Novels, Readers, and Reviewers
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Conclusion

No sooner was the novel invented, it seems, than the review followed. So closely connected have been the form and the commentary on it—both being products of a print culture—that it does not seem extreme to say that the novel has responded to discourse about it almost as much as reviews have responded to the novels they reviewed. In the United States before the Civil War, especially after 1840, there was in existence a broad-ranging and widely circulated discourse about the novel, whose contours I have attempted to describe in this book. It was an ambitious discourse, in the sense that it took as its field the entire corpus of existing novels produced in all European nations. Nobody writing or reading a novel in America in these years could have been ignorant of it, for it appeared, among other places, in those journals whose readership over the decades included millions of literate Americans. It was, moreover, the chief extant discourse about novels, since academic discussion of them, except very rarely on the Lyceum circuit and then only with a very few novelists, did not yet exist. An academic history of fiction had been written in England before 1810, but it treated the novel only in a few concluding paragraphs.

The first step in assessing any long work of fiction was to ask whether it was a novel—which is to say, the question of genre took priority over all other ways a text might be interrogated. The procedure for answering this question was simple: one searched for the presence or absence of a unifying plot. In the absence of such a feature, critics would relegate the work to a marginal or mixed genre, of which the series of loosely connected
 sketches was probably the most common. In all but a few instances, these tangential genres were viewed as artistically inferior to the novel; and the likelihood of their success, given the public appetite for novels, was assumed to be much less than that of even a crudely executed novel.

The question of membership in the genre satisfied, critics went on to discuss a variety of formal features of the work at hand, all following from its status as a novel. Reviewers applied genre expectations with some latitude, aware that the genre was a set of rules derived from a body of existing texts, sensitive to the novel as a historical form changing even as they wrote about it, and greatly interested in the distinguishing qualities of the individual author's canon. In addition, as novels proliferated over the years, reviewers developed a lexicon of subgenres. Reviewers worked mainly with four broad types: domestic fiction, subsuming local color; highly wrought fiction, subsuming urban novels; the historical novel; and the advocacy novel. The term romance did not refer to any agreed-on subgenre and was usually employed simply as a synonym for novel. American novels, identifiable by their setting, were singled out for praise by American reviewers—perhaps they were overpraised—but no subgenre of the novel was thought characteristic of the nation, nor is a theory that American novels should be different from other novels beyond their American setting anywhere to be found. The invention of a subgenre called the romance with specifically American fictional properties is a later critical development; it is a concept alien to the practice and production of the times it is now used to analyze.

Novels were generally evaluated according to the artistic execution of formal features, the picture of life provided by the novel, and the interest achieved by the work. Of these three, the overwhelmingly central one for novel criticism was the matter of interest. Indeed, I would argue that both formal, artistic excellence and verisimilitude or pictures of life were, during all of this period, criteria subordinate to that of interest, ultimately viewed in terms of contribution to or detraction from this final end of the novel. The unitary plot was viewed simultaneously as a formal structure by which all parts of the novel were integrated and through which they were related, and as a psychological structure designed to arouse, sustain, and finally satisfy the reader's
interest. Reviewers described interest as a powerful human experience, involving a greatly heightened and sustained attention, an absorption in the text amounting (as many wrote) to “enchainment” and accompanied at times by an excitement that was almost “painful.”

Thus, although at various points I have used the words “pleasure” and “enjoyment” as synonyms for “interest,” this last is the important term because it distinguished the type of enjoyment or pleasure a reader experienced from a novel. That is, there are all sorts of pleasure and all kinds of enjoyment; that which was characteristic of the novel was the pleasure or enjoyment of a sustained interest. Such human psychological characteristics as sympathy and curiosity were put powerfully into play in the reading of a novel, and so long as the reader was interested, the novel had to be judged a success. The more interesting, too, the more popular. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, for example, was probably the most interesting novel of the era, for many reasons. The characters were enormously sympathetic or repellent, and their fates were in question from the first page to the last. The adventures that befell them were exciting, life threatening, deeply pathetic, occasionally funny. And while the author speechified shamelessly, she always entered the narrative on her characters’ behalf, so that her indignation formally emphasized the emotional responses the story was calling for. And contributory interest was provided by the descriptions of so many regions of the nation and the treatment of a crucial contemporary political issue.

Interest, though not identical to the “willing suspension of disbelief,” certainly demanded something like it from readers. This could always be revoked, however, which is why plot achieved its dominant position as the defining formal quality of the novel: because interest derived more from plot than from any other aspect. And it is in terms of relation to plot rather than to an external reality that such matters as “probability” need to be understood. An improbably plotted narrative, or so reviewers thought, was simply not as interesting as a probable one. The public rejection of novels of the supernatural, their interest in stories about ordinary people, seemed to support this contention. The highly wrought novel intensified, but did not abandon, ordinary life.

Reviewers, according to their own account, parted company
with readers in introducing a second criterion: novels should also be “pictures of life.” Eager to push the novel in the direction of high art as they understood it—and the terms of their understanding were such as to make high art a matter of expressing general human truths—they argued that truth and interest were entirely compatible. But finding pictures of nature in novels involved a distancing from the work that inevitably brought into play a different sort of interest, a meditative or intellectual interest rather than any passionate engagement of reader with text. I do not mean to suggest that the exciting interest was not intellectual. On the contrary, I have tried to show (chapter 4) that the reader’s mental faculties were fired up and engrossed by reading a novel; but they were directed toward the construal of plot, not values. Values, rather, were aspects of presentation that enabled a reader to invest sympathy properly, to identify protagonist and antagonist. As an intellectual matter, of course, this is very different from extracting themes or constructing (or deconstructing) a work’s value system. But I am not convinced that it is inferior.

Reviewers of the earlier age knew they were looking for a different kind of interest in novels, but they did not recognize that the success of their campaign might split (or further split) the novel-reading audience beyond recuperation, as seems to have happened in our own time. Their crucial choice of a way to make the novel better rises from the essentially didactic nature of literary culture in America and England at the time, a characteristic we continue to exhibit, given that this is the culture that created literary criticism.

The difference between these earlier reviewers and the academic critic now is that the reviewer then thought of the “truth” of the novel as an increment beyond its form, while the critic today asserts that its truth (or falsity, or meaning) inheres in and constitutes its form. Given this difference, the critic then could continue to accept the novel’s form as a pleasure-producing entity while carrying out his self-appointed mission of making it something more. The critic now cannot. Now an enchanting interest—an intense pleasure—has vanished as a respectable reason for reading novels. It is only fair to add that, as the novel is part of the culture that discourses about it, the creation of such interest has also mostly vanished as a respectable reason for writing novels. Hence the gap between serious (elite) and frivolous (pop-
ular) novels is vast. In critical theory of yesteryear the reader could choose whether or not to be instructed—take or leave the novel's truth while still enjoying its story. Things are much more momentous and serious for the novel reader of today. The good novel, being nothing now but a meaningful (or meaningless) form, cannot produce simple pleasure unless it is misread or read naively. The "good read," all agree, is not a good novel.

As Gerald Graff writes (in Literature against Itself [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 161), "what chiefly distinguishes the elite forms is precisely that they have something serious to say." But that is not all: they have something to say that is difficult to find, for the assumption is that nothing serious is easy. The work ethic has been attached to what was formerly recreation, and it is difficult to estimate how much this may have come about because novels are the source of real work—paid work—for so many literary academics and hence need to be objects that can be worked on. Elite is now a subgenre and can only be read for meaning: "if one is looking for real freedom from allegorical or thematic meanings . . . one should go . . . to works that are so innocent of meaning that they do not need to refuse it—dime novels, detective stories, Jacqueline Susann novels, comic books"; these are "entertainments" that "achieve imperviousness to interpretation without effort" (Graff, pp. 160–161). The activity of the reader hypothesized in contemporary reader-response theory, busy constructing and testing meanings; the activity of a traditional Graffian reader, busy extracting the serious truth content of a fiction; the activity of a poststructuralist, busy taking meanings apart—all of these are qualitatively different from the activity of the engaged reader cooperating with the novelist in the game of aims and obstacles that constituted the structural play of the novel's plot, unfolding itself in novel time. Interpretation, always an interesting and important activity to a small group of people, is not what the tremendous success of the novel in the nineteenth century was based upon.

Of course, novel criticism today is fragmented. There remain magazine and newspaper reviews of new fiction that carry on a method of assessment based on formal concerns: plot, characters, setting. My comments above refer to academic criticism, a mode that scarcely existed in the historical era I examine. The genre of academic criticism of current and older novels validates the aca-
demic setting; that is, it proves novels are texts that require teaching. It would be embarrassingly frivolous or superficial to set students to writing plot summaries rather than essays on the serious themes of, say, *The Sound and the Fury*; but who says what is and what is not serious? Are we teaching novels or are we using them to teach something else—seriousness?

It is important to recognize, too, that to define elite novels according to whether they have something serious “to say” is to erase genre. Many elite novels are artistically inept, and many popular novels are serious (overly so, some academics would claim). When we read past genre for meaning, we are deprived of the means of assessing an artistic achievement as such. And disallowing genre, meaning- or interpretation-centered criticism cannot investigate the degree to which readers are responding to the formal properties of the work. As a result such criticism assumes about people’s reading habits the antiformal bias that it actually manifests itself: assuming that people read fiction for truths and finding no truths in the fiction they read, it concludes that they read for lies. It does not consider that they may read for the interest and pleasure of a reading experience, the fun of reading a novel.

That the populace once read novels of all kinds also serves, I believe, to put into question our view of the specifically American situation in antebellum America and thus impinges on our historical (as my comments above impinge on our theoretical) formulations of the novel’s story in this country. It is clear to me that the novel’s story in this country, where readers are concerned, cannot be confined to the purely native product. In American literary history we seem to have been involving ourselves in the circular enterprise of looking for works that accord with our (highly tendentious) idea of “American” as opposed to something not American (something that is usually a piece of knowledge, a “statement,” about our special situation as Americans), devising a history of those works alone, and then acting as though this history were the history of both American literature (literature written by Americans) and literature in America (literature as received by Americans), when “in fact” it is not one or the other. This “history” enables us to imagine Hawthorne and Melville working inside a cultural envelope in which nobody liked and nobody read novels. My study uncovers a different culture, one
where their troubles might have derived from their decisions not to write, or their inability to write, novels in an era that would have accepted almost anything if it came in that much-loved form. I would like to think that this book will make it impossible for us any longer to maintain that the literary climate in ante-bellum America was hostile to fiction.