probability—which later critical discussions of the “realistic” novel (a term that, by the way, does not appear in any of these reviews) were to make much of, was distinctly secondary in significance in defining the novel as a genre, though for a group of reviewers it was of considerable importance in determining the eventual value of any given work. Most reviewers of the day agreed that the novelist who made an artistic and interesting plot out of the probable had achieved something qualitatively superior to one
who relied on improbabilities to wind up a story or deliver characters from complications of incident. But there was less consensus that a more probable story was also inherently more interesting, since readers did not behave in a way that would make such a proposition self-evident. Thus, though the Tribune found the “great defect” of Ida May in “the improbability of its leading incidents,” asserting that “the intrinsic improbability of the whole conception greatly mars the interest of the work as a consecutive story, and leaves the reader dependent on the energy and pathos of isolated passages” (November 22, 1854), it had also written earlier (of Mrs. Marsh’s Castle Avon): “complicated, and, in some respects, improbable, as is the plot, it is developed with such admirable grouping of incidents and richness of coloring, that the interest of the reader is held in a perpetual fascination” (February 19, 1853).

Improbabilities in a plot diminished but did not obliterate reader interest, and other aspects of the presentation could more than compensate. E. D. E. N. Southworth’s The Deserted Wife, according to the Literary World, “will owe its popularity to the dramatic power with which a complicated and not unoriginal plot has been managed. . . . As often happens in dramatic pieces, this novel sacrifices probabilities to the intense” (August 31, 1850). It repeated this judgment on later occasions: there is “no lack of interest in Mrs. Southworth’s tales, and although somewhat wild and improbable, once commenced they are never thrown aside as tame common-place”; “the plot of Mrs. Southworth’s novel is highly interesting and ingenious, though she does not stop at an improbability for the sake of extricating a favorite character from a dilemma” (May 24, 1851; August 7, 1852). Harper’s also found Southworth’s excesses a fault: “in the construction of her plots, she has not regard for probability; nature is violated at every step; impossible people are brought into impossible situations; every thing is colored so highly that the eye is dazzled”; but it described these excesses in language revealing their appeal. “Let her curb her fiery Pegasus with unre­ lent­ing hand,” the reviewer counseled, “and she will yet attain a rank worthy of her fine faculties, from which she has hitherto been precluded by her outrages on the proprieties of fictitious composition” (October 1852). Reviewing Ann Stephens’s Mary Derwent, Harper’s remarked that “the plan of the work is bold—
not to say audacious—involving demands on the faith of the reader which defy all sense of probability; but the incidents are wrought up into a succession of striking scenes, forming a sort of tragic unity which excites both the imagination and the sympathy of the reader” (August 1858). The dates of these extracts suggest that the demand for probability was no stronger at the close of this era than it had been earlier. And the word “proprieties” in the Harper’s criticism of Southworth suggests that the need for probability was less strongly felt by readers than by critics—suggests even that the criterion was connected to reviewer preference for propriety as a virtue in itself. In sum, the inveterate novel reader preferred excitement and interest to probability; the reviewer hoped to elevate taste.

Again we return to the criterion of interest, a persistent term describing identically a formal aspect of a novel to be identified, isolated, and described and an experience or response in a reader. The North American employed the term in its almost technical formal sense as early as July 1825 when it observed of The Refugee that “the interest is also divided by episodes and underplots, till it is nearly reduced to nothing.” In October 1837 it commented that “artificial complication of plot . . . is necessary to sustain the interest of a long story.” Emma, said Knickerbocker, “may be a fine and delicate conception, but it has been embodied at the sacrifice of what we prefer—that of interest. Of this essential quality in a novel, Emma is so seriously deficient that all the talents of its author have proved incompetent to make a story which the most determined patience can peruse”; in Simms’s Yemassee “the interest . . . is awakened, without circumlocution, in the opening chapters, and though perhaps too often changed from one train of moving events to another, is yet powerfully excited, and sustained, throughout the work”; Ellen Pickering’s novels were “all richly endowed with the one most indispensable quality, interest” (August 1833, April 1835, April 1839).

Theodore Fay’s Countess Ida “is well told, the plot is well-laid and well developed, and the interest is sustained throughout” (New York Review, July 1840). “The interest of a romance should continue, let it be remembered, throughout the whole story” (Graham’s, January 1841). The Southern Literary Messenger complained that in Cooper’s Wyandotte “what little interest there is in it is terribly delayed,” found Bulwer’s Lucretia “deficient in the
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first quality of every novel—interest,” and, though commending the morality of his Harold, observed that “as a story, it is a very wearisome affair” displaying “an entire want of continuing interest” (November 1843, January 1847, August 1848). Peterson’s thought that the “interest of the story is not sustained” in Bulwer’s Last of the Barons (April 1843). The Literary World found “the interest [of Dombey and Son] not so well sustained as the author’s previous efforts”; in Laneton Parsonage “interest, in the ordinary sense of the word, is not to be found”; and the “interest” in St. Leger “is considerably injured by the introduction of characters foreign to the general design” (September 25, 1847; March 10, 1849; January 5, 1850).

Godey’s said that in Sybil Lennard “the interest commences on the first page, and is continued throughout the book” (January 1848). Sartain’s noted that in Brontë’s Shirley “the interest is divided between too many, and being divided it is of course weakened” (February 1850). The author of James Mountjoy has “unwisely deprived his book of the advantage of unity of interest. He has too many leading personages, whose separate adventures engross too much of the reader’s attention” (American Review, April 1850). Harper’s declared that in McConnel’s Talbot and Vernon “details are managed with a good deal of skill, developing the course of the affairs in such a gradual manner, that the interest of the reader never sleeps, until the final winding-up of the narrative” (June 1850). In Mayo’s The Berber, according to the Tribune, “the different interests of the story are admirably blended”; the paper also said of Overing that “the interest of the plot is well sustained,” and of Chesebro’s Getting Along that the novel “gains consistently in interest as it advances” (November 13, 1850; May 22, 1852; March 30, 1855).

In sum, the formal principle of the novel was plot, and the basic principle of reader response—interest—also derived from plot. The “novel,” in a basic sense, existed only when the distinction between it and the reader disappeared, when the novel initiated and the reader completed a single experience. Thus formal criticism and reader-response criticism (of course neither of the terms existed) were the same act, since reader response was a function of form and form was a modeling of reader responses.