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## American Regionalism and He Problem of Minor Literature: A Study of Three Post-Civil War Novels

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AMERICAN REGIONALISM AND THE  
PROBLEM OF MINOR LITERATURE:  
A STUDY OF THREE POST-CIVIL WAR NOVELS

by

Christopher Lambert, O.F.M.

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of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment  
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1989



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## VITA

The author, Brother Christopher (David) Lambert, O.F.M., is the son of George F. Lambert and Frances (Perko) Lambert. He was born on April 28, 1945, in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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## CHAPTER I

### ISSUES IN CANON FORMATION

*“Creative literature exists, not for  
literary historians, but for  
readers.” - Boris Tomashevskii*

#### 1. Introduction

After nearly a score of years the issue of canon revision continues to insinuate itself upon the academy in a variety of guises, from the militant demands for outright “canon busting” to the milder calls for “opening up the canon” in order to include groups, writers, and works which had previously been either omitted or undervalued for what have come to be seen as other than purely literary reasons. Remedying the situation seems at first almost too obvious and simple for it to ever have developed into a problem at all: simply compile an inclusive canon which will incorporate all the known writers and all their known literary works. The first difficulty in doing this, however, is arriving at a definition of the term “literary”: do only traditional genres such as novels, short stories, plays, and poems fall into this category, or is there a case to be made for diaries, letters, journals, and discursive essays? The second problem is that any catalogue of works can never be totally neutral; some works will

be identified as "major" (i.e., more important historically, more "literary," more artistic, etc.), while others will be regarded as "minor." The question always arises as to the bases on which such judgments are made: how are the determining criteria formulated? are these criteria objective and external to the works they describe, or do factors such as "taste" play a role in arriving at these decisions?

These problems in themselves are daunting enough, but there are also other difficulties of a less aesthetic or philosophical nature. Some authors or certain of their works have been classed as minor for so long that they become gradually more "lost" with every reformulation of the canon. Furthermore, there are obscure works which have been out of print for so long that the physical absence (or scarcity) of a text, even when the author or work is known, renders them virtually non-existent. The hope of ever arriving at a totally comprehensive canon, then, is a dim one.

Canons from before the middle of the twentieth century give the impression that the domain of "literature" has, for the most part, been in the hands of primarily white men, for little representation of either women or non-whites is to be found. Revisionists have long been convinced that numerous texts had been repressed on ethnic and gender grounds; further, they argued, the norms for defining what constituted "literary" were much too restrictive. And so began the movement to "open up the canon" and make it truly representative of the diversity of people and

cultures which constitute the American heritage.

In her recent observations as outgoing president of the MLA, Barbara Herrnstein Smith rightly notes (285-86) that underlying the current controversies over the canon is the notion that the term "canon" is really more of a "vivid allegory and abbreviation" for other issues which are in themselves much more urgent than simply reinstating lost or undervalued authors and works into the canon; what is really at stake, she asserts, is "the location of intellectual and institutional authority in the literary academy and, thereby, of cultural and social authority more broadly," an issue which is not new, but which highlights the cumulative force of other demographic, political, and intellectual concerns.

Such is a sampling of some of the major issues that current canon study is addressing. This dissertation does not presume to answer all the questions or solve all the problems arising from these issues, for no one perspective or approach could be so broad as to encompass the many facets of the overall situation. What this study does do is to frame the issue of canon study in its historical and theoretical frameworks, thereby identifying the ways in which canon formation has functioned in the past. The findings herein demonstrate that the norms which underlie principles of selection throughout the ages have been as mutable as the resulting canons. Growing out of this discussion is the question of how valorization and canonic rank have been determined over the years: how the categories of "major" and "minor" have been decided at various times, and how

these decisions have affected the status of particular works.

The subject of "minor literature" is considered here not as an inherently problematic designation in itself, but rather how particular works either "become minor" in the judgment of critics contemporary with the work or how works change between "major" and "minor" status over time. Accordingly, this study takes into account the dichotomy between issues of "taste" and "value" as well as distinctions between "serious" and "popular" literature, considerations which at least tacitly underpin such judgments.

Having explored these issues, we turn our attention to one area of literary history which has not been studied extensively from these perspectives: American Regionalism—those works associated with the period following the Civil War until the turn of the century. A disproportionate number of these often tend to be summarily regarded as an "afterthought" to a consideration of realism and, for the most part, as relatively unimportant except for their historical value in recalling the culture and lifestyle of various areas before the onset of modern industrialism and its homogenizing effect on the American culture. Hence the latter portion of this study examines three regionalist novels, each representing a different area of the country and addressing different cultural concerns: Bret Harte's *Gabriel Conroy* considers the regionalism of the West; George Washington Cable's *Madame Delphine* examines the relationship between the Creoles and the quadroons in New Orleans; and Mary Wilkins

Freeman's *Pembroke* explores the character of latter day Puritan New England villagers. The common denominator among all of these is that they all enjoyed wide acclaim among both general readers and academic critics at the time of their publication, but have since fallen into virtual oblivion except for occasional passing mention in discussions of their author's canon.

The obvious question that arises out of this circumstance is how such a dramatic change of reputation came about in such a relatively short time, and thus in each case there is an examination of the factors about the work which have found less appeal among twentieth century critics, especially the New Critics and the structuralists, and so have led to the subsequent devaluation of the work. Each of these chapters concludes with an argument based on New Historicism and reception theory, modeled after Jane Tompkins' approach in *Sensational Designs*, for considering that novel on the basis of its historical and cultural significant and its relationship to the author's canon.

## 2. Framing the Argument

During the past few decades the philosophies and ideologies which underpin various critical theories have successfully polarized elements of the scholarly community into opposing, often mutually exclusive camps: "On one side of this divide [are] New Criticism, the Chicago School, phenomenological criticism, hermeneutics, structuralism, and deconstruction.



On the other side [are] Marxist criticism, the New York Intellectuals, myth criticism, existential criticism, reader-response criticism, feminist criticism, and the Black Aesthetic movement” (Leitch 1). Yet despite these marked and sometimes hostile divisions, the furor over literary theories is restricted to a relatively small portion of the overall academic population; most people who teach (and is not the classroom where any and all theories ultimately succeed or fail? where they are finally accepted or rejected?) quietly adopt an approach (or eclectically formulate one) that “works” in their classes, preferring to leave the heated debates over philosophical minutiae to be thrashed out by the “scholars” in the arenas of journal pages and convention rooms.

The issue of canon formation, on the other hand, is a much more pervasive and influential one. On an academic level it affects those who compile textbooks and anthologies, those who publish them, as well as those who purchase them, for each of these parties must exercise principles of selection based presumably on literary “value” which will both include and exclude several works, along with assigning to each work a greater or lesser amount of “merit,” according to often intangible and aesthetic criteria which inform each group’s final choices. Similarly with popular literature (a term which is discussed below), the interplay among author, critic, publisher, and reader takes place on many levels with several (often hidden) agendas operating at once which frequently work at cross purposes with one another. Here the issue of “taste” is usually

more important than "value," although the promise of supposed value is always inherent in the shaping of taste.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the nature of a canon and to examine a number of issues that have influenced canonic decisions about American literature generally and thus have helped to create, either directly or indirectly, such categories as "major" and "minor" literature. There is first a brief survey of the history of American literature anthologies which shows how the criteria underlying their principles of selection have been as changeable as the listings they have produced, and addresses the role that such subjective factors as "taste" and "value" have played in the formation and revision of canons. In the context of discussing revisionism and the issue of "opening up the canon" will be considered the question of what constitutes "literature" and how varying answers to that question have been responsible for shaping various canons. Finally, the chapter will demonstrate that the impulse toward revisionism is inevitable because its nature is immanently political and utopian, characteristics which are themselves ever dynamic.

Subsequent chapters will address the polemic of "minor" literature and will consider American Regionalism as constituting a body of works which is now collectively considered "minor" in an attempt to determine how that reduced valuation has evolved. Separate later chapters will examine three American Regionalist writers whose works enjoyed both critical and popular acclaim at the time of their publication, but who have

since come to be regarded as minor writers; these chapters will show how the process of canon revision has altered the literary fortunes of these writers by considering one work usually regarded as "significant" by each of them.

### 3. The Many Faces of the Canon

In literary terms, a canon is defined as "an authoritative list of writings," or more to the point for this study, "the unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature'" (Eagleton 11), "that body of material deemed worthy of study" (Meese 17). Writers arguing for a particular philosophical or political ideology each offer their own version of the definition: for the political activist, canon is "a tool to impose on students the ideologies of classes in power" (Cantarow 91); for the literary historian, it is "an institutional form for exposing people to a range of idealized attitudes," a mode for "establishing models of wisdom" (Altieri 46, 51); for the broader-based aesthetic, it is "an enduring and exemplary collection of books, buildings, and paintings which are authorized in some way for contemplation, admiration, interpretation and the determination of value" (Kerman 177). The common thread running through all these statements is the notion of a collection of works which valorizes certain ones over others for the purpose of forming attitudes and shaping opinion. The obvious polemic here is in determining—and in reaching agreement upon—the locus of the authority which informs these value judgments.

Robert von Hallberg alludes to this problem in defining canon as “what other people, once powerful, have made and what should now be opened up and demystified” (1), and in doing so he focuses squarely on one of the important implications of canon formation: that it is an exercise of social, academic, and political power. Writing from a different perspective, Mikhail Bakhtin admonishes that “one must memorialize with artistic language only that which is worthy of being remembered, that which should be preserved in the memory of descendants” (18); his statement immediately raises the question which underpins most canonic investigation: who determines what is “worthy” and by what criteria are these judgments made? The next section of this study will show how that question has been approached in the history of canon formation.

These various ways of considering canon, however, are inherently monolithic in that they are based on the underlying assumption that there is only one type of canon. This is so, first of all, because the very term canon itself is almost always used in the singular. Revisionists refer to “*the* canon” rather than “*a* canon” and thus suggest that only one kind does or can exist when, in fact, a number of similar though competing canons have always existed simultaneously. But it is even more likely that such narrow views of canon result from each one’s being formulated in the context of a particular critical or political stance. Hence they tend to be reductive because they do not take into account either how various canons are formulated or the uses to which they are put.

Alan Golding (279 ff) provides a broader and more useful view in citing and amplifying the three types of canons proposed by Alastair Fowler in *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982, 213-16); Golding's terminology is particularly helpful. First, there is the "potential" canon which contains all the known literature that exists, simply because it exists;<sup>1</sup> thus it is a catalogue of all the works that a potential reader could read. Such a canon is impelled by the urge to preserve and is based on the value of breadth of inclusion with little attention paid to the intrinsic "value" of works. Next, the "accessible" canon refers to that part of the potential canon which is actually available through reprints and in anthologies. The guiding principle here is the very practical one of availability; works which no longer survive physically can only be either forgotten or mentioned in passing if reference is made to them in other texts. Finally, the "selective" canon includes those works in the accessible canon which scholars have singled out as particularly worthy of attention. The sequence from one type to another seems both simple and logical: from preservation to evaluation to a more limited preservation; but it is actually more complex because evaluation is taking place before the potential canon is formulated. The compiler must decide among extant works which ones are worth saving and which ones seem too inconsequential to merit preserving as "literature." It is the progression from the accessible to the selective canon, however, which is probably the more influential in determining the

continued canonization of a work. When formulators of canon no longer cite a work as worthy of attention, it can virtually disappear from the accessible canon by going out of print. Bruce Franklin further cautions that the selective canon “substitutes a part for the whole” by demeaning as sub-literary or otherwise unworthy of serious attention not only many individual works, but entire genres as well, “especially popular literature (including science fiction, detective stories, westerns, and tales of adventure and romance), folk literature, oral literature [an issue which will be discussed later] . . . and almost all the literature by nonwhite peoples” (96)—and, it might also be added, many of the works of American Regionalism. Hence his point is clearly well taken and provides the impetus for much contemporary revisionism.

It will be useful at this time to say something regarding how the term “popular literature” is defined. While very real distinctions exist between serious (or “high”) literature and popular literature, we must realize that these two exist on a continuum and are not separate and mutually exclusive forms. Serious literature traditionally is the “development and statement of a brilliant individual’s consciousness delivered into artistry through great skill with words and mastery of form” (Morrow 15). Thus serious literature gives us a philosophical sense of the world, articulates new possibilities and perspectives, and often makes moral statements showing us the difference between good and evil, the genuine and the imitation. Furthermore, great writers typically tend to change, that is, to

mature and develop (Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Faulkner are good examples), while popular writers tend to repeat the successful performance of a product. Popular literature reinforces an audience's values and expectations, often with the skillful manipulation of cliché, stereotypes, and formula. Thus by means of popular art an audience can find both a justification of its covert and overt values and a dramatization of wish-fulfillment. Popular literature often restates old myths in new ways, creating a product that shows how people feel about things at a given time. Most regionalist works operate in this way: they dramatize their intended audience's feelings and values far more than they show an artist's "world picture" and personal vision. It is the reader's task, then, to try to uncover in a popular work the *why* and *how* of its success; questions about a popular work's "quality" are secondary, since by definition a large number of people are convinced that it is "good."

Fowler's thinking might also be reshaped in another way to represent a different set of concerns: an "historical" canon is one which strives for the broadest inclusion possible so that an accurate record is available of all that has been written in the course of history. The "institutional" canon is a collection of works which demonstrate a high degree of literary merit, and from these works is derived the teaching (or "anthology") canon, which frames the content for literature courses, the effective medium by which the "high" canon is communicated to the larger reading public. "Revisionist" canons are usually extra-institutional and thus are counter-

canons in that they constitute a reaction to what has been institutionalized by what is judged to be an elitist, overly narrow set of evaluative norms.<sup>2</sup>

There is yet another basic approach to classifying canons: the "high" canon includes the "serious" works from the past which have long been recognized by scholars as "worthy" of attention because of their "literary merit"; this listing enumerates the so-called "classics." A key component of these works is that they have "survived the test of time" and continually show themselves to contain aspects of both form and content which transcend the time of their composition. On the other hand, the "popular" canon looks less to the past than to the contemporary. It reflects the taste of the reading public (which often served to inform "scholarly opinion") and seeks to locate value in works which have not yet been subjected to the test of time and long-time critical opinion. Leslie Fiedler (78) suggests this same sort of distinction in referring to "majority" novels (which are read by the general public, hence "popular") and "minority" novels (which are the kind considered worth teaching and studying). These several categories, although reductively brief in these descriptions, do suggest certain tensions in the current critical debate over the canon. Aside from the obvious issue of the values which inform canonic judgments, there is the implication that the canonization of "great" or "serious" works is the province (indeed the privilege) of scholars within educational institutions (the so-called "academy");<sup>3</sup> the historical survey



later in this chapter will show how that situation evolved during the latter nineteenth century. There is the further implication that great works are recognized as being such only in the longer perspective of historical evaluation. In "What Is a Classic?" T. S. Eliot observes that a canonical text, a "classic," stands out only in retrospect and that contemporary evaluations usually fail to recognize it: "It is only by hindsight, and in historical perspective, that a classic can be known as such," and the contemporary canon "confounds the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent" (116, 129). Bakhtin expresses the sentiment of a number of more conservative critics in asserting that "it is impossible to achieve greatness in one's own time. Greatness always makes itself known only to descendants, for whom such a quality is always located in the past" (18), although he does not make it his task to identify what constitutes this self-revealing greatness. For Frank Kermode, ever the cautious and logical observer, greatness—and hence canonicity—is demonstrated by the continual critical conversation which a work generates: "there will always be something else and something different to say" (62), which is to say that a work proves itself to be perpetually modern. He concludes, then, that a great work survives in the medium of commentary (and hence in continued publication and re-reading), not simply because of any intrinsic literary value it may embody. The danger with Kermode's view is that the literature in the "high" canon is so often looked upon as "things that are read only in school" or as works which appeal, really,

only to scholars who can “understand” them, and that the “ordinary” reader would probably not recognize or appreciate the complex subtleties of these works. These are the attitudes which perpetuate an elitist view of the institutional canon.

Current revisionist thinking is predicated on the principle of “opening up the canon,” but not all revisionists see this goal in the same way. One of the more popular approaches to expansion of the canon, which addresses the situation from the standpoint of curriculum development, is termed the “park-bench principle” by Gary Waller and argues for both the inclusion of contemporary works and the revaluation of already canonized texts: “when a powerful newcomer shows up, everyone on the bench shuffles over just a little to make room for the latest arrival. Occasionally, if things get a little crowded, the one at the end falls off—Anglo-Saxon, perhaps, or philology.” But Waller admits that this theory is more a compromise than a solution in that it operates in the restricted context of an individual instructor or department attempting to offer students as broad a look as possible at the field of literature and literary theory in a limited amount of time; hence such issues as women’s literature, black literature, and so forth “become one more subject at the margin of the canon” so that “rarely is a fundamental retheorizing allowed to occur” (33).

Another approach to opening up the canon advocates looking back over works of the past with a different vision which is based on a differ-

ent set of evaluative criteria to determine which ones should now be either included or excluded, or at least valued more or less than they were previously. There are two ways this process can take place: the more frequent approach is to re-examine already canonized works in the light of contemporary literary theory to determine which ones no longer "speak to" the culture or the generation and so may be relegated either to the status of "minor" or "unimportant," or perhaps dropped from the canon altogether, although it is generally agreed that "once in [the canon], a [work] tends to stay in, if only in a small corner of the attic. Getting in at all is [the difficult] matter" (Golding 284). Hence it is unlikely that a canonized work will ever fully lose its canonic status; rather, it is more likely that its position in the canon will fluctuate between varying degrees of "major" and "minor" (as the next two chapters dealing with minor literature and Regionalism will show), for the "critical conversation" which has kept it alive for so long will undoubtedly continue to sustain it, at least by mention in literary histories. This observation lends limited credence both to Kermode's theory of the "perpetual modernity" of great works and to his idea that greatness, although an often ineffable quality, is nonetheless one which is able to make itself manifest. The approach of re-evaluating established works according to current literary theories is obviously an academic maneuver, one carried out in the context of compiling a new or revised anthology or putting together a course syllabus, for it is a practical necessity that the teaching canon be held to a somewhat

reasonable size owing to the limited amount of time of any individual course or program of study.

But what is to become of those works which may become "demoted" out of the canon? We might assume that it is the task of the literary historian to keep alive at least the memory of works which were once considered "great," but the discussion of literary histories in the next section shows that historians are no more free of bias in their selection of works to include than any anthologist; in fact historians do as much to shape literary opinion as they do to record it. However, it is probably safe to assume that there will always be research specialists in every field of literature who will collectively serve as the custodians of the potential (or at least the accessible) canon; studying the work of a number of them will yield an overall picture of the canon and how it has evolved.

If one technique for opening up the canon is to re-examine canonized works by the standards of current criticism, the other one is to take the opposite approach: to consider a work according to the critical criteria which were in vogue at the time of its publication. Such an approach can help to explain why a once-canonized work is no longer held in such high critical favor, which is one aspect of the argument Jane Tompkins makes in *Sensational Designs*. In her chapter on Hawthorne, she argues that critics speak on behalf of the cultural (i.e., political, religious, social, economic) norms of their age and either praise or condemn a work on the basis of how it reflects and speaks to its age; hence critical rhetoric and

strategies "are inseparable from a whole way of looking at life" (16). For this reason, critical principles of classification differ from age to age and so produce different ways of grouping the same body of texts than a later age, using another set of norms, would arrive at. Her point, then, is that the application of modernist criteria to pre-modern works has resulted in the selection of a small number of atypical texts for the canon. Her argument flows from her basic premise that fiction in the nineteenth century was written with a conscious and specific social agenda in mind and that by recovering the authorial intention underlying a work, it is possible to appreciate the greatness of a larger number of the works of the time. Hence she offers a single way of reading all texts. It follows, then, that different ways of reading the same text have produced a text which is a significantly different one for each generation who reads it. The obvious implication of this for the canon is that works which are now seen as "minor" or "unimportant" may well have been considered as "great" in another age for critical reasons which we do not immediately recognize or appreciate, as she demonstrates with such works as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*.

Tompkins' argument is quite persuasive although problematic under scrutiny. Her directive to read the text in light of the authorial intention in order to arrive at better explanations than modernist formal analysis can yield seems a plausible one, but the recovery of that intention on often purely speculative grounds ("one might say," or "one could

conclude”) devalues the argument. Tompkins admits that “my own attitude toward these texts is [not] neutral or disinterested” (xiii) nor is she necessarily more accurate in her assessment of either authorial intention or the “mental set” of the era than other commentators have been.

Furthermore, it is an elitist notion of the “novel” which Tompkins urges us to discard: “*Wieland* was not designed as a well-made novel, but as a political tract meant to produce social change” (44), which “account[s] for portions of the text that have hitherto been seen as irrelevant, inadvertent, or simply ‘bad’” (43). Nina Baym, in her review of *Sensational Designs*, counters that “it is not necessary to discard the rubric ‘novel’ in order to think of books as having designs upon the world, because ordinary readers of fiction throughout our history have been much more receptive to highly emotive and interventionist fiction than has the literary establishment” (98). Baym concludes that Tompkins’ ideas about the novel have been formed according to the modernist principles she is trying to persuade her readers to reject.

Finally, if it is the case that fiction was intended to carry out a particular cultural work, the success of that task must be measured in terms of the impact the text had on its audience and what sorts of changes took place as a result. Her observation that Brockden Brown’s novels were “not at all popular when Brown was alive” (xii) would seem to contradict her premise that *Wieland* actually carried out its intended cultural work since Brown was presumably writing for his own age.

These remarks are not intended to devalue Tompkins' work for indeed she has offered both plausible and provocative readings of the texts she has chosen. However, her vision is often uncomfortably narrow and uncompromising, particularly in her insistence that literary reputation (i.e., greatness) is always a political construct.

If it is the case that "greatness" speaks for itself, as Bakhtin and Kermode assert, why do people go to the trouble of constructing canons at all? And why do later thinkers formulate catalogues which are meant to refute earlier listings? John Kohl posits that "greatness" is a quality which emerges as the result of the movement from the accessible to the selective canon: "literary works in general undergo a constant scrutiny and are under constant review; this review may be regarded as a sifting or winnowing process from which certain [works] emerge as 'great' while others by more or less common agreement are eventually judged to be not so, perhaps not even worth reading at all" (1). (In this regard, both Kermode and Tompkins make a strong point about the important role of "opinion" in determining literary reputation.) Kohl further argues that "a canon . . . is drawn up in order to keep safe a tradition" (5), to ensure that particular works continue to receive attention and to be studied because they embody the values deemed important to a society. Just as Scripture is a canonized body of writings which is held as central to the living out of Western Christianity, so certain literary works are felt to reflect values which underpin a particular culture. One impetus for the

movement to "open up the canon" is the feeling that the established canon does not adequately enough represent the spectrum of values which characterize that society; when the social consciousness has been expanded, a greater range of criteria must govern the selection of works which are canonized so that this heightened consciousness is reflected in those choices. This is one of the most cogent reasons why there is an ongoing inclination toward revisionism.

#### 4. The Making of a Canon

The ideas of both canon and American literature have changed significantly in the course of our brief two-century history. Several important and intensive studies have been undertaken to demonstrate various aspects of these changes; two of them have been especially helpful for the present purposes: Alan Golding's survey of the development of American poetry anthologies is an especially helpful guide to canon development in general, while Bruce Franklin has examined the exclusion of blacks (and, to some extent, other minorities) from the American canon in his exhaustive introduction to *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison*.

When Elihu Hubbard Smith compiled *American Poems, Selected and Original in 1793*, one of the earliest poetry anthologies in American literary history, his several aims can be summarized as wanting to preserve poems which appeared in newspapers and magazines that might



otherwise be lost to posterity along with the works of "eminent" American poets, and providing the forum for a side-by-side evaluation of various poems so that their comparative merit could be ascertained. In other words, he was attempting to preserve a national literature simultaneous with its creation, a participation in the present rather than an observation of the past, as was the case with British anthologies. It is obvious from examining the contents of Smith's anthology that he exercised a good deal of editorial judgment in deciding which poems to include: Golding observes that it was dominated by the works of his friends, by Connecticut poets, and by Federalists (286). Thus although Smith was mainly preserving an accessible canon, he consciously applied critical judgment which was deliberate and value-laden, not neutral and disinterested, an observation which can be made of all editors and anthologists.

The implications of this selectivity have been considered earlier; but whatever our critical judgment of such a result, certain important observations must be noted: from the very beginning, "human politics" has been a factor in canon formation; knowing the "right" people and being in "the right place at the right time" can greatly influence one's inclusion in or exclusion from the canon. In such instances, considerations of "literary merit" may often be clearly subordinate. This does not necessarily mean that bad poems written by an editor's friends will be chosen, but that friends who write poems of merit have a better chance of being recognized and included. Jane Tompkins, however, makes a much narrower

argument concerning Hawthorne in *Sensational Designs*: she asserts that his reputation was more the result of the confluence of timing and literary friendships than the literary merit of his writings. As convincing as she is, however, her argument is difficult to prove because there is no list of "better" writers who were excluded from the canon so that Hawthorne could be included. Smith's anthology also demonstrates that political ideologies and social values serve as shaping forces in the development of a canon. Throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, Golding notes, literary nationalism was an underlying principle in the compilation of anthologies; as the new nation struggled to cultivate its own identity as something separate and different from England, more attention was accorded to works that reflected this ideal. The notion of literature being canonized because it speaks to contemporary social and political issues is commonly recognized in older canons and is the thrust of the current revisionist movement, as demonstrated in the writings of critics such as Paul Lauter, Louis Kampf, Sheila Delany, and Ellen Cantarow.

Literary nationalism also took on a moral edge. With the framework of political institutions firmly established, the next step was their moral justification and guidelines for living within them; literature affirmed this new sense of self, and so the works which had the best chance of being collected into anthologies were those which inspired ideological conformity. In other words, preservation was fine, so long as it

was the preservation of ideologically acceptable works. This selective approach explains why it was not until the publication of Samuel Kettell's *Specimens of American Poetry* (1829) that Puritan poetry and the works of Philip Freneau and John Barlow were introduced into the national canon. It was not until a firm sense of an "American" identity had been cultivated that writings which espoused other ideologies could be recognized as part of the American heritage. Rufus Griswold followed Kettell's more inclusive approach in his highly influential *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842), even though he was guided as well by the idiosyncracies of his own taste: he disliked the South, so he weighted his canon heavily toward New England; he was partial to his friends, with the result that some now forgotten figures were heavily represented at the expense of more competent writers such as Longfellow, Bryant, Lowell, Holmes, and Whittier; although he liked Emerson, he disliked transcendentalism and so virtually ignored Thoreau; finally, his opinion that "the literature of women . . . is, for the most part, sauzle"<sup>4</sup> resulted in hardly any representation of women poets. In a word, Griswold's canon suggests that American poetry allowed no tolerance of eccentric philosophies, that it was written almost exclusively by men, and that most of it was created in New York and New England.

By the time of the Civil War, Golding notes, anthologists began to operate more and more on the assumption that a stable canon of poets, made up of both greater and lesser names as reflected in the successive

editions of Griswold's collection, was emerging as a natural product of time and history (again the idea of historical perspective being the touchstone for measuring what "greatness" is). This assumption was felt to be the result of an important new criterion of judgment introduced by Charles Dana in his well received *Household Book of Poetry*, first published in 1858 and still being reprinted in 1919, namely the exercise of absolute rather than historically relative critical judgment. This principle had long been followed by British anthologists, but not Americans. Dana attempted to judge each work solely on the basis of its poetic merit rather than on the nationality, status or "politics" of the poet. The same guideline was followed in three post-Civil War anthologies compiled by Bryant, Emerson, and Whittier. This shift in emphasis was an important phase of canon building because it initiated the international canon by allowing the "best" American works to stand alongside the "best" British ones. However, what constituted the "best" is sometimes suspect; the three latter anthologists took advantage of their own great status to promote their own work and the work of their friends so that the canon became not only stable but self-perpetuating. Their commonality of opinions is interesting: they all ranked Poe below minor poets and all excluded Melville and Whitman (despite Emerson's praise of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855); the thrust of general critical opinion of the time supported their contentions. Golding suggests that this might have been the case because of the desire to offset the disorienting effect of the Civil War and of rapid economic expan-

sion; he feels the postbellum reading public wanted a stable, ordered art, and the New England poets stood for continuity in a disrupted time.

The next important stage of canon formation is reflected in the Englishman William Michael Rossetti's *American Poems: A Collection of Representative Verse* (1872). His anthology proposed a different balance of reputations than had obtained in American ones by representing Whitman, whose English reputation far outstripped his American one, as the most important American poet of his time. He elevates Poe's position in the canon and, with the exception of Emerson and Whittier, the New England poets are relegated to a minor status. Rossetti's canon was enthusiastically confirmed by Edmund Clarence Stedman, one of the period's most influential American critics, whose *American Anthology, 1787-1900* (1900) professed the belief that each generation needs both its own literary history and its own anthology. His principle of selection was grounded in the notion that the tendency of poetry to politicize and moralize had died away; America's sense of political and literary accomplishment no longer needed the support of anthologies documenting the unique national characteristics of its verse. Those whom Stedman saw as the best American poets did not define or confirm their culture's dominant values but revolted against them, which led him to sustain the elevated positions of Whitman and Poe. In addition, he was one of the first to grant appreciable space to Emily Dickinson's work (although, as Golding notes, one of the factors that delayed Dickinson's entry into the canon was the absence

of easily available editions of her work). Stedman's position foreshadowed the split between cultivated and popular taste—the “high” canon and the “popular” canon—that came to characterize modernism.

By the mid-1870's, fiction had come to surpass poetry in the market place. Stedman viewed this situation as public indifference to poetry, which he valued as superior to fiction. He (and most subsequent anthologists, according to Golding) responded by strictly separating popular from cultivated taste. In 1865 the best poetry was defined by popular taste, but in 1912 Thomas Lounsbury referred in his *Yale Book of American Verse* to “the wretchedness of taste displayed by the average man.” Texts such as Lounsbury's and others contemporary with his show that teachers of literature had become more responsible for overseeing the canon in the two decades after 1900. Thus the power to direct taste shifted from individual editors to institutions—the universities. These academic anthologies embraced most of Stedman's principles of selection, but ignored much of his canon: the New England poets and Poe formed the core of their canon; Whitman's reputation was still unsure, and Dickinson did not hold a very high place. While these anthologies often demeaned public taste, they generally accepted the canons which that taste had established.

Golding concludes that Stedman's work and the subsequent work of those who followed his principles effectively closed the pre-twentieth century canon for all practical purposes; the names will remain the same, even if relative positions sometimes fluctuate. Thus modern anthologists

are free to gather contemporary works. One of the elements guiding modern critical thought is the proliferation of ancillary writings (essays, introductions, etc.) by authors themselves, both of prose and of poetry, in which they discuss both their own work and that of others as well as reflect on writing and literature in general, with the result that many twentieth century anthologies are coterie texts that influence other writers.

Stedman's canon and the modernist anthologies, then, have had a profound influence on how canons are established by employing a shift in the principles by which canonic texts are chosen. Nineteenth-century anthologists praised poetically conservative work; after Stedman, most editors began increasingly to value the poetically innovative. Whereas nineteenth-century collections tended to reflect and even celebrate popular taste, the modernist anthologies programmatically deviate from it. In the absence of the impulse toward preservation, modern canonists have no hesitation about proliferating a number of different types of selective canons, each delimited according to a specific definition and constructed to serve a particular purpose, but all drawing from the same accessible canon.

This brief summary/survey attempts to show how ideas about canons have changed dramatically in the history of American literature as have the principles which govern the inclusion and exclusion of particular texts. It is evident that any canon is an attempt to homogenize taste, to persuade a larger group to view a selection of works the same way a

smaller group does. The revisionist movement in the twentieth century, then, is less a movement to alter the older, established canon than it is a challenge to re-read what is already there, but according to a new set of evaluative principles, according to “a way that makes explicit their omissions, commissions, investments, and constraints” which grows out of “a dissatisfaction with the available historical accounts of specific social, political, economic and cultural changes” (Sosnoski 2). Hence contemporary revisionism is as much a call to look at the old with new eyes as a mandate to include some contemporary works alongside the old.

A word is also in order here about the general subject of anthologies. The anthology is the usual vehicle by which a canon is presented and communicated; it takes various forms, and not all of them were meant to have academic or institutional identities. Alberto Manguel refers to anthologists as “reader[s] with a purpose” who subsequently become writers about what they have read because they “see in a story or poem patterns and plots that are not immediately obvious” (22); in the process of explaining their observations, anthologists create new ways of reading (and hence grouping) a number of works. There is, then, the “museum anthology” which attempts to preserve the best of a kind, such as the fairy tales collected by the Grimm brothers or the many stories of varied authorship which comprise *The Arabian Nights*. There are also anthologies built around a theme, a genre, or a topic; here would be found a collection such as *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural* (ed. Herbert



Wise and Phyllis Fraser, 1944). It follows, then, that an anthology can create genres as well as define them. Manguel cites two examples of how this has taken place: André Breton's *Anthologie de l'Humour Noir* gives a name to a motif which is nearly as old as literature itself, though it was a scant fifty years ago (1937) that Breton coined the term. And again, in the *Anthologie du Fantastique* (1966), Roger Caillois argues his distinction between what in English we would call "the fantastic" and "fantasy"; to demonstrate his thesis, Caillois excludes from his anthology (and hence from his definition of the fantastic) both Gothic literature and fairy tales.

It is evident that canons and anthologies are attempts to preserve certain works because of the "greatness" they exemplify or the "values" they embody, qualities which are judged important enough to be passed on to succeeding generations as a significant part of the cultural heritage. Critics often use terms such as "greatness" and "value" without qualification as though their meanings were uniformly understood and their criteria universally accepted. In the quest for locating these qualities in a work, these same critics studiously eschew any criteria which derive from personal "taste," suggesting that value and greatness are universals which inhere in a text and operate independently of subjective appeal; in this view, the critic becomes a privileged reader who is specially qualified to recognize these characteristics. Taste, however, is the locus from which norms of greatness and value ultimately obtain their definition, that is, that taste *becomes* value. Robert Frost's observation that "the right read-

er of a good poem can tell the moment it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound" intimates that the process of valorization begins only after a work has found appeal with the reader. What has been shown in this section is that this appeal can take many shapes: a work may be seen to reflect a particular political, social, religious, or critical ideology; it may be thought to address a cultural or national identity; or it may simply "speak to" the heart of an individual in a way which seems reflective of (and hence applicable to) all human nature.<sup>5</sup> Once this appeal is recognized, there is an urgency to preserve and promulgate the work (and ones similar to it) so that other readers can experience and appreciate what another person has identified as "great" or "valuable." But just as the same glass of water can be accurately described as either half full or half empty, so can the same set of values and principles be judged as biases and prejudices by another critic. Hence each canon which is formulated is the product of someone else's tastes which have been translated into values and principles, and then offered (usually through an anthology or course syllabus) as a definitive or at least enlightened way of looking at the accessible canon.

Thus every canon is a pre-judgment and is itself the result, at least by reaction, of earlier pre-judgments. Texts which have survived the "test of time" and continue to be included in successive canons (the "classics") are thought to embody qualities which transcend the temporal issues of their authors and speak with a universal voice to people of all

ages. Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that there is nothing inherently "timeless" or "valuable" in any text, but rather that succeeding generations simply continue to exercise the same (or many of the same) standards of evaluation that critics of previous ages espoused. In a similar vein, Jane Tompkins contends that continued canonization results from continued practice of the same kinds of political stratagems which originally brought the work to critical and popular attention.

Tompkins and Smith posit essentially the same argument, though in different terms, that there is no such thing as absolute "value" in a literary work. For Tompkins, as has been pointed out, literary reputation is more the result of producing texts which reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies and therefore have "sensational designs" on a culture in terms of shaping its thought and behavior than on any theoretical "value" a work may contain. Smith is less political in her contention that value does indeed exist, but it is not a stable quality which is universal and timeless; instead, it is contingent upon the prevailing structure of tastes and preferences of the age which offers it as a norm. Tompkins applies similar reasoning in discussing certain works of the nineteenth century now seen as "minor" by proposing that to appreciate why they were once regarded as "major," it is necessary both to reconstruct the author's intention and to view the works from their contemporary critical perspective rather than from ours. Their thesis is in obvious opposition to those offered by Kermode, Gadamer, and Bakhtin.

This is not meant to suggest that either anthologizing or canon reevaluation is a negative or somehow heretical activity, for while "someone else's whim can become taste" and taste can become value, "the second-hand quality of an anthology is really one of second sight" (Manguel 22) which, at the very least, offers a newly-structured way of looking at the accessible canon and challenges readers to re-examine their received notions of what constitutes value. Perhaps the only immutable characteristic of the canon is its mutability, which attests to the subjectivity of the judgment that formulates it.

### **5. Opening Up the Canon: What Is Literature?**

The historical discussion in the foregoing section suggests that revisionism prior to the twentieth century followed two general tracks: earlier efforts were impelled by nationalistic urges to expand the selective canon as the accessible canon grew so that a more comprehensive listing of American writers would be preserved. The later movements, once the canon of names was rather well established, sought to determine the relative ranking of the writers within the canon. Most contemporary revisionism finds its impetus in exclusionary issues: what groups within society do not find a place in the canon and hence do not find a voice for themselves? As mentioned before, the canon was almost exclusively made up of writers who were white, male, and usually northeastern. "Where are the blacks?" asks Paul Lauter; "Where are the women?" (xiii) And, we

might also add, where are the Native Americans? the gays? the immigrants? the poor whites? The list could go on and on, but the point is that regardless of the breadth of the American canon, it has never been truly representative of the cross-section of Americans. In the absence of a recognized literature through which a group may express its identity, that group has no identity and, in a sense, has no existence because they become effectively invisible to the rest of society. Discovering the nearly-lost works of these groups and encouraging the composition of original ones which reflect the identity of that group is the thrust of today's canon-busters (as Michael Warner and others like to call them). And once these works are in the accessible canon, the challenge is to have them accorded full status in the selective canon—certainly no easy task!

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the canonical judgments made by previous generations were somehow inferior to those being advanced today. It cannot be denied that earlier canons were formulated according to norms which we now recognize as narrow and biased, but this is not to say that their selections were flawed or otherwise poor ones. Each critic and anthologist worked within a defined set of criteria and attempted to select a sampling of the best examples of these criteria. Forgiving them the biases which their culture did not give them eyes to see, we must admit that their methods were just as sophisticated as those being practiced today; the fact that such a large percentage of their judgments are still recognized as worthwhile today attests to the

soundness of their insight. The subjectivity which they brought to their task was no less critically debilitating than that which current revisionists bring to theirs.

The greatest demands for canonic inclusion have come by far from women, blacks, and Native Americans; to some degree all of these groups have been successful in gaining at least limited admission to the canon, though it is the demands of the feminists which have made the most impact and yielded the greatest results. However, the case of each of these groups poses certain problems for the literary theorist, at the root of which is the seemingly simplistic question: What is "literature"?

Arnold Krupat correctly observes that "the rich and various literatures of Native American peoples, by virtue of their antiquity and indigeness, have an important claim to inclusion in the canon of American literature"; from the time of Christopher Columbus to the close of the frontier, the "new" Americans "tended to define their peculiar national distinctiveness in relation to a perceived opposition between the Europeans they no longer were and the Indians they did not wish to become" (309). The logic for canonizing Native American literature is too obvious to admit argument, but the problem underlying its exclusion stems from another consideration: since the Indians (the term is here used interchangeably with Native American) did not write, Krupat observes that "they were not regarded as possessing a 'littera-*t*ure' available for study" (309). The term "littera-*t*ure" refers to the culture of letters, and the

person of letters, European or American, was the person of culture. Indians were "children of nature" for the very reason that they were not people of letters. At the time Smith and Kettell and others were drawing up their canons, "oral literature" could only be a contradiction in terms. American literature was seeking to define itself as a body of national *writing* and as a selection of distinctively literary texts, so the oral tradition of the Indians, as beautiful and rich as it might be, could not be included in the classification of "literature."

Making Indian "literature" into "littera-*ture*" is not as easy a task as it might seem at first. A culture which had no written language to record its literature likewise had no medium for preserving its history other than the oral tradition, and that such a medium is fraught with inherent fallibility is obvious. Much of what we know of Native American literature and culture is from the writings of non-Indians: journals, diaries and letters of the white settlers. Only a very small portion has been written by educated descendants of early Indians who are recording the oral tradition passed on to them. Houston Baker asserts that "literature is a representation of experience, [so] one must ask how it is possible to represent in the English language experiences that occur, so to speak, in other languages" (ix). The polemic here is twofold: first, can oral tradition be considered "literature" in the same way that written texts are, so that they may be included in the potential canon? Second, since an "outsider's" rendering of an experience cannot communicate the "mind set" of

the insider group, is the resulting text, then, a "second-hand" piece of literature which renders nothing but facts and events? An oral tradition does not cease to exist simply because it gets written down either once or from time to time; the many versions of the Scottish ballad "Barbara Allan" are witness to this. If something is written down accurately, that text is to be considered "literature" just as much as any author's manuscript and thus is subject to study in all the same ways (as is done with other "non-literary" texts such as letters and journals). The degree to which any reader appreciates the several layers of cultural implications in the text works the same here as for any translation (for certainly the original Indian experience did not take place in standard British English!): there will always be a point beyond which any person who is not natively a part of that culture (or a native speaker of that language) must remain an outsider, although that restriction does not inhibit the study of these texts in the same way that other texts are studied, nor does it preclude the expansion of a reader's appreciation for the culture through continued study. Krupat concludes that despite the easily convincing argument to include Native American literature in the canon, the practicalities of doing so are complicated both by a lack of accessible texts (by far the larger problem) and a continuing resistance by some elements of the "old guard" to see the often unique forms of Indian literature and language as being on a par with "classical" literature and, therefore, worthy of attention and study.



Some of these same considerations apply to black literature as well; indeed it is only within the past several decades that the two words "black" and "literature" together came to have real meaning. History documents that while the blacks who were brought to America to serve as slaves might have been illiterate (which was almost universally the case), they certainly did not lack imagination or fail to find a creative voice, at least among themselves. Once again, however, their media were often unconventional forms which were alien to the established canon: much of the black experience is recorded in work songs and spirituals; furthermore, these are not only oral but expressed in their distinctive black dialect. The recent efforts to canonize both Indian and black literatures shows that the attitudes of canon builders are once more inclined toward preservation on a broader scale; however, the limited success of these efforts, especially in the case of Native American literature, just might be reflective of the overall dearth of potential (hence accessible) materials.

The strongest single influence on the contemporary canon has come from women's studies; neither American thought nor the American canon will ever be the same again. This is so in part for two important reasons: first, the percentage of literate women in the course of history (although they may have been disenfranchised) has always been exponentially greater than the percentage of both literate blacks and Native Americans; for this reason, there is a greater number of potential texts which can be examined and possibly canonized. Second, the rise of feminist cri-

ticism has provided a forum for the re-reading of many already established texts in the canon; in some cases, this has resulted in scholarly though non-literary texts by and about women (such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*), and in other cases it has spawned new creative works in reaction to older ones (such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in response to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*). Feminist studies have also been responsible for the rediscovery of texts which had been virtually lost due to the oppression of women and the suppression of their literary efforts. However, a significant number of these texts are of the "nontraditional" type: letters, journals, diaries, even oral testimony which has been only subsequently written down; this situation brings up again the issue of their "worthiness" for inclusion in the canon. That these materials are indeed being published in greater numbers seems to have at least tacitly addressed the matter of their appropriateness for the canon; hence any *recording* of the human experience comes under the definition of "literature."<sup>6</sup> This is likewise the thinking of Elizabeth Meese in her contention that "literature has to be defined so broadly that it can potentially contain all instances of creative verbal [not to be confused with oral] expression" (16). She insists that all speech acts must be considered as part of the potential canon, and there are numerous contemporary critics who stand firm in that same opinion; this attitude alone has enough force to restructure the identity and shape of the canon in the next century. But equally as influential is the recognition that no canon which purports to

be a record of human experience can ignore the existence of any groups of persons.

Many issues of race and gender have come to bear on the contemporary canon, but the concerns of women, blacks, and Native Americans have certainly had the strongest influence. However, these are not the only issues which have commanded attention, nor are they issues which exist independently; rather, they form part of the larger mosaic of politics.

## 6. The Nature of Contemporary Revisionism

The notion of a totally inclusive canon, such as Meese and others have proposed, both suggests and validates the concept of multiple canons, that is, a number of canonic listings organized around specified principles of selection but which all draw from the same accessible canon; this is indeed the model which current study follows. It is these principles of selection which are now being called into question because the agendas which inform them are increasingly more political than aesthetic or literary.

Ellen Cantarow defines politics as "all actions and activities taken in pursuit of a social goal" (74). Her choice of words is clearly reflective of the generation in which she wrote them: the 1960's were perhaps the most volatile years in American literary history. Fueled by manifold social disillusionment and compounded by the Viet Nam issue, many English professors began to see their work partly as futile but mostly as dishonest

and sham: the received canon served only to perpetuate white male social values which were not only stagnant but false because of their blatant elitist noninclusiveness. In their frustration they began to ask the question which titles Cantarow's essay: Why teach literature? Their response ushered in the era of militant "canon-busting" which is still going on full force today.

The response to the question posed earlier, "What is literature?" reflected a concern about what kinds of texts might or might not be appropriately considered as literary; in this new context the answer is quite different: according to what for present purposes might be termed the "Kampf/Lauter" group, literature is an instrument of persuasion, hence political power. Their arguments are framed by their milieu as college instructors and so are colored by professional concerns: "What can we teach or write about—and how—that will unify intention and action in our lives, and produce competent students?" The question flows from what they see as their "major concern: the specific social effects of literature" (Kampf/Lauter 5, 8). When Sheila Delany observes that "at the heart of any great piece of literature [is] some profound human truth" (311), she is saying the same thing that canonists and literary historians have said since the beginning of criticism, but for her that truth is no more relative to lived experience than a silk flower is relative to a real flower: one is a romantic copy of the other; although lovely, it is still false. Thus Bruce Franklin mandates that English departments must begin "to teach litera-

ture that is, in one way or another, relevant to the lives of the great masses of people, and to teach it in ways that these people can perceive as relevant" (103). It is in light of this thinking that Cantarow concludes that "our particular responsibility as teachers of literature is to act on the humanizing knowledge art can give us to construct with our students in class new, revolutionary ideas of culture, and to construct with them outside the classroom both an active socialist movement and culture" (97).

Such a manifesto as this clearly shows how canons can easily become what Charles Altieri calls "ideological banners for social groups" and which then serve to function as a mark of group identification. But he also cautions that "when canons are at stake, purposes determine what count as facts" (43). He here suggests that the fervor of idealism can easily lead a zealous group to be just as selectively inclusive and exclusive in formulating their canon as they claim were the earlier canon makers against whom they are revolting.

This kind of revisionist thinking is, at the very least, a shift in emphasis away from traditional aesthetic values in canon formation: the Kampf/Lauter agenda is clearly both political and militant. But it would be a mistake to think that these people advocate scrapping the received canon in favor of assembling an entirely contemporary one comprised of revolutionary social documents. Their revisionism is of the type that advocates both more canonic inclusion (as does Elizabeth Meese and others) and studied re-readings of established texts in order to discover veiled

social commentary that they might contain. The calmer voice of Frank Kermode, though, offers a note of caution to those who tend to place a lot of trust in re-defining the message of established canonical works of long-standing: "It is not to be expected that future conversational developments will satisfy when the old ones have proved unsatisfying" (88). His remark points to the contingency and relativity of all literary judgments: how one culture or society values (that is, reads) a particular work may not be satisfactory to even another generation of the same society; neither, then, can any reading of a work can ever be considered the "best" or final one. It is this same thinking which sets the stage for the current New Historical approach to reassessing works by locating their value to later readers more in the political and cultural context which produced them than on formal or structural principles.

## 7. The Challenge of Canon Theory

The impulse to canonize—whether it be literary works, personal values, or even more banal kinds of things—seems to be a natural one and as old as humankind itself. Barbara Herrnstein Smith contends that "to exist is to evaluate" (23), while Alberto Manguel observes that "every reader is an anthologist" (1); even St. Paul admonishes us to "test everything and retain what is good." In his simplicity of heart, Paul was probably unaware of the polemical nature of the word "good," but his exhortation does suggest that the process of valorization is predicated on a sys-

tem of values and assumptions that define a way of thinking and approaching anything which is offered as “valuable” or at least “better” than what has been previously accepted. To that extent, then, the impetus to formulate and reformulate canons takes on what might be called a utopian impulse in that canon building aims at expanding the social and aesthetic consciousness by proposing ever more inclusiveness while demanding ever more responsible principles of selectivity.

Canons, furthermore, are both private and public things because the literary works they valorize “express personal subjectivity as well as the social milieu which inspired them” (Lauter xxiv). When we examine a canon and analyze the distribution of gender, race, and demography, we are seeing the externalization of someone’s values and ideologies. Just as Jane Tompkins argues that certain stories were intended to have “sensational designs” on their audience, so the same thing can be said of canons, particularly contemporary revisionist canons.

From the outset canon formation and re-formation, as this chapter has shown, is a political activity, regardless of how subtly or blatantly the political agenda may be expressed. Because politics both grows out of and attempts to shape human behavior, it is an activity which is as dynamic as the human spirit itself. It follows, then, that the impulse to canonic revisionism is an inherent part of literary study because it is the outgrowth of an intrinsically dynamic activity. Human nature is not long content with anything, particularly its past. When Altieri sums up the

political view of literature, he is addressing all of canon theory as well by describing "the past as essentially a record of ideological struggle, the present as a domain we liberate from that past . . . and the future as a conflict among the competing self-interests that determine critical stances" (47). In whatever terms we may choose to characterize literary history, the pattern is always the same, so the task of canon theory must be to see the past as a set of challenges and models by which the present is viewed. Only then will we be able to approach the task of drawing up a canon whose works are a reflection of the diversity of our culture and society and represent what we view as valuable and worthy of preservation and attention from the perspective of our moment in history.



## NOTES FOR CHAPTER I

1. Theoretically the potential canon would provide an exhaustive listing of "all the works ever written," but in reality such is not the situation, particularly in the case of older literary periods, for the obvious reason of insufficient documentation regarding now lost works. From a more modern perspective, however, the problem of how the mechanisms of the publishing industry have consistently caused fiction and poetry of "high quality" to be overlooked and hence unpublished (i.e., "lost") is chronicled in Bill Henderson's *The Publish-It-Yourself Handbook: Literary Tradition and How-To*. Henderson's solution was to found his own publishing house (Pushcart Press) as a vehicle for self-publishing by "determined authors of quality" (mostly young or never-before-published individuals) whose works were not judged "good enough" for commercial houses to "take a chance" on printing. His vigorous documentation of self-published works which were later judged to be "great" (Blake and Whitman are among the more famous examples) is undercut by his relentless disclaimer that his enterprise is not a "vanity press" (one which publishes anything a writer wants to see in print). Stephen Tabachnick also addresses the role of the publishing industry in suppressing important works in "The Problem of Neglected Literature."
2. The very term "revisionist" suggests the strong influence of Marxist philosophy which underlies much of the current impetus toward "opening up the canon." There is an obvious reaction against an attitude which valorizes the past to the exclusion of the present and thus the notion that "greatness" is not to be found in the present. Revisionist thinking also reacts against evaluative norms which locate greater value in formal and stylistic matters than in content, for they see the purpose of literature to be a guide for social structure and action as well as a reflection of its times, or, as Jane Tompkins views it in *Sensational Designs*, the "cultural work" which fiction is asked to do. Thus for the revisionist the process of remaking the canon is necessarily inevitable as well as ongoing, for the society to which that literature speaks is itself always undergoing change and development. Be that as it may, there is still a reluctance on the part of the academy to accord contemporary works the status of "classic"; that label is still reserved for works which have continued to occupy a high place in the canon for a longer period of time. The laudatory but more cautious designation of "great" is more likely to be used to describe contemporary works of literary merit.

3. The strength of the academy's control over the formation and revision of the canon can be sensed in *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English* (eds. Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter. NY: Pantheon Books, 1972). The contributors, all then-young professors in probationary faculty positions, describe their struggles to incorporate noncanonical works into their syllabi and the administrative harassment and often denial of tenure that resulted. Paul Lauter's *Reconstructing American Literature: Courses, Syllabi, Issues*, published eleven years later, shows a marked relaxation of hostility between administrators and innovative professors which seems to be based on mutual concession: the newer syllabi are for the most part a deft blend of traditional canonical texts and minor or nearly unknown works of the period along with contemporary works.
4. The word "sauzle" is listed in neither an unabridged dictionary nor the *O.E.D.*, so we may assume that it is a word of Griswold's own concoction. The context of the term and tone of the passage suggest that the word is meant to denote an attitude of derision toward something which is judged to have little inherent value, in this case, the work of women writers.
5. A recent University of Chicago advertisement for a "great books" course refers to "the classics—those Western masterworks that, through beauty of language and expression, offer insight into the human condition, speak to our minds hearts century after century," which indicates that traditional values such as "timelessness" are still strongly embraced by the academy.
6. The necessity for potentially canonical texts being in written form is obvious since the nature of a canon is essentially a preservative one. The recording of a work drawn from the oral tradition does not remove the work from that tradition, but simply documents (i.e., preserves) one version of the work for study and for standardized dissemination.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PROBLEM OF MINOR LITERATURE

*"Methods do not fall from the sky, but have their place in history." – Hans Robert Jauss*

It quickly becomes clear that there is a close and virtually inseparable relationship among literary history, critical theory, canon formation, and theories of major and minor literature; a consideration of any one of them inevitably raises issues relating to the others because they are so mutually influential. For that reason, a consideration of minor literature is a natural outgrowth of canon study, although it is difficult to talk about minor literature as if it enjoyed an autonomous existence. Hence this discussion will necessarily touch on a number of different areas so that the larger picture of how these elements interact may be appreciated.

John Guillory (174) observes that "for *some* reason *some* literature is worth preserving" (his italics), and the process of canonizing is the attempt to determine which works are "great" or "major" and hence should be preserved. The natural result of such an endeavor is to conclude that some works must be seen as "not great," or at least "not as great," but still worthy of being preserved. As the foregoing discussion makes clear, the goal of canon building is to give critical (and presumably popular)

attention to certain works which are seen to possess enduring "value" of one sort or another. Canon makers have numerous works from which to choose in drawing up their rubrics and so, if for no other reasons than efficiency and expediency, attempt to select those works which most clearly exemplify the criteria which underpin their principle of selection. At the same time, it would seem that an attempt is made to opt for those works which will appeal to a large segment of the reading public (whether that public be defined as the general population or the academic community<sup>1</sup>) and which will convey a feeling of "timelessness" so as to have appeal for subsequent generations of readers. In a word, canon makers effectively declare some works to be "major" by their inclusion of them in the canon, while others become seen as "minor" by virtue of their being excluded from or assigned to a peripheral position within the canon.

There is essentially only one criterion which guides canon makers: they recognize that a particular work is worthy of being preserved (i.e., re-read) because it calls attention to itself by demonstrating one or more important characteristics. The most important one is that the work's subject matter deals with issues timely to the agenda of that canon. The work, further, is presented in a style which is notably allusive; it draws memorable characters and evidences sufficient depth, ambiguity, and irony so as to invite subsequent readings to appreciate the complex interaction of these various elements. Any theory of minor literature recognizes that different works possess any or all of these characteristics but to varying

degrees. As a complement to the category of major literature, it helps to assess the extent to which an author has been successful in realizing these qualities in a particular work. Any theory of minor literature assumes that there will be an unevenness of quality from one author to another and even from one work to another by the same author. Inclusive canons will find a place for most of the works which exhibit these attributes, higher places for the more successful accomplishments and lower places for the ambitious but less realized attempts.

But the matter of "major" and "minor" categories of literature is not as simple as all this in practice because works, especially minor ones, do indeed over a period of time change position within the canon and, to a lesser degree, move in and out of the canon. The fact that movement between positions of major and minor takes place indicates that the categories and contexts which are used to view a body of works are inherently unstable and shift not only from age to age but from critic to critic. The intention of this chapter is to show that traditional ways of defining minor literature are, owing to their fundamental formalist framework, flawed by narrowness in two essential ways: first, in their consideration of only formal literary qualities as gauges of majority and minority status, and second, in their prejudicial underlying suppositions about race and gender which have effectively excluded a large number of works from possible consideration for canonization. What will be proposed, instead, is a theory of minor literature which acknowledges the validity of formal literary

characteristics, but as one criterion among several, and which recognizes the interplay of history and reader involvement in ascertaining both the meaning and the value of a work. Furthermore, it will be argued that minor literature is itself inherently honorific by showing that the task it sets out to do is *different* from that of major literature, but that the ways in which it is different are no less literary, artistic, or laudable than the qualities found in major literature. Subsequent chapters will consider American Regionalism in general, a genre which has experienced fluctuating critical fortunes, as an example of minor literature,<sup>2</sup> along with three works in particular from that genre which have shifted from the height of popularity in their day to near oblivion in our own and attempt to account for that shift.

### 1. The Background of Minor Literary Theory

A theory of minor literature has always existed, at least by implication, as the necessary counterpart to "the classics" and other works which were seen as great. However, the necessity for discussing and defining minor literature from a theoretical standpoint is a relatively recent development, although the subject of minor literature as a separate critical entity is still of somewhat secondary concern. Louis Renza observes that there has never been a tradition of criticism which acknowledges "an honorifically understood minor literature apart from a privileged notion of major literature" (4); previous criticism, he feels, is "ambivalently moti-

vated" toward minor works and ultimately serves the purpose of showing by contrast what qualities make great works great. Criticism of minor literature, therefore, is essentially a comparative mode of evaluation (as is criticism of major literature) because it arises from a situation of seeing a particular work in relation to other similar or contemporary pieces. It seems reasonable to assume that no author writes with the deliberate intention of producing a minor work, so each work must be read as at least potentially great—or, it might be said, must be presumed great until proven otherwise. It is this very point which touches on the heart of Renza's argument, which will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

Any discussion of minor literature, then, is at the same time a discussion of major literature, for one can be understood only in relation to the other. That is to say, the nature of minor literature is most efficiently and effectively described in terms of what major literature is not, and vice-versa. But even this is a simplistic way of approaching such a complex topic because the works which are considered minor do not constitute a stable group. T. S. Eliot points out ("Minor Poetry" 39) that the very term minor (and hence major) means different things at different times because the criteria for making these judgments are variously defined both in different generations and among different contemporary critics. Just as it is difficult to arrive at a simple definition which encompasses all the ramifications of "the canon," so no definition of either major or minor literature can ever be inclusive enough to account for multi-

faceted standards of critical taste and the ever-changing environments in which they are exercised. To say this, however, is not to propose a deliberately ambivalent concept of minor literature which will somehow reconcile the divergent views of it which various critics have advanced, but is meant to suggest that the term itself has throughout history been as unstable as the list of works and writers which it names. The approach, then, will be an inductive one which will examine a number of aspects of and approaches to the critical process and assess their validity and effectiveness in defining minor literature.

Hans Robert Jauss's observation which opens this chapter points to the inherently retrospective character of literary criticism as opposed to the more dynamic nature of literature (i.e., art), which it serves. Critical theory grows out of the past as an experientially based reaction to literature as well as its criticism: "Like the French general staff, criticism is always fighting the previous battle, the last war; its standards are inevitably drawn from an earlier phase of creative activity, from which it codifies the rules that artists feel almost obliged to violate" (Dickstein 35). Given the dynamic nature of art (and hence literature), occasional revisions of critical definitions are both inevitable and necessary, a truism which Samuel Johnson recognized in 1751:

The systems of learning. . . must be sometimes reviewed, complications analyzed into principles, and knowledge disentangled from opinion. It is not always possible, without close inspection, to separate the genuine shoots of consequential learning, which grows out of some radical postulate, from the branches which have been engrafted upon it. The accidental prescriptions of authority, when time has procured them veneration, are often confounded with the laws of



nature, and those rules supposed coeval with reason, of which the first rise cannot be discovered. . . . It ought to be the first endeavour of a writer [i.e., critic] to distinguish between nature and custom, and that which is established because it is right from that which is right only because it is established. (qtd. in Kermode 68)

It is interesting that Johnson speaks for revision rather than replacement by some "radical postulate," for though some authoritative prescriptions may be proven to be faulty or narrow, it does not follow that all of them are. Some of them have become established because they are indeed true; it is the job of ongoing critical inquiry to determine which ones are correct and which ones are not, not merely to reject them all. Therefore, the most effective revisions, it would seem, are those which incorporate further development of already proven strategies of assessment and interpretation rather than attempts to expand isolated aspects of the larger critical perspective into monolithic modes of dealing with literary works. The notion of the canon as the repository of "valued" works has prevailed long enough to affirm its validity to the academy as well as to the reading public; critical approaches which tend to be narrow in their scope quite often introduce more chaos than illumination into a structure which is looked upon as a significant part of our cultural heritage. Current revisionism, which will inevitably reshape the definitions of major and minor literature, is essentially less concerned with adding and changing titles and authors as with altering the kinds of attitudes and values which informed the choices of earlier canon makers and how those attitudes themselves came to be "canonized" and normative. Commentary on texts, as we

know, "varies from one generation to the next because it meets different needs; the need to go on talking is paramount, the need to do it rather differently is equally urgent" (Kermode 36); critical conversation on the issue of the status of a work as major or minor, along with the attendant definition of the norms which inform these categories (notwithstanding the inevitable differences of opinion which will result), is just as important as discussion of any other aspect of the work in assuring its continued existence through the "form of attention" of criticism.

It is tempting to think that the word "minor" is synonymous with terms which suggest lesser quality or inferiority, but T. S. Eliot assures us that there is nothing inherently denigrating about the label itself ("Minor Poetry" 39). The very fact that specific works called minor have continued to survive in the canon attests that there is something about them, apart from merely historical significance, which makes them valuable enough to be the subject of continuing (if less frequent) critical attention and canonical inclusion. For this reason, much of what T. S. Eliot says about minor poetry can be ascribed to minor prose works as well. Minor works, for example, cannot be thought of as "easier" to read or less worthwhile than major works; quite often they demonstrate a complexity of theme and symbol found in the most esteemed of works. Nor can they merely be thought of as primarily shorter works; indeed several minor novels are many hundreds of pages long, while numerous major works are considerably briefer. It is not in these more superficial qualities, then,

that the nature of minor literature is to be found; instead, we must turn our attention to the definitions expressed or implied by various systems of literary theory.

## 2. Formalist Approaches to Minor Literature

Formalism and New Criticism have probably been more influential in shaping the various definitions of minor literature than any other critical approaches have been. This is not meant to suggest that these two terms are interchangeable names for the same theory, but rather that there are certain similarities between their ideologies which make it efficient to discuss them together. To summarize reductively, both kinds of criticism aim to explore what is specifically literary in texts, and both favor a detailed and empirical approach to reading. Formalists, however, are more concerned with method, that is, with establishing a "scientific" basis for literary theory; this emphasis is clearly seen in Northrop Frye's famous polemical assertion that "criticism is a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right, with some measure of independence from the art it deals with" (5). Thus criticism, in this view, is a construct, modeled after a scientific structure, and as such applies its principles to texts themselves to the exclusion of any non-textual considerations. By contrast, the New Critics combined attention to specific verbal ordering of texts with an emphasis on the non-conceptual nature of literary meaning: a literary work's complexity embodies a subtle response to life which

cannot be reduced to logical statements or paraphrases; thus the New Critical approach, despite its emphasis on close reading of texts, is fundamentally humanistic. In a word, Formalism thinks of literature as a special use of language, while New Criticism regards it as a form of human understanding. In sum, then, Formalism and New Criticism identify the locus of meaning of a text within the text itself and do not rely on external considerations such as history, biography, or reader response to complement the meaning of the text. Hence, the concepts of both major and minor literature are predicated on the belief that meaning (from whatever viewpoint one defines that term) inheres in the text, and that it is the task of criticism to identify and articulate this meaning, and to assess which texts have been shown to communicate their meaning more or less effectively than others.

Minor literature is so called in New Critical terms because these works fall short in terms of irony, tension, paradox, and ambiguity; that is to say, the authorial intention is too obvious to invite many re-readings or to sustain prolonged critical commentary, for they have "given themselves away" by yielding most of their meaning in a reading or two. In doing so, these works invite the "heresy of paraphrase" and become easy prey to the "intentional fallacy." Underlying this description, of course, is the notion that minor works are somehow less effective at doing *something* than the author's other works or works by other authors can do, and that "something" is usually defined as either communicating meaning or

demonstrating artistry: "There are authors—even great authors—in whose work one simply cannot find freighted detail, polyphony of voices, ambiguity of intent, and so on," observes Helen Vendler (qtd. in Renza, 183, n.10). By the same token, a work may be ultimately judged as minor because it errs on the side of making too strong a point about a trivial issue or because it contains unnecessary (and hence confusing) complication. But minor works nevertheless continue to survive either because they are the minor product of a major writer and hence have an inherently historical importance, or because they present a unique or interesting presentation of a place, an era, or a commonplace plot. That they occupy even a peripheral place in the canon is an issue secondary to their continued inclusion in the canon at all. Frank Kermode observes that "the process of selecting the canon may be very long but, once it is concluded, the inside works [presumably both the major and the minor ones] will normally be provided with the kinds of reading they require if they are to keep their immediacy to any moment . . . they quickly acquire virtual immunity to textual alteration, so the necessary changes must all be interpretative" (75). With minor literature, the interpretations are usually fewer; it is the categories under which the titles are grouped that change more frequently. But in the end, "the success of interpretative argument as a means of conferring or endorsing value is . . . not to be measured by the survival of the comment but by the survival of its object" (Kermode 67).

The approach of judging a work as major or minor exclusively on its literary merits is unquestionably a valuable criterion, but if it is the sole norm, the resulting canon is likely to overlook many works which contain aesthetic or literary elements which were judged more favorably by their original audiences and critics. As will be discussed later, for example, modern criticism sees sentimentalism as one of the major flaws in the writings of Bret Harte, but at the time Harte was writing, sentimentalism was not looked upon as a negative characteristic in a novel.

Formalism and New Criticism are most frequently described as "narrow" approaches because of their exclusive focus on the text, but this is not entirely correct; indeed it is the later Formalist principle of aesthetic function, subsequently taken up by Marxist critics, which paved the way for E. D. Hirsch's theory of significance. Late Formalists (such as Mukarovsky and Tynyanov) began to recognize the mistake of completely excluding extra-literary factors from critical analysis; their dynamic view of aesthetic structures placed great emphasis on the dynamic tension between literature and society. They argue that the aesthetic function of an object is not confined to a fixed category but is rather an ever-shifting boundary. Put another way, the same object can possess several functions: a church, for example, can be both a place of worship and a work of art. This same variability of function, they assert, can be found in literary works: the same literary product—a political speech, a biography, a letter, and so forth—may or may not possess the same aesthetic value in

different societies and periods. Hence “the circumference of the sphere of ‘art,’” observes Terry Eagleton, “is always changing and always dynamically related to the structures of society” (61). The idea of aesthetic function, then, somewhat broadens the perimeters of formalist thought not by admitting extra-textual material to the critical process, but by allowing texts and their formal properties to be assessed in terms of how they function in the context of the total work of art rather than as isolated elements judged by immutable norms.

E. D. Hirsch, in *The Aims of Interpretation*, effectively expands on the notion of aesthetic function in distinguishing between the meaning and the significance of a work. For him “the term ‘meaning’ refers to the whole verbal meaning of a text, and ‘significance’ to textual meaning in relation to a larger context, i.e., another mind, another era, a wider subject matter, an alien system of values, and so on. In other words, ‘significance’ is textual meaning as related to some context, indeed any context, beyond itself” (2-3). It is overly simplistic, according to Hirsch, to suppose that only one interpretation of a work is possible simply because the “meaning” of a work is identical with what the author meant by it at the time of its writing. For any number of readers at any given time there may be a number of different valid interpretations, but all of them must “move within the system of typical expectations and probabilities which the author’s meaning permits” (8). This potential multiplicity of interpretations, in Hirsch’s view, is more properly a matter of a work’s signifi-

cance rather than its meaning. The fact that a theater group may stage a production of *Macbeth* in a way which makes it relevant to nuclear warfare does not alter the fact that this not what *Macbeth*, from Shakespeare's own viewpoint, "means." Hence significances vary throughout history, while meanings remain constant,<sup>3</sup> or, as Hirsch phrases it, "authors put in meanings, but readers assign significances" (12).

The implications of Hirsch's view to a consideration of minor literature are clear. Decisions regarding canonical status are made in some cases on the basis of a work's meaning, which might be seen as universal or timeless; this is usually the case with the works referred to as classics. In other cases, the perceived significance of a work in a given context is a far more compelling reason for endowing a work with a place in the canon; this is the case with most Regionalist works, as will be detailed at greater length later. When subsequent generations of readers find less significance in a work than did the original audiences, the work will move to a lower-ranking position within the canon; by the same process, works originally considered minor can move to a position of greater canonical centrality. Considerations of significance take into account a much broader range of factors than simply formal literary characteristics, rendering Hirsch's approach more useful as an evaluative strategy.

One other notable Formalist concept must also be mentioned, that of defamiliarization. It is important both for its implications for the definition of minor literature and for its historical posture of being a bridge



between Formalism and reader-oriented theories. Viktor Shklovskii asserts that the role of art is to defamiliarize our perception of ordinary objects, to make them come alive again in the imagination of the perceiver. Thus in his view perception and not creation, reception and not production, become the constituent elements of art. Defamiliarization in a literary sense refers to a particular relationship between reader and text that removes the text from its normal perceptive field and causes the reader to see something in a new and unique way. The situation, Frank Kermode reminds us, is similar with literary criticism: "The effect [of critical activity] is always to make the work under consideration look different, to alter its internal balances, to attend to what had been thought marginal as if it must be brought closer to the center, even at the cost of losing what had hitherto seemed manifestly central" precisely because "what has been thought marginal may belong more properly in the center" (36-7), at least at a given time or within a particular critical framework. In this regard, according to Robert Holub, "a new school of literature inevitably relies on a forgotten or non-dominant [aspect of its] heritage for its basic principles." In much the same way, as Holub explains, the notion of defamiliarization is likewise a key to accounting for shifts in both critical and popular opinions of various works:

[The term "dominant"] signifies the element or group of elements that is placed in the foreground in a given work or during a given period. Succession in literary history can then be viewed as a continuous replacement of one group of dominants by another. They do not drop out of the system entirely; rather they recede into the background to reappear later in a novel manner. The fecundity of this explanation for reception theory is apparent. It helps to account for

not only the changes in the literary canon, but also the shift in critical emphasis when judging the "great" works of literature during different periods. If a given work is sufficiently rich in interpretive potential, a change in dominants will simply result in the recognition and praise of hitherto unnoticed features. (22)

Thus Holub, in language highly suggestive of gestalt psychology, neatly accounts for movement of works within the canon as the shift of emphasis from certain elements in the work to other elements, and at the same time offers insight about how the meanings of major and minor can virtually trade places in terms of the same work at different times. But it would be incorrect to presume that Holub is positing anarchical definitions of the terms, for his last sentence clearly indicates that major literature is always "sufficiently rich in interpretive potential"; by contrast, minor literature will at some times call forth a good deal of commentary focusing on the elements which are dominant at the time, but at other times will attract little critical attention because, to echo T. S. Eliot, these works are only equal to, as opposed to being greater than, the sum of their parts. In the language of reception theory, then, a minor work is one which enjoys only occasional or sporadic critical notice because its "hitherto unnoticed features" are not strong or well developed enough to invite a great deal of commentary on a consistent basis.

### 3. Reader-Oriented Perspectives

Literary criticism in the twentieth century, particularly during the last three decades, is perhaps best characterized by the rapid changes

which it has undergone. Modern critical theory is an ongoing reaction to the objective certainties which nineteenth century science espoused, and which found their way into earlier literary theories, such as Formalism. Philosophy has shown that what is perceived as a "fact" depends upon the frame of reference which the observer brings to it; psychology has demonstrated that the human mind does not perceive reality as discrete bits and pieces, but rather as configurations of themes or elements. Hence individual things look different in different situations because the perceiver is an active participant, not a passive receiver, in the act of perception. The implications of such findings have had a singularly dramatic effect on critical theory because the very foundations of its underlying assumptions have been called into question. Theories based on the involvement of the reader, usually gathered under the heading reception theory or reader-response criticism, have much to offer to an inquiry into the nature of minor literature.

Both reception theory and reader-response criticism are more appropriately lower-case titles because both are, for the most part, descriptive labels which identify a variety of critical systems which have certain similarities rather than codified approaches or "schools" of theory. In his exhaustive study of the subject, Robert Holub goes to great lengths to delineate reception studies as a separate formalized approach to literary theory, distinct from reader-response criticism, but grudgingly concludes that "both have to do with the impact of the work on someone, and it is

not clear that [the two theories] can be separated completely" (xi).<sup>4</sup> In a word, reader-oriented theories reflect a general shift from the objective to the subjective, from a concern with the author and the work (in formalist terms) to the relationship and interaction between the text and the reader, an approach as inherently political as it is literary.

Considered in Holub's terms as a separate mode of inquiry, reception theory is still seeking to define itself in precise terms as an approach to literary investigation because it, like reader-response criticism, is an umbrella term which accommodates a variety of diverse critical theories, most of which come under one of two headings: the "aesthetics of reception," which will be developed at length in a later chapter, is concerned with the degree of popular acceptance a work enjoys with its original audience, and the impact that acceptance has upon the eventual canonical status of the work; the other, related category, the "aesthetics of response," is concerned with the effect the work has upon its readers, that is, the kind of attitudinal or behavioral changes the work incites among its audience. Although somewhat similar in its concerns, reader-response criticism takes an even broader-based approach to the reader's role in the actualizing of a text in its embrace of the nature of perception, the definition of the reader, the role of cognition and imagination, and the psychology of reading. Clearly there is a diversity of reader-oriented approaches, only a few of which will be discussed here, but all of them add substantively to a more inclusive understanding of the nature of minor literature.

The approach known as Reception Theory began in Germany during the late 1960's as a dimension of the overall social and political unrest. Hans Robert Jauss, whose theories are discussed at length in Holub's *Reception Theory*, provided an historical dimension to reader-oriented criticism by mediating a compromise between Formalism, which ignores history, and purely social theories, which ignore the text (Holub 12). Jauss, along with other of his colleagues, was not only questioning the old canon of German literature, but was also attempting to show that it was reasonable to do so. He contended that the old critical ideologies had ceased to make sense in the same way that scientific theories of the nineteenth century no longer seemed adequate in the twentieth. What he offered was "a method for looking at the old canon anew . . . [and thus providing] a basis for analyzing those works that had been traditionally excluded from selection, as well as the reasons for these omissions, . . . [thereby offering] the promise of a revised and continuously revisable canon" (Holub 10).

Jauss uses the term "horizon of expectations" to describe the criteria which readers use to judge literary texts in any given period. These criteria help the reader decide how to recognize a poem, for example, as an epic or a tragedy or a pastoral; furthermore, these criteria govern what is to be regarded as literary as opposed to non-literary uses of language. The crux of Jauss's theory is that the original horizon of expectations tells only how the work was valued and interpreted when it first appeared, but

does not establish the final meaning of that work. In Jauss's view, it would be wrong to say that a work is universal, that its meaning is fixed and open to all readers in every age: "A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue" (Holub 66). But since the meaning changes and develops through time, the question arises: Whose authority are we to accept? That of the first readers? The combined opinion of readers over time? Or the aesthetic judgment of the present? It is entirely possible that the original readers may have been incapable of recognizing the revolutionary significance of a writer, as with the case of William Blake, for example; this same critique applies to succeeding generations of readers as well, including our own. Frank Kermode points out that canonical works have

figural qualities not to be detected, save at an appropriate moment in the future. Interpretations may be regarded not as modern increments but rather as discoveries of original meanings hitherto hidden; so that, together with the written text, these interpretations constitute a total object of which the text is but a part or version . . . (75)

Thus even in the case of works which are accorded a high canonical status at the time of their appearance, it is incorrect to assume that their meaning and significance is fully realized, for as we have seen, one of the marks of the canonical work is that something new and different can always be said about it.

In response to these questions of authority, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that all interpretations of past literature arise from a dialogue

between past and present (Holub 36). Our attempts to understand a work will depend on the questions which our own cultural environment allows us to raise. At the same time, we seek to discover the questions which the work itself was trying to answer in its own dialogue with history (which is part of the approach that Jane Tompkins takes in *Sensational Designs* and which will also be used later in this study):

. . . we listen . . . to [the work's] unfamiliar voice, allowing it to question our present concerns; but what the work "says" to us will in turn depend on the kind of questions which we are able to address to it, from our own vantage-point in history. It will also depend on our ability to reconstruct the "question" to which the work itself is an "answer," for the work is also a dialogue with its own history. (Eagleton 71)

Thus our present perspective always involves a relationship to the past, but at the same the past can be grasped only through the limited perspective of the past. Put in this way, the task of establishing a knowledge of the past seems virtually impossible, but a hermeneutical notion of "understanding" does not separate knower and object in the usual way that an empirical conception does: "understanding is a fusion of past and present; we cannot make our journey into the past without taking the present with us" (Holub 42).

In the view of reception theory, the process of reading (and thus of evaluating, of determining majority and minority) is always a dynamic one, a complex movement and development through time which is ever incomplete. Various reader-response theories parallel and expand upon the issues raised by reception theory, and bring out even more clearly the

difficulties inherent in determining the meaning and arriving at interpretations of a work.

Literary analysis has always differentiated various types of narrators (omniscient, unreliable, implied, and so forth), but not nearly so much attention has been paid to the various kinds of person to whom the narrator directs the discourse, the person Gerald Prince refers to as the "narratee," but who is not to be confused with the reader (8). Certain characteristics of the narratee may be specified (age, gender, class, etc.) or deduced from the narrative situation; however, the actual reader of the text may have little or nothing in common with the narratee and thus prove to be neither a "virtual" reader (the sort of reader whom the author had in mind when creating the narrator) nor an "ideal" reader (the perfectly insightful reader who understands the writer's intention completely) [18]. Prince's elaborate theory highlights a dimension of narration which has always been understood intuitively by readers but which had remained undefined, thus drawing attention to the ways in which narratives produce their own readers or listeners. Obviously a lack of coincidence between the narratee and the reader can lead not only to a misinterpretation of the text, but also to misjudgment on the value or worth of the narrative as a whole. Indeed it is conceivable that the narratee of a work could be judged to be so narrow as to eliminate the possibility of the work's ever achieving major status in the canon.



Perhaps better known than Prince's theory is Wolfgang Iser's concept of the "implied reader," the reader whom the text creates for itself; this idea amounts to a "network of response-inviting structures" which predisposes readers to read in a certain way. The "actual reader" receives certain mental images in the process of reading; however, the images are colored by the reader's "existing stock of experience" (52-3). Thus the experience of reading will differ according to each reader's past experiences.

Another key element of Iser's approach is his concept of "gaps" in the text. He posits that an author presents only an unfinished view of ethical norms, value systems, and world-views in characters and the situations in which they are presented. What is lacking is a judgment about the degree to which those norms and values are either actualized, questioned, or rejected, and it is the task of the reader to make such judgments—to fill in the gaps in the text—based, of course, on the reader's own ethical and moral framework and the kinds of experiences he or she brings to that particular reading experience (63). In concretizing a text, in filling in the gaps, readers also have the opportunity to exercise imagination as well as skill. Since concretizations are the activity of individual readers, they are subject to vast variation. Personal experiences, moods, and a whole array of other factors affect each concretization. No two are ever precisely identical, even when they are the product of the same reader. While texts, then, do set the terms on which the reader actualizes

meanings, the reader's own "store of experience" will play an important part in the process.

But it follows also that this situation produces the possibility that the reader's own "world-view" may be modified to some degree as the result of negotiating the partially indeterminate elements of the text, which is to say that the reader can learn from or be changed by the experience of reading:

The most effective literary work for Iser is one which forces the reader into a new critical awareness of his or her customary codes and expectations. The work interrogates and transforms the implicit beliefs we bring to it, "disconfirms" our routine habits of perception and so forces us to acknowledge them for the first time for what they are. Rather than merely reinforce our given perceptions, the valuable work of literature violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing, and so teaches us new codes for understanding. (Eagleton 79)

Hence there is, in a sense, a certain amount of risk involved in reading in that the preconceived notions which a reader imposes upon a particular work, as well as the entire range of critical presuppositions the reader brings to the reading process, are in danger of being undermined and overthrown by the very act of reading itself. This effect, of course, is the whole point of persuasive rhetoric, but the same result is possible with narrative prose as well.

Jonathan Culler argues that it is necessary to discover the interpretative operations used by readers in order to explain why different readers produce different interpretations of the same work (103). It is interesting that while readers may differ about the meaning of a work,

they may well have all followed the same set of interpretative conventions to reach those various conclusions. For example, when critics speak of "unity" in a work, each one may have slightly different concept of what that term means, with the result that each of them is looking for and identifying a variant of a supposedly universal characteristic. People's understanding of literary principles, like their knowledge of the canon, is in large part a result of their education, their acquired "literary competence"; obviously, the more competent the reader, the more accurate and insightful will be the resulting interpretation. However, Frank Kermode reminds us, there is "room for dissent" even among informed opinions and that "there can be no simple and perpetual consensus as to the proper way to join the shadow of comment to the substance of the [work]. And this is what it means to call a book canonical." (52) Thus an important part of the critical dialogue is the challenging of one critic by another as to the validity of the underlying assumptions and the legitimacy (i.e., soundness) of the conclusions reached by virtue of those assumptions.

It is clear from this brief overview that reader-oriented theories share no single or predominant philosophical presuppositions; their only common ground is their emphasis on subjectivity in the process of reading and interpreting texts, on the role, whether active or passive, that the reader plays in actualizing the meaning of a work. But in theories of this orientation are found some of the most fertile material for arriving at an understanding of how determinations of minor literature are made, for

ultimately all canonic decisions are judgments rooted in personal taste and interpretation which, through the workings of politics and institutional policies, themselves become normative at least for a time. Of course, texts can be (and are) works of art worthy of being judged solely on their artistic merits, but what is ultimately labeled as "major" or "minor" cannot be taken as a final, definitive judgment in any age, for the manifold workings of how readers perceive (and consequently assess) any text will always be subject to the ever-changing social and intellectual climate in which it is actualized by its readers. Canon history assures us that the handful of works referred to as "classics" will probably always maintain their "truly great" status; those which are judged as "great" and "not so great" will continue to change places from age to age and from critic to critic.

#### 4. The Role of Politics

Theories of reception and reader response clearly suggest an aspect of canon study which has only recently become an issue of central focus, namely the intrinsically political nature of all canonic judgments. Essentially, politics is concerned with tactics and strategies and maneuvering, even to the level of intrigue; as applied to literary judgments, Jane Tompkins posits that politics "involve[s] preferences, interests, tastes, and beliefs that are not universal but part of a particular reader's situation" (9). Her point is that no determination of major or minor is ever made in a

vacuum but is informed by opinions which predispose such an evaluation. In "Contingencies of Value," Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that our tastes, emphases, preferences, and priorities, whether they be literary or otherwise, do not exist in isolation, but rather emerge from within a dynamic system of values which determines what, at any given moment, will be considered best. Thus opinions of both the entire canon as well as the individual works contained in (or excluded from) it are initially shaped by the critical biases of the textbooks and teachers a person is exposed to as a student, which underscores the key role of teaching in canon formation. Canons are taught (i.e., promulgated) through school texts by instructors who teach what they learned from their teachers, and who pass on the same canon (along with its political and critical underpinnings), often without question or challenge. Hence attitudes about which works and authors are "important" are learned (or at least conditioned) early on in life. Impulses toward revisionism come about when insightful readers recognize not necessarily that established canonic judgments are incorrect so much as they are narrowly conceived, exclusionary, and often unyielding.

Two recent works make a strong case for contextuality (i.e., applied politics) in assessing literary value, although from differing perspectives, and merit consideration here. Following on Smith's assertion, Jane Tompkins argues in *Sensational Designs* that there is no such thing as a disinterested literary judgment, and that our evaluation of works from the past is determined almost entirely by convention. Her study focuses on

how works of literature express dominating cultural needs, but goes on further to show how these needs and forces interact to form a canon (i.e., a construct which distinguishes major from minor works). She sees literary texts “not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order” (xi); thus her aim is not so much to revise or expand the canon as to restructure the critical approaches used to evaluate works of the past: “It is the notion of literary texts as doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them, that I wish to substitute finally for the critical perspective that sees them as attempts to achieve a timeless, universal ideal of truth and formal coherence” (200). Her basic approach is to set aside modernist assumptions about psychological complexity and moral ambiguity to show what certain novels<sup>5</sup> held in common with other contemporary examples of the same genre, including formulaic ways of presenting their material. She has chosen works which share “a certain set of defects that excludes them from the ranks of great masterpieces: an absence of finely delineated characters, a lack of verisimilitude in the story line, an excessive reliance on plot, and a certain sensationalism in the events portrayed” because one of her purposes is “to ask why these works, many of which did not seem at all deficient to their original audiences, have come to seem deficient” (xii) to modernist critics.

Tompkins' conclusion is essentially twofold: first, that “a literary reputation [can] never be anything but a political matter” (4). She argues

that many now- "great" authors (such as Hawthorne) were, in their own day, neither notable nor outstanding in terms of being popular or widely read, but were made to be so through the mutual influence of critics, publishers, and literary society editors. Once an author became respected within this network, continued critical approval was virtually assured, thus paving the way for an established reputation of greatness within the academy. She further concludes that many past works which met the criteria of an existent elite (such as *The Scarlet Letter*) continue to be overvalued by the academy simply because they have been shown to embody some transcendent "greatness" which is, in traditional rhetoric, eternal and immutable. Her argument obviously addresses the biases of the criteria employed by the academy against "popular" literature and works by women and minorities, which provides her with the framework for offering new readings of the now-devalued works she has chosen.

As convincing as her argument is, it is still polemical because of her relentless insistence that literary judgments are almost exclusively political and only minimally aesthetic. She distorts the assertion that assessments of major and minor are *inherently* political, certainly a reasonable and plausible observation, by almost totally negating the possibility of relying on aesthetic criteria in making such evaluations. That such qualities as "greatness" and "beauty" are difficult to describe in words, as has been pointed out, makes them no less recognizable and no less important in the making of canonical judgments than are politically motivated con-

cerns. At the same time, however, she effectively shows how serious historic scholarship can recover many forgotten or overlooked works which would be lost to modern sensibility. But perhaps the most problematic aspect of her argument is that because these works meet her historical criteria, they are as "good" as the works in the established canon. In so arguing this point so intensely, she has probably weakened—although inadvertently—the impact of her overall argument, despite its persuasiveness. Nevertheless, her study voices some of the most effective reasoning for demonstrating the conventionality of canon formation.

From another perspective, Louis Renza's polemical "*A White Heron*" and *the Question of Minor Literature*<sup>6</sup> finds its inspiration in the author's "suspicion" that Jewett's short story, while consigned by literary history to the ranks of "minor literature," was really "something more" than minor status would suggest because it has long been popular enough to be a frequent choice for inclusion in anthologies. He argues that various critical ideologies have consistently kept minor works from being both understood and appreciated because these theories provide no more than a name for the category of minor literature; because they provide no criteria for assessing minor works, the implication is that all minor literature can be regarded only as inferior and, therefore, not deserving of much serious or sustained critical attention. His approach<sup>7</sup> is to examine such varied theories as those proposed by Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Marx, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (among



others) to show how their conceptions of minor literature effectively devalue and dismiss certain works because they cannot be judged as "effective" in terms of the ideology which underpins a particular theory.

Renza's solution to this critical shortcoming is twofold: first, the reader must suspend as much as possible the critical predispositions which he or she would ordinarily bring to a similar piece of major literature and judge the work at hand on its own artistic and literary merits. This suggestion is laudable as far as it goes, but Renza's approach is wholly theoretical and completely ignores the role of history in both the production of literature and the development of critical theory. He is correct in identifying the complex symbolism and notably implicated plot in "A White Heron" but underestimates the lack of impact that a highly regionalist work which explores the rural/urban conflict can have on a late twentieth century audience. A work which is a good "teaching piece" in a survey or genre course will not necessarily be an outstanding work for a larger, serious readership.<sup>8</sup>

Second, Renza proposes that the reader "imagine" a "minor criticism of minor literature" (41), which would, in effect, establish criteria for assessing the merits of minor works among themselves rather than comparing them, usually unfavorably, to similar works of major status; by extension, his proposal would also effectively create a secondary canon of minor works, which would accordingly classify these already devalued works as "better" and "not so good" on their own terms. However, even

Renza doubts the feasibility of this latter proposal (hence his term "imagine") because the critical profession is more interested in reading commentary on major rather than minor works, and so such efforts would not be seen by the academy as writing "something important on something of literary importance" (xxvi); furthermore, such an enterprise would heighten the status of minor works by according them more serious critical attention than minor works are considered to be "worthy" of. As was noted earlier, minor works will probably continue to attract critical attention, but it will not be as sustained as that given to major works. Likewise, it is difficult to conceive of criteria for minor works which are substantially more than a reverse image of the norms for judging major works. In sum, then, Renza has reached "a conventional conclusion in an unconventional way" (Nordloh 224).

### 5. Other Considerations

A consideration of formal literary theory, particularly of the type which focuses on the involvement of the reader, is both a necessary as well as fruitful approach to examining the nature of minor literature, but there are other issues which fall outside the scope of literary theory which must be taken into consideration in order to arrive at a comprehensive definition. For example, Pope's observation that great works are those which express "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed" ("An Essay on Criticism," l.298) helps to explain why some works continue

to remain at the center of the canon while others are most often found at the periphery. Major works are those which have succeeded in saying something both exquisitely and memorably, and at the same time transcend the limitations of the space and time they depict. Minor works may likewise speak in an exquisite or memorable voice, but the difference is often a qualitative one, resulting in the works usually being described in terms such as "muted" or "weaker" or "restrained." Hence the difference between major and minor works is frequently one of perspective: a work which invites close attention to the manifold implications of its theme, characters, or symbolism will at the same time deflect attention from the superficialities of its setting and plot, elements which are not unimportant but certainly less important in ascertaining a work's "greatness." Minor works, because they lack depth in analytical aspects, tend to be more conspicuous in formal and topical ways, with the result that critical interest in them has usually been correspondingly superficial and topical.

These observations suggest echoes of Eliot's criterion for a major work ("Minor Poetry" 47): that it is one whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts; by contrast, then, a minor work could be said to be one in which the whole is only equivalent to the sum of its parts. It is not enough, Eliot reminds us, for a great writer simply to have something different to say from what everyone else has said; the great writer must also have found *the* particular way of saying it which expresses that difference. This, it seems clear, is what the idea of the whole being greater

than the sum of its parts means. The truly great work transcends the ordinary by having something distinctive to say about even an ordinary topic, and by saying it in a way which calls more attention to what is said than to the necessary accidentals of the work's formal qualities or style. But at the same time, elements such as plot or character may be so strongly and skillfully crafted that they call attention to themselves in a way which enhances the overall effect of the work. It is in these ways, then, that the major work is indeed greater than the sum of its parts because the enduring effectiveness of the interaction among the parts engages and invites subsequent generations of readers to continually discover new, or at least different, ways of seeing the meaning of both the parts as well as the whole.

The thrust of recent canon revisionism likewise sheds some interesting light on how the meaning of "minor" has been implemented in the past. The efforts to expand the canon have brought many minor works closer to its center, notably works by women and blacks and, to a lesser extent, Native Americans. Some (though certainly not all) of these recently discovered works have shown themselves to be of notably high quality by any standards, yet for years have been consigned to critical oblivion because of the gender or race of the authors. We can only conclude, then, that prejudice has been as much a factor in canonic decisions about major and minor as has any other norm of the selection process. Recognizing this has created an atmosphere of skepticism about the some-

times arbitrary process by which evaluative criteria have been applied to canonic decisions in the past; it is this very point which underpins much of the revisionist thinking, and rightly so, for such subjectivity has resulted in as much unjust under-valuing and exclusion as it has achieved appropriate recognition and inclusion, and has often cultivated a blatant elitism within that very structure which purports to preserve and promulgate the best that has been thought and written. There is a vast difference between evaluative criteria which rightly or wrongly ignore certain works, and institutional policies or critical preconceptions which categorically exclude certain works from the possibility of being considered major or even canonical. Canon structure is a two-fold construct: it is both a demonstration of literary theory, and the result of the demands of the reading public; these two characteristics are always intrinsically bound together at the heart of any canonical ideology, whether or not every canon realizes or reflects them. Minor literature, then, becomes a problem when its definition is deflected away from a consideration of essential literary characteristics (such as complexity, irony, tension, or style) or the work's perceived significance, to more superficial and extrinsic aspects such as the author's gender or race or the particularities of the work's plot, setting, or tone.

One of the unfortunate shortcomings of recent movements for revising and expanding the canon has been their often extremist approach. Some radical revisionists would completely throw out the established can-

on and recognize as valuable (i.e., valid) only "my new canon." This, it seems to me, is a failure to recognize not only the validity and usefulness of other canons on their own terms, but also the underlying assumption that no canon is carved in stone and is therefore incapable of resisting later criticism and revision. There is a need for canon builders to be aware that "different" does not carry any inherent connotation of either "better" or "worse"; to acknowledge that another canon is constructed on a different set of criteria is not to pronounce judgment on either those criteria or the works contained in that list. Thus it follows inevitably that the definitions of both major and minor can only be relative; the norms delineated for a particular canon will determine which works more or less successfully satisfy a given agenda. Any canon is at once inclusive as well as selective, but no canon can claim to be exhaustive, so it is always the case that multiple and overlapping canons can and do exist concurrently. The important thing is to realize that acknowledging this multiplicity does not necessarily devalue or negate any of those canons, even if the ideological underpinnings or inherent prejudices of the criteria for inclusion can or should be called into question, but simply recognizes that each of the various rubrics is postulated on a different set of principles, and affirms that each canon is more or less effective in a different type of situation for which it was constructed or adopted. The sage Dr. Johnson, we recall, argued for revision rather than overthrow.

Once a canon has been described and the criteria outlined, the issue of major and minor becomes more immediate, for the canon maker is confronted with numerous works which might be possible candidates for inclusion. The meaning of "minor" comes into play in a twofold way here: first, in determining which works will be rejected from the canon altogether and, second, which ones will be included but only at the periphery. It is on this second level that it becomes more obvious that it is not so much the definition of "minor" that is variable as its praxis, for it is here that standards of taste and personal judgment are more obviously exercised. "Opinion," Frank Kermode reminds us, "is the great canon-maker, and you can't have privileged insiders without creating outsiders, apocrypha" (74); by extension, within the canon itself it is impossible for every work to occupy a central position, and so there must be positions of periphery as well as centrality in order to communicate the relative merits of the works included.

But Kermode further cautions that while opinion effectively acts as a preservative agent on behalf of valuable works of art, it can be a destructive force as well because "opinion is not always on the side of virtue . . . it can be a means to oblivion as well as the main defense against it" (72). He favors keeping canonical decisions as the duty of the "canon-defending, theory laden" academy rather than entrusting the task to "artists and enthusiasts" <sup>9</sup> as a means of ensuring that only "truly worthy pieces" will be accorded canonic status. No critic will deny that taste (along with

prejudice, its alter-ego) plays as indisputable a role in canon making as does any other principle of selection; at the same time, it is most often the issue of taste that is first called into question by subsequent revisionists.

## 6. Toward a Definition of Minor Literature

If it is true, as suggested near the beginning of this chapter, that no definition of minor literature can ever be inclusive enough to encompass all the theoretical approaches and subjective implications which constitute and condition its application, then it must be acknowledged that minor literature has a more complex identity than merely works which are "not great" and that its definition must necessarily be eclectic so as to reflect that complexity. The difficulty in trying to adequately define minor literature is the same difficulty encountered in trying to adequately define canon: any formulation, regardless of how valid or laudable its ideological framework, which fails to account for the variety of considerations which have been here discussed is inadequate from the outset and can hope to accomplish no more inclusiveness than any definition it seeks to supplant.

Hence no single statement can be formulated which will account for what minor literature "is" in every canonical situation. Because canons are inherently political by nature, minor works must be seen, in one set of circumstances, as those which do not conform to or exemplify the



hegemony of a particular rubric. In another context, minor works are those which, although constructed according to major codifications, fall short of a recognizable standard of greatness, either in technical, formal, or aesthetic terms. From an historical perspective, works whose primary function was strongly sociological, ideological, or time- or place-oriented may lose a great deal of their appeal for later audiences because the underlying "agenda" for the work is too far removed from current concerns; these works become "period pieces" which have historical or cultural appeal or are admired for specific formal aspects or narrative strategies. On a critical level, minor works are those which, after the era of their introduction and its attendant popularity, generate only occasional rather than sustained critical attention, which could suggest a lack of transcendent or far reaching "value" in the works. Like a diamond which has many facets, minor literature changes its appearance depending on the perspective from which one considers it; and just as the several facets are all parts of the same gem, so are all the aspects of minor literature here discussed all parts of the same overall consideration of attempting to define artistic accomplishment.

The problem of minor literature, then, is not that there is such a category, nor even that minor works exist side by side in the canon with great ones; the problem is in the complexity of its definition and the inconsistency with which that definition has been formulated and applied. Greatness is a quality which is virtually undefinable but yet is ultimately

recognizable; in the end, works which fall short of realizing this greatness will always be subject to the same critical criteria and descriptive statements that are applied to all literary works and which will determine both their relative position within the canon as well as their overall worthiness for inclusion in the canon at all. The process of defining and identifying minor works is not nearly so problematic as formulating inclusive definitions and applying them consistently. The history of canon formation shows that each canon is founded upon a different rationale and that each canon builder applies terms like "major" and "minor" in a slightly different way, with the result that minor works tend to have a much more tenuous hold on their place in the canon.

But it would be misleading to assume that minor literature, because it is named by a word which carries unfortunate negative connotations, is somehow lacking in literary or artistic quality and is therefore unworthy of serious critical consideration; we must remember that the minor works did attract at least enough attention to merit their inclusion in the canon. It is thus useful to make one final distinction between these two broad categories: Major writers are those who break significant new ground in style or technique, and thus in some important way change the direction of subsequent literature. Minor writers, on the other hand, are those whom Louis Renza describes as engaging in a "noncompetitive mode of literary production," one in which they are "content with the quiet [literary] life" (10) to work skillfully and artistically within a set of

“givens” for their genre, but who do not produce innovative contributions to either the techniques or the parameters of the genre. The significance of minor writers’ contributions to literary history, then, is not measured so much in terms of formal or structural innovation, but in such areas as the perspective they bring to the fictional situation, the depth of characterization they are able to develop, or the keen sense of place they are able to communicate. It may be more critically exciting to discover highly innovative works, but it is just as fulfilling to recognize familiar patterns handled deftly and memorably.

Minor works often find their way into the fringes of the canon as “footnotes to” or “further examples” of an era or a genre or a particular author, and for that reason their literary fortunes are much more fickle. This likewise applies as well to entire groups of works as to individual pieces, and the next chapter will show how that has been the case with American Regionalist writings.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER II

1. Morris Dickstein observes that "publishers today may find it convenient to distinguish between popular and literary fiction, but this refers to the size of the audience, not to any absolute formal difference" (38).
2. While most regionalist novels and short stories find their place in the canon as minor works, this is not to suggest that the very term "regionalist" is synonymous with "minor," for such an implication would slight such regionalists as William Faulkner and Mark Twain. This study, however, is concerned with identifying the factors which have consigned the majority of regionalists to minor status and will examine the works only of authors who are classified as minor.
3. Significances can be as highly changeable as they are personal. James Michener, for example, defines a "classic" as a book which reaches a person at the precise moment when it can make the most impression. He credits his success as an author to having read "the right book at the right time," in his case Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* in the summer before his last year as an undergraduate. He claims the book taught him how to write fiction: "I saw the importance of setting, of character development, of the clever interposition of the author, of the value of witty observation." However, after recently re-reading the same novel, he could only conclude that "it creaked." (Recounted in the *Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine*, 2-21-88, page 1.)
4. It quickly becomes evident that Holub is writing from a German nationalist viewpoint and, as such, is as much concerned with aggrandizing German theorists as he is with explicating reception theory. Thus his differentiation of reception theory and reader-response criticism takes on a distinctively nationalistic character: reception theory "must be understood as a more cohesive, conscious, and collective undertaking," whereas reader-response is a term "applied *ex post facto* to a number of [critics] who have had very little contact with or influence on one another." He asserts that "if reader-response criticism has become a critical force, as some would maintain, it is by virtue of the ingenuity of labeling rather than any commonality of effort," and concludes that "the similarities in general critical perspective between reader-response criticism and reception theory are ultimately too superficial and too abstract for a merging here" (xii-xiv). His insistence on the superior methodology of the Germans is an unfortunate flaw in an otherwise lucid and thoroughgoing examination of such a seminal theory, although these attitudes are happily

confined to his Preface. As my next paragraph shows, the distinctions between the two may not be as slight as Holub supposes, although, for my purposes, it is as convenient as it is fair to consider both under the broad heading of reader-oriented theories.

5. Tompkins frames her argument by a discussion of several works by Hawthorne, notably *The Scarlet Letter*; she demonstrates her thesis with discussions of *Wieland; or The Transformation, An American Tale* and *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* by Charles Brockden Brown, *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper, *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe.
6. Two distinct shortcomings of Renza's study must be observed: first, his extensive argument is proved by application to a single work, the one noted in his title. This would seem to be disadvantageous because he tailors specific aspects of his argument to fit one particular text; in effect, he is narrowing the applicability of his theory to a wider range of works. As a result, the parts of his work which may ultimately prove most valuable are the insightful revised readings of Jewett's story (from Marxist, feminist, regionalist, and pastoral perspectives) which he offers. Further, it seems unusual that a lengthy work devoted to the nature of minor literature never offers its own definition of the term. Renza cites and critiques several other writers' concepts of minor literature, but never clearly articulates his own, except by implication.
7. As scholarly and as brilliant as Renza's study is, it must also be noted that his argument is often as abstract as it is abstruse; there is consensus among the reviewers of the book that the "exasperatingly overwrought prose and labored argumentation often make it difficult to know exactly what he is driving at" (J. Michael Lennon, 855); his "convoluted style" sometimes "results in labyrinthine syntax . . . clogged with allusions" (Brian Harding, 139). This is unfortunate because of the importance and fecundity of Renza's ideas; his work runs the risk of being ignored owing to its very style.
8. Renza's conclusion that the story is indeed a minor work in traditional critical terms seems to anticipate my remarks here. While he admits the unlikelihood that "A White Heron" will ever be raised to the status of a major work, he avers that the story will always "be something more" for him than its critical assessment proves it to be, a judgment which seems to flow from his expressed attraction to the story. However, this is not to be taken as a shortcoming of judgment, for T. S. Eliot affirms that the same work can be major for one reader and minor for another simply because it is a work which a particular reader happens to like ("Minor Poetry" 42).

9. It is not completely clear whom Kermode intends by the word "enthusiasts," but I take the term to refer to the general reading public and hence see the entire remark as a thinly veiled negative critique of popular taste versus academic opinion. Recognizing Kermode's own position within the academy, this commentary comes as no surprise. The context of his remark, however, suggests that he recognizes popular taste as at least one factor in the process by which works come to invite serious consideration by the academy, but he seems anxious to make clear that canonic decisions are not significantly influenced by the presence or absence of popular acclaim for a work.

## CHAPTER III

### AN AMERICAN FORM OF PASTORAL:

### THE RELATIONSHIP OF REGIONALISM TO REALISM

*“The novelist must regard himself as an historian and his narrative as history. . . . As a narrator of fictitious events he is nowhere; to insert into his attempts a backbone of logic, he must relate events that are assumed to be real.”*

– Henry James

General terms such as classicism, romanticism, realism, and regionalism serve a necessary and valuable purpose to both critics and literary historians, despite their often multiple meanings, for to describe a writer or work or genre by such descriptive terms is to establish a useful frame of reference from which further discussion can ensue. Whether one is discussing classicism or regionalism, or major or minor literature, then, there needs to be some general agreement on the parameters which define these terms. The preceding chapter examined the shifting definitions of minor literature by demonstrating the various contexts in which that label is used; the aim here is to explore the nature of regionalist literature, particularly as that term is applied to works associated with the period between the Civil War and the turn of the century.

Regionalism has a somewhat tenuous identity by itself because it

shares many of the characteristics of realism and is therefore something of a "sub-set" of realism. Hence just as realism is usually best understood in terms of its relationship to romanticism, so regionalism is most clearly seen as both an aspect of and, because of its romantic tendencies, a departure from realism. The most appropriate and fruitful approach to regionalism, then, is to consider all three movements—romanticism, realism, and regionalism—as overlapping points on the larger continuum of American literary history rather than attempting to focus on regionalism as if it were a unique genre or period.

### 1. The Rise of a New America

Literary "periods" and movements usually find their impetus within the larger culture, for literature in every age serves to mirror not only society's concerns and accomplishments, but also the ideology which underpins the very structure of the culture. When even popular and long established literary forms prove inadequate to the task of articulating and evaluating the human condition at a given moment, new forms and styles will evolve which, at least for a time, will meet that basic need of a society to define, record, and examine itself. Such was the case with realism and regionalism: what literary history later identified as a "new" style or genre actually began with little fanfare as an attempt to re-shape what was already current and popular to reflect a society which was irreversibly altered within a relatively short time. To understand realism is to under-



stand the milieu of the late nineteenth century and the rapidly changing face of both America and Americanism.

Even before the Civil War the seeds of change had been sown and were beginning to flower. Westward movement, accelerated by the wave of homesteading and the thrill of the gold rush, had already restructured the essential "North/South" description of the United States. The tide of immigration, which would swell to a flood after the war, was already in motion. The Civil War would merely complete the transformation of the American social and economic countenance which was begun more than a quarter century earlier.

The period between the Civil War and the First World War was an era of what might well be termed the most dynamic growth in American history. The single decade from 1868 alone witnessed the final settlement of the West, the completion of a transcontinental railroad and telegraph system, the nationalization of corporations, and the establishment of national banks (Pattee 19). America was finally putting off its country ways and assuming the character of an urban culture while grappling, with uneven success, with the myriad of social and political problems which necessarily accompanied such fundamental and enormous changes. The Civil War set the stage for what could be called the second discovery of America because of the new-found emphasis on the nation rather than the state; the war which pitted brother against brother was the tragic catalyst for the death of provincialism and the rise of nationalism.

The Civil War effectively changed the equilibrium of every aspect of American life. From an industrial viewpoint, the sudden shift of vast numbers of people from the status of productive farmers and workers to that of dependent soldiers not only decimated the ranks of the labor force, but also created a network of related needs. Just the necessity to provide supplies for large numbers of soldiers, for example, gave rise to the need for sewing machines to manufacture clothing and shoes, along with meat packing houses to supply enormous amounts of food. Farmers-become-soldiers generated the necessity for farm machinery which would allow women and children to assume many of their heavy tasks in their absence.

For the most part, the years following the Civil War were characterized by the restless expansion of new land, new wealth, new technology, and new social order. The stabilizing influence of urbanization was finding its way into the West, transforming camps into towns, and towns into cities. The conquered South, once aristocratic in social structure, was completely enmeshed in the throes of reconstruction. Having survived military occupation and now beleaguered by carpetbaggers and scalawags, the South was making the gradual and painful shift from a plantation to a farmstead economy; survival supplanted manners, though only grudgingly. In the meantime, the North was rising to new heights of manufacturing and financial hegemony kindled by the demands of the war. But there was another significant and deep-seated change at work as well which was to change the face of America's intellectual life.

Before the Civil War, the North was intellectually aristocratic. The intellectual life of America was dominated by college men (women were not yet admitted to colleges at this time), all from the East, mostly from Harvard. However, more than a generation before the war the doors of literary respectability had begun to be pushed open by mandate of a large and critical reading public—something relatively new in American literature. Following the war the influence of the academy was even more seriously weakened with the appearance of a new breed of writers—the majority of them journalists rather than belletrists—many of them only minimally educated or self-educated, whose writings gained immense popularity among the general readership and journalistic critics, although their works continued to be roundly shunned by the “Brahmins” of the East. But this shift of academic prestige was not to be abated; no longer was the intellectual life of the country to be exclusively in the hands of an aristocratic, scholarly few.

Indeed no longer was nearly anything which had characterized American life before the war to remain the same, for change was happening rapidly in every aspect of the country's life. It was in this environment of change—in the many faceted tensions between old and new—that a whole new literature was to find its voice.

## **2. The Shift from Romanticism to Realism**

The chief literary output of the post-war era was realistic fiction

(Pizer 3). Simply put, realism was a reaction to the romanticism of mid-century, the experience of war, and the growing pragmatism of a burgeoning nation. Like all literary movements, realism saw itself as a reaction to a past which it perceived as having become lifeless and outworn: "Revolt always has begun with the cry 'back to nature'; it is always the work of young men who have no reverence for the long-standing and the conventional; and it is always looked upon with horror by the older generations" (Pattee 17). The tenor of American life in the middle of the nineteenth century and the attitudes which informed it were well served by romantic literature (both of the "high" and the popular variety), but in the surge of industrialism and the aftermath of war among ourselves, romanticism proved inadequate to the task of defining and interpreting what Americanism was fast becoming.

Mid-century glorified scholarship, often for its own sake, which resulted in an attitude of academic elitism against which realism and other popular literature would have to struggle to gain acceptance.<sup>1</sup> The post-war era, on the other hand, glorified the person of action, the individual who could "make things happen." The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed both "the binding up of the nation's wounds" and the beginning of the Progressive Era, which politicized American urbanization and industrialism. The academy viewed the role of literature at this time as a force which would help to re-establish the social equanimity which had been disrupted by the war and thus staunchly held to the belief that

the best way to remedy the ills of the war was to insist on a return to antebellum romantic idealism. The realists on the other hand countered that the "innocence" of pre-war America could never be recaptured, nor was it desirable to wish for it. The Civil War was but one element which transformed Americanism into an entirely different culture—a better one, according to the realists—one in which there was no stemming the tide of progress into a new century. If literature was to serve as the recorder and interpreter of its age, then the forms of the past would have to be made as bold and new as the times themselves.

These assertions of the realists are framed in strikingly (though not surprisingly) romantic rhetoric. Less than a century before this, Wordsworth and Coleridge, in the Preface to their *Lyrical Ballads*, had issued the mandate that poetry should draw its matter from everyday life and be written in the language of ordinary speech. Seen from this perspective, realism (and hence regionalism) can be seen as movements which are essentially "romantic" in thrust, for

. . . romanticism always in [the] broadest sense is a revolution against orthodoxy, against the old which has been so long established that it has lost its first vitality and has become an obedience to the letter rather than to the spirit. (Pattee 18)

The original aim of the realists was not to displace romanticism so much as to challenge it to reassert with even greater vigor its claim to depict everyday life in ordinary speech and thus to make it once again a viable means of representing the changed times and new society which emerged from the Civil War.

Romanticism, of course, did not die out when realism began to flourish—literary movements do not begin and end so abruptly—but both continued to flourish together for a time. Works by earlier romantics who had already died, such as Cooper, Irving, Poe, and Hawthorne, continued to grow in popularity; new works by such contemporary romantics as Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes continued to appear and exert an influence (Pizer 30). Writers and thinkers after the Civil War, however, moved steadily from romanticism toward increasingly realistic objectives and literary forms, and toward pragmatic and naturalistic interpretations of people and their destiny. The novel could serve as an instrument of evaluation and expression of American life because of the novel's widespread and generalized audience which represented the people as a whole.

The two decades immediately following the Civil War, then, were something of a transitional period between romanticism and realism. Authors just starting out at this time found themselves caught between the ideals of the old world and those of the new age which was struggling to find its voice; thus many of them found it difficult to be completely faithful to either tradition. But it soon became evident that the works produced after the Civil War depicted a world significantly different from that represented in the works of the earlier romantic idealists.

The major realist works were written in prose (primarily the novel but also the short story), a fact which merits some mention both from an historical as well as a literary standpoint. Earlier literary historians such

as Pattee and Higginson and Wendell assert that it was in the post-war era that the novel rose to its position of hegemony and thus realism and regionalism are significant as the first flowerings of the finally mature novelistic form. However, Nina Baym's recent extensive research (*Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America*) refutes this claim by showing that the novel achieved its triumph as the literary form of the nineteenth century by as early as 1850. Through the citation of literally hundreds of mid-century critical reviews, Baym shows that the novel had garnered a huge audience comprised of every social class, and that this audience, although sometimes culturally and educationally unsophisticated, was nevertheless continually clamoring for more new novels and was judging them according to a higher standard of literary taste. She further demonstrates that the novel had established a body of critics (both academic and journalistic) who had developed both critical norms and a critical vocabulary for assessing individual novels. These findings hold some interesting implications for realism. First, the realists were pioneers not so much in form as in content and style; it was their attempt to record ordinary people in everyday speech that made them initially noteworthy, not the fact that they were writing in the novelistic form and bringing it to maturity. It follows, then, that an appreciable part of their immediate and widespread popularity was due to their making wise use of an already widely read literary form, thus overcoming the initial obstacle of establishing a wide readership.

Baym's assertions, however, are not to be construed as implying that realism was popular *only* because it was presented in the already well-liked novel form. Realism was truly, in the Jeffersonian ideal, literature by the people and for the people. Whereas poetry had earlier been the appropriated "property" of the scholarly few, realist works were by and large the creation of writers with considerably less formal education (Pattee refers to the realists as "uncolleged for the most part"[387]); moreover, most of them had no connection with the academy, being either journalists or self-appointed "reporters" of the times. They found prose a readily accessible mode, and dialect the most natural vehicle for portraying "life as it really is." In this regard, the realists were transforming American literature in much the same way that Dickens had done in England by writing novels which broke with all the traditions and conventions of fiction in their emphasis on characterization over plot, and by the inclusion of dialect, humor, and sentiment as essential and self-conscious elements of the narrative.

Despite the widespread and almost immediate popularity of realist novels and short stories, the shift from romanticism to realism was nonetheless a gradual one. But even so, by little more than a dozen years after Appomattox, romantic idealism had virtually exhausted itself as a viable expression of the new America which rose in the wake of the War Between the States. The United States was moving too rapidly and irreversibly toward the pragmatism and naturalism which would usher in the



twentieth century; neither romanticism nor idealism could hope to dominate such a climate.

### 3. Realism as a Literary Convention

Owing to its multi-faceted nature as a literary impulse, realism can be seen as something of a "hub" from which other trends and movements proceed, including such diverse types as regionalism, local color, naturalism, and even muckraking; hence it is necessary to examine realism as a literary convention in some detail in order to understand the nature of regionalism.

Attempting to define realism is a reminder of the tenuousness of the labels by which all literary "periods" are identified. A particular problem with realism is that much of its critical literature often tends to be either reductive ("realism is the attempt to portray life 'as it really is'") or descriptive, noting the characteristics of realism without attempting to formulate the concept in substantive terms. An unfortunate consequence of such ambivalence is the resulting impression that realism is all things to all critics, that everyone's individual definition of realism is valid since the term has no definitive identity of its own. Realism, however, is a more stable term than the variety of critical opinion might suggest, one which includes both a far-reaching historical context and a variety of works which it informs.

Realism cannot be reduced to a simple statement of formula which

is then applied to particular works; rather, it is an aesthetic impulse arising from shared philosophical assumptions between a writer and an audience about the nature and location of reality—that is to say, a particular piece of literature is perceived as realistic by the reader because what it presents and the way in which it is presented is judged concomitant with the reader's perception of reality. This, of course, implies a time-dependent definition of realism because people of various eras have held differing views about what reality is and how it is experienced. Furthermore, there is the possibility for disagreement among individuals as to whether or not a given work is considered realistic since theories of reality can (and do) vary from person to person in the same generation. Hence it is important that the limits of this pluralism be clearly defined.

George Becker posits that writings in the realistic mode meet three essential criteria which distinguish them from other kinds of writing. First, they “reflect a verisimilitude of detail which is derived both from observation and documentation” (185). This indicates that the settings of realist works are contemporary with the author, being neither “historical fictions” nor futuristic speculations. This sense of immediacy is one of the factors which contributed to the popularity of realism in that it was able to serve as a comment on the rapidly changing and often troubled times. Literature of earlier periods, from the epic through mid-century, made the representation of the long-ago past or the creation of ethereal, sometimes even fantastic settings, their stock-in-trade; not until the

eighteenth century with the advent of the novel did considerations of "true-to-life" representation become an issue or a goal. Yet none of the earlier "realistic" approaches seemed adequate for the realists, whose intent was to present a "slice of life," that is, a cross-section both of society and the lives of individuals within that society. Hence Becker's second tenet that "realism is an effort to approach the norm of experience" (187), implies a reliance upon the representative rather than the exceptional in plot, setting, and character; thus sensationalism would not be a characteristic of the realistic novel.

The word "experience" here is of cardinal importance, for the obvious question arises, "*whose* experience?" By the time of the Civil War, as Jane Tompkins has thoroughly documented, the ranks of novel readers were swelled by educated but essentially non-academic, non-scholarly people. If the "experience" recounted in a novel was to be meaningful to a large portion of the audience, then that experience had to at least approximate that of the readers; otherwise, the work becomes a piece of "escape literature" of one sort or another. The world of the latter nineteenth century was expanding too rapidly for the majority of people to find satisfaction in romantic depictions of life; readers began to demand representations of character and plots which showed them life as they themselves were living it, narratives from which they could learn something of how to cope with the challenges and frustrations of life as they knew it. But this is not to imply that realism conceived of itself as didactic or even as

reformatory, though the later "muckrakers" did find the realistic novel the most effective medium for their message.

Instead, according to Becker's third criterion, realism is "an objective (so far as an artist can achieve objectivity) rather than a subjective or idealistic view of human experience" (188). Hence the early realists, who were in many cases newspaper and magazine journalists, claimed to be concerned with what might be called "photographic representation" of life; they proposed to offer neither moral nor ethical judgments about their characters or plots, but rather let the readers draw their own conclusions. Becker's parenthetical *caveat* suggests that the realists had to struggle as much as did any other writers with achieving objectivity, for the nature of art necessarily involves the communication of the artist, however subtly that may take place. A novel as a work of art is more than a journalistic reporting of events: it includes characters who are effective (and memorable) only if they are drawn with depth and complexity; furthermore, these characters bring to life a plot which is not merely an accumulation of facts but a series of events which are intricately woven into a narrative which proceeds through complications to a resolution. This is to say that a novelist is forced to at least tacitly moralize in the way the denouement resolves (or fails to resolve) the basic conflicts in the story and by the kinds of consequences which befall the characters.

Yet it can be said that the realists of the post-Civil War period were successful in achieving a greater degree of objectivity than did their

predecessors because their writings both conform to as well as depart from Becker's characteristics. Donald Pizer argues that many works of late nineteenth century realism achieve a greater diversity in subject matter than is suggested by the criterion of the representative, and that the realism of this period is frequently subjective and idealistic in its view of human nature and experience (2), which is to say that it is often ethically idealistic. The novel of manners is the most common type of novel found among realist works. The usual way of defining a "novel of manners" is one which focuses on the relationship of its central character to a particular social world; hence this type of novel will introduce a moral tension or conflict between the protagonist and his or her milieu (*Sister Carrie* comes readily to mind here). Within such a framework, some realistic novels present the ideal possibilities of action in particular social contexts, rather than the way most people really do act in these same contexts. Other novels, such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, dramatize a vision of experience in which individuals achieve something which is still a goal for society at large: Lapham's "rise" is ultimately a spiritual and moral one, ironically achieved at the price of his worldly wealth.

Robert Spiller observes in his *Literary History of the United States* (184) that American realism in the late nineteenth century was criticized in its own time for generally presenting unidealized pictures of commonplace life, and for many years thereafter continued to be so characterized; however, a look at several novels of the period shows that realism was

neither unidealized nor, for the most part, commonplace. And even though these observations cannot be universally applied to all works of the period, they nonetheless have significant implications for the period as a whole. The not-infrequent departure of many realist novels from two of Becker's criteria for the conventional definition of realistic writing—that is, in their ethical idealism and in their exploration of richly diverse experience—helped realism in general achieve both its vitality and its promise of future growth and development.

John Loofbourow observes that “if it were possible to make the term ‘realism’ independent of ‘reality’ without reducing its aesthetic significance, the difficulty of trying to understand realism would be much simpler” (433). Concepts of reality are founded upon philosophical assumptions about how that reality is perceived. Philosophers and scientific theorists have been grappling for centuries with the concept of what is “real”; their various and diverse answers basically shape the way in which the world is viewed and what sort of “reality” is conveyed in artistic expression. While “realism” is a relatively recent term, the concept of realistic expression was of artistic concern long before this—and agreement on what constitutes realistic expression in art has never been either settled or universal.

Concepts of reality are the result not so much of physical observation of the world, but of the answers to philosophical questions concerning how we know what is “real”; this is what is known as a “world view.”

Ernst Gombrich, for example, points out (5) that while we usually consider ancient Egyptian art to be highly stylized and artificial, their style of artistic expression was probably an accurate representation of their world view; but since concepts of reality have changed so significantly since then, it is difficult for us in the twentieth century to recognize their art as "realistic" because we are judging it by our modern standards rather than by theirs.

The Platonic-Aristotelian theory of "Forms" as the basis for assumptions about the nature of reality went virtually unchallenged for centuries; in fact, it was not until a mere two centuries ago that any newer theories were formulated which had enough impact to seriously challenge these long-established views. It is not surprising, then, that the term "realism" came into use as relatively late in literary history as it did: until this time there simply was no serious questioning of the nature of reality. It was the philosophers of the eighteenth century, notably Descartes and Locke, who posited that truth (i.e., reality) can indeed be discovered through the senses, that what we see in the world is not just an imperfect reflection of some ideal which can never be realized, but is itself actuality. It was the formulation of this concept of empiricism that paved the way for the development of modern realism in the following century.

There are two important historical and philosophical questions which must be considered if the modern meaning of realism is to be understood. First, there is the difficulty of the historical span of realism.

One critical position, held by such writers as George Becker (36), is that the mode we now call realism began with the word itself. However, Joseph Warren Beach argues that "we have had instances, from Petronius to Defoe, of the subjects and methods currently called 'realistic'" (107). Thus René Wellek concludes that attempting to define realism on the basis of fictional content "would be futile, even in the hundred years that include such disparate writers as Zola, Hardy, and Kafka" (216). The fact that representation was first called realism in the nineteenth century reflects corresponding existential premises. Loofbourow remarks that

. . . despite the recent usage, it seems likely that some art has always seemed "real" to its contemporaries since the exemplary bird pecked at the grapes in Apelles' painting. From Homer to Johnson, fancy and fantasy have been contrasted with imagination or imaging, the imitation of Nature. (434)

Erich Auerbach asserts that "realism appears in all periods, whenever characters of all types can be treated seriously without being segregated by class and style and when all aspects of life are represented" and proposes that "the serious treatment of everyday reality . . . the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, [and] the fluid historical background" (263) are the characteristics which separate modern realism from earlier attempts to imitate reality. But while numerous critics have undertaken the task of trying to distinguish modern realism from traditional "imitation," the historical problem is still unsolved, for the various criteria proposed will not exclude recent anomalous fiction which exploits history and explores the common-



place, but whose meaning still seems unrealistic even by contemporary standards (e.g., *Ulysses* and *The Remembrance of Things Past*). Thus George Levine sees realism as “an historical phenomenon, a literary method (or methods) rather than a literary or metaphysical ideal” (235), and posits that writers, in adopting realism as a technique, thought they were in fact moving closer to the truth. While he cites Auerbach’s work as “extraordinary,” he nonetheless criticizes it as

. . . fostering the confusion [about what constitutes realism in the novel] by implying that Western literature has been moving constantly toward a finer and finer approximation to reality. If we read [Auerbach] in that way, we can fall into the trap of assuming that there is some sort of absolute reality toward which artistic consciousness, in a kind of Hegelian dialectical movement, is progressively moving. (236)

Thus at some point in history writers became so self-conscious about truth-telling in art that they raised realism to the level of doctrine, thereby suggesting that previous literatures had not been entirely realistic. This is a significant development in intellectual history, but criticism can be misled when it operates on the assumption that the realistic novels of the late nineteenth century represent real life (i.e., truth) more accurately than do the narratives of Milton, Hawthorne, or even Fielding.

The concept of realism as an artistic concern, then, is much older than the term itself. To call the period following the Civil War the “Age of Realism” is to call attention to the primary aesthetic doctrine adopted by the writers rather than to the content of their works or their attitudes toward what their novels portray. More specifically, it is to call attention

to the philosophical underpinnings of the era which spawned the literature and influenced the writers.

The second problem is posed by the difficulties of philosophical description. George Becker offers an inclusive theory:

Of the four kinds of reality, broadly conceived: that of absolute essence as asserted by Plato or the Transcendentalists; that which is unique in individual experience and has its essential being out of time, asserted by Proust; that which inheres in external phenomena; and that which has its being in some kind of relation between external phenomena and perceiving consciousness—of these kinds of reality, realism/naturalism must flatly deny the first two, and to resort to them is, automatically, a rejection of literary realism. It is with the third type that realism began, and although it is subject to exhaustion as material for literature, it has been a prime source of force and interest for a hundred years. (36)

Becker's thinking tends primarily toward empiricism, as does that of many contemporary critics, like Erich Heller, but who question why that notion should be attributed first to the nineteenth century. The "reality" that was transcendent for Plato was already immanent for Aristotle; if the idea is an old one, how "new" can the realism be that "began" with the coining of the term? Because post-Civil War realists thought they could record reality as no one had done before, we are not, he feels, obliged to share their assumptions, though we use their term:

If [the realism of the nineteenth-century novel] is concerned with man's reality, it certainly shares this concern with the great literature of any other age. The name "realism" merely betrays the particular superstition of the age, which flattered itself with the notion that it had found the key to what really is. But in fact the realistic writer is only, like any other writer, fascinated by certain aspects of reality, and uses the selective scheme of his fascination for the aesthetic ordering of his chosen material. (qtd. in Becker, 201-02)

It is clear, then, that the concept of realism was an important critical and

philosophical concern long before the term itself was coined. At the same time, it is more than coincidental that the term "realism" came into usage almost concurrently with the rise of the novel, for there is a close relationship between the two.

Harry Levin sees the novel as an integral part of the continuum of social history reflected in literature: epic, romance, and novel, he says, are representative of three successive states and styles of life—the military, the courtly, and the mercantile (*Realism*, 68). Along this same line, M. M. Bakhtin observes that

The novel took shape at the point when epic distance was disintegrating, when the object of artistic representation shifted to the level of a contemporary reality which was inconclusive and fluid. At the core of the novel is personal experience and creative imagination. From its beginning, the novel was made of different clay than other already completed genres; once it came into being, it could never be merely one genre among others. (39)

In contrast with the epic, truth and reality in the novel are determined by knowledge, experience, and practice, and there is a closer identification with the characters by the audience. Finally, absolute closure is characteristic of the epic, whereas the novel is rooted in the present and aims toward the future. Bakhtin also notes that in relation to other genres, the novel is the only developing genre and, therefore, "it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding" (7). Therefore, any final definition of the novel, like any definition of realism, must be tentative and unfinished.

Ian Watt asserts that Defoe and Richardson were the first great

writers who did not take story material from mythology, history, legend, or previous literatures (14). He has chosen two outstanding authors as his starting point, for certainly both of them, in their fictionalized re-creation of ordinary life, signaled a dramatic departure from previous epic and romance models for narrative. From the beginnings of the novel, then, we see the movement toward what would come to be known as realism.

Many early novels which were not written specifically as romances or adventures (as well as the earliest criticism of the novel) exemplify the strong didacticism which inhered in the new genre, a theme which would continue for over a century. So strong and influential was this tendency to moral purpose in the history of both the novel and of realism that it deserves particular consideration.

Samuel Johnson was concerned with "art as a moral instructor and the artist as the instrument of moral instruction" (Halperin 14). Thus Johnson could admire Richardson, whose moral patterns were always clear (as seen in such works as *Pamela* and *Clarissa*), but not Fielding, who, he felt, did not adequately distinguish virtue and vice in *Tom Jones*. Fielding's methods, however, were taken up by later writers (such as George Eliot) who felt that if we are exposed to the psychological processes of an ordinary person, we can compare his private experience to our own and so learn more about ourselves.

Victorian novelists, despite the distance of years between them and

their Augustan predecessors, differed in no serious way in their mutual preoccupation with the pedagogical value of art. "Both Augustan and nineteenth century novel theory before Flaubert and James are primarily interested in the relationship between the reader and the text" (Wellek 231). That is to say, novelists consciously intended for their readers to learn from their narratives and improve their lives. However, there began to be a gradual shift in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to a style of novel writing which focused on the mental life of the character. It can be said, then, that the novel up to this time was essentially mimetic in direction and moral in tone.

Controversies about the propriety of didacticism in the novel are still being waged. René Wellek takes issue with Erich Auerbach's assertion that "realism must not be didactic, moralistic, rhetorical, idyllic or comic" (289). Wellek admits that in theory completely truthful representation of reality would exclude any kind of social purpose or propaganda, but he notes the basic antinomy of the theory:

Any depiction of social reality implies a lesson of human pity, social reformism and criticism—often a rejection and revulsion against society. Thus there is an implicit tension between description and prescription, truth and instruction. This tension cannot be resolved logically, but actually characterizes realistic literature. (242)

Hence for Wellek, a thread of didacticism is always concealed—or at least implied—in realistic novels.

What Ian Watt refers to as "Realism of Assessment" is "the conveyance of wise and responsible judgment about the life depicted in real-

ism" (288), which at least implies some didactic impulse on the part of the writer. While Harry Levin earlier concurred with Auerbach on the sociological premises of realism, they are at odds on the topic of didacticism; Levin states that "realism presupposes an idealism to be corrected, a convention to be superseded, or an orthodoxy to be criticized" (*Gates* 66). Hence is it virtually impossible for an author to achieve complete objectivity, despite George Becker's assertion, mentioned earlier, that realism is an objective rather than a subjective or idealistic view of human experience.

Flaubert was the first to articulate a theory of realism as a reaction to Romanticism, though he expressed a dislike for "pure" realism, that is, the mere imitation or copying of the external. For him, as for George Eliot, the novel creates beauty primarily in its treatment of the internal (Halperin 12). Flaubert felt this was accomplished through style because he believed that style and subject are symbiotic, if not identical.

Sir Walter Scott asserted that "Romances emphasize marvelous and uncommon incidents," while novels "emphasize the ordinary train of human events and the modern state of society" (qtd. in Levin, *Gates* 40). His approach to the novel not only focuses on one of the primary tenets of realism (the "ordinary") but also carries a suggestion of historicism in that the novel depicts current social conditions. Scott, however, is reductive in his view in tacitly assuming that a single mode informs an entire work; it is more likely that "any work of the imagination . . . will exhibit

both tendencies: romantic and realistic," as they are "by no means confined to those historical movements which we associate with them" (Kaminsky 222). Wayne Booth, furthermore, makes the point that no one style of realism will be equally effective or applicable to all parts of the same work (321).

One of the continuing problems of realism is that it has always had to defend itself as art. Thomas Hardy, an essentially didactic writer, theorized that

Art is a disproportioning (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence, "realism" is not art. (qtd. in Becker 101)

Hardy's objection arises primarily from his didacticism: he is more concerned that art show what matters for the improvement of the reader rather than with merely achieving realism, which could distract from the didactic aim of the work. But other nay-sayers of realism have been motivated by lesser impulses: Loofbourow observes that realistic novels have generally tended to be popular with the reading public, often more so than works of a more "serious" nature. He theorizes that promptings of jealousy over this popularity might be the cause for some critics' attacks on realism as art (441).

Alice Kaminsky sees the novel from a different perspective which brings the notion of truth in narration under scrutiny:

It is precisely because the novelist works with the formula, "If A were to occur, then B would occur," that veracity for him has to be a flexible rather than a rigid notion. The counter-factuality explains

why he never has to be limited to the description of the lines and surfaces of existing objects. To write realistic novels is to deal with imaginary events and characters and with the hypothetical formulation of possibilities, in other words, with the counterfactual, for the sake of illuminating political, social, economic, psychological, or moral "truth" of an age. This kind of veracity seems to be a necessary condition for the creation of a good or great novel. (236)

The idea of creating fiction, however, is not to be confused with writing fantasy: fiction implies the logical and believable arrangement of events which *could* actually happen in real life (since fictional events are modeled on actual experiences), whereas fantasy is not predicated on this assumption. The argument that realism is a reaction against the imaginative does not contradict Kaminsky's assertion concerning counterfactuality; her point is that observable reality can be manipulated by the novelist without sacrificing verisimilitude, even though the creation of fiction must necessarily be seen as an act of imagination.

The foregoing discussion points out the variety of considerations which inform the many ways that critics define realism. The aim here is to synthesize these ideas into a unified way of thinking about the concept which will elucidate the body of post-Civil War works identified by that term.

Wallace Martin posits that "discussion of realism begins when we are not confident about our understanding of reality" (*Recent Theories* 62). This was certainly the case in the eighteenth century when the long held Platonic-Aristotelian notions of the location of reality, coupled with the rise of science, called into question the traditional beliefs which had gone



virtually unquestioned for centuries. Hence realism, like any literary method, reflects both inherited conventions and a way of looking at the world. Further, it implies certain assumptions about the nature of the real world, assumptions which need not be made explicit in any realistic text but which certainly constitute a ground of meaning. For example, realism implies that ordinariness is more real—at least more representative—than heroism, that people are a moral mixture rather than either good or bad, and that the firmest realities are objects rather than ideas or imaginings.<sup>2</sup> Realism, furthermore, represents a break with the romantic exaltation of the ego, its emphasis on the imagination, its often symbolic method, its concern for myth, and the romantic concept of animated nature (Watt 29). In contrast with classicism, realism rejects the notion of “levels of style” and the social exclusions which Wellek sees as “inherent” in classicism (253).

There is consensus among critics that the choice of ordinary and typical subjects is one of the most important tenets of realism. However, the very idea of representative subject matter is precariously balanced between two extremes: the real, as opposed to the abstract, is concrete and individual; in this sense, then, realism is opposed to the use of stock characters. In fiction, however, the particularized individual often provides an ironic perspective on the generally accepted values and behavior of other characters, what Wallace Martin calls a “systematic undermining and demystification, a secular ‘decoding,’ of inherited assumptions about life”

(*Recent Theories* 87). Therefore, according to Watt, characters should have ordinary proper names instead of symbolic, allegorical ones to exemplify that the character is a particular person (17). This suggests that realism is a new literary perspective, a rejection of universals and an emphasis on particulars. But on the other hand, the real is that which is common rather than unique or atypical and, therefore, it can be argued that realism is committed to maintaining a certain distance from particularity. Georg Lukács and René Wellek espouse the notion of the “type”—a “figure who, although individual, still has universal significance, such as Hamlet, Othello, Shylock, and Faust” (Wellek 244). Types, then, constitute a bridge between the real and the social ideal. This is why Kaminisky observes that “great novelists like Dostoevski and Tolstoy [in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *War and Peace* respectively] have the same view of reality as consisting of individuals in whom the universal is reflected” (215). These types, of course, embody certain didactic and prescriptive implications: they are meant as a model to be evaluated.

Realism is a theory which is both inclusive and exclusive. On the one hand it excludes the fantastic, the symbolic, the highly stylized, and the purely abstract, along with the mythical and the improbable and the extraordinary; at the same time it reflects the orderly world of nineteenth century science, a world without miracles and transcendence where cause and effect can be ascertained and studied. Realism also recognizes the ugly and low as legitimate subjects of art; for example, taboo subjects such

as sex and dying (as opposed to love and death, which had always been the standard fare of literature) could now be appropriate subject matter. But Ian Watt wisely observes that

If the novel were realistic merely because it saw life from the seamy side, it would only be an inverted romance; but in fact it surely attempts to portray all the varieties of human experience and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective; the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it. (11)

In other words, there is something notably particular about the style and the structure and the language of realism which separates it from other literature that may include details of the ordinary and everyday: simply because a narrative set in an Hogarthian environment does not automatically classify it as a piece of realism.

Harry Levin takes a more guarded, philosophical approach:

If we define truth as the accurate correspondence between reality itself and a given account of reality, we are thereupon confronted by the question, "What is reality?" Since it cannot bear precisely the same significance for any two human beings, Carlyle declared that "reality escapes us." Let us concede the point; let it stand as "X," the unknown element in whatever formulation we may reach. We come closer by approaching the problem from the other side—by sorting out the testimony that various witnesses have deposed, charting the general direction they seem to indicate, and tentatively calling this process of approximation "realism." (Realism 143)

Hence realism is something other than a precise method which can be formulated and then tested upon individual works; Levin's term "process" identifies realism more as a kind of impulse or direction. But even more important, his theory attests that reality (i.e., truth) is not something stable and fixed, but is the product of the subjectivity of the observer. Just

as reality differs from one person to another, so do concepts of realism change from one age to another. An essential element in our judgment about the "realism" of a work is an understanding of the cultural mind set which gave rise to the work, an underlying assumption in the work of both Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins.

Despite the diversity of opinions about the nature of realism evident in the foregoing discussion, there is a certain regularity of attitudes among them which suggests both the stability of the term's meaning as well as the conventions of realism as a critical concept. The choice of ordinary, typical subject matter as the foremost criterion is a matter of mutual agreement among various critics. Realism is also characterized by a tone of objectivity by which an author strives not to let personal attitudes intervene in the presentation of the narrative, notwithstanding the implicit judgment inherent in any handling of narrative elements. Realism likewise involves an attitude of natural causality, that is, the antithesis of chance, fate, and providence, which are common elements in romance. Auerbach posits that realism shows individuals enmeshed in total reality, an entity which is at once political, social, and economic, and which is both concrete and constantly evolving (435). Finally, a particular world view inheres in realism. For Becker, it is a philosophical commitment to a scientific view of people and of society, one which is opposed to idealism and traditional religious views (69), while for Wellek there is a strain of didacticism concealed or at least implied in this commitment

(228). These seemingly paradoxical views can be reconciled in that the social criticism inherent in many realistic novels can be termed didactic in the sense that they present life from one individual's point of view, but that other views are also possible. The realist holds that his point of view is *true*, and that others are, if not false, at least seriously distorted. For this reason, Lukács asserts that a genuinely realistic narrative does not borrow its form from literary tradition, but from the process of historical change: the plots and characters in realistic fiction show us what actually happened in history (in Wellek 253).

All this suggests that realism is less an organized body of literature than a literary convention which influences the way a particular work is read. These excerpts from Hugh Holman's definition of a convention help to put the current discussion into perspective:

A convention is any device or style or subject matter which has become, in its time and by reason of its habitual use, a recognized means of literary expression, an accepted element in technique. . . . Features which later become conventions usually arise from freshness of appeal [and] acquire a pleasing familiarity at the hands of good writers. . . . Although conventions can be trite and even painful when overdone, it should be recognized that they are also essential to the necessary communication between author and audience. (101)

If we say, for example, that realism depicts "ordinary" life, we have not only offered a conventional description of realism but have also established the norm by which a work can be judged as realistic or not. Thus other kinds of narrative will provide something else for the reader—fantasy, wish-fulfillment, make-believe, and so forth. In other words, conventions condition the way in which a work will be read, and these conventions

must make themselves apparent, if only implicitly, at the outset of a work. Conventions call forth certain expectations from the author by the reader; our assessment of a work is at least partially a critique of how these expectations have been met.

With realism, then, we are dealing with a convention rather than a specific doctrine or canon of works. The most fruitful approach to defining realism is to take a relativistic outlook which allows for the flexibility of a time-dependent concept rather than one grounded in dogmatism and rigidness. Much literary theory is predicated on the assumption that disparate elements in a work can be fused into a single theory or vision, but reality is a more complex thing than any single system can allow for; hence "realism is a hybrid and the definitions we work with correspond to ideals rather than to novels" (Levine 242). At best, then, definitions are derived from a wide variety of works and are based on a number of considerations found in those works, though that does not necessarily make them tenuous, which is why Wallace Martin concludes that "realism is that which is true for us in our time" (62).

With these issues and arguments in mind, the stage is now set for a consideration of the characteristics of regionalism.

#### **4. Regionalism and Local Color**

Regionalism, like realism, dates back much further than the Civil War; it simply reached the height of both popularity and literary quality

at the hands of such diverse writers as Bret Harte, George Washington Cable, Ambrose Bierce, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. It was a movement that began in the broad humor based on the customs and peculiarities of common people in various parts of the country; likewise, much of it is in the style of folk literature, its matter drawn frequently from local legend or experience, and most usually narrated in the dialect of the region. Early regionalists such as A. B. Longstreet, George Washington Harris, and Joel Chandler Harris supplied the popular press with anecdotes and fiction in which humorous narrative was mingled with diverse elements as white and black folklore, frontier tall tales and hunting stories, as well as folk songs and ballads (Pattee 387). Ultimately the body of regional literature, both serious and comic, provided a more comprehensive understanding of the United States as a whole than did any other single body of literature, which accounts in part for its popularity in its time. Edward Eggleston, looking back over the regionalist movement near the close of the nineteenth century, observed that the "Great American Novel," which had yet to be written, actually existed "in sections" (qtd. in J. Martin 149) in these depictions of the domestic scene and individual character.

Donald Pizer (37) observes that any literary genres and modes have certain barriers of established terms and ideas which any commentator must overcome in trying to define them; regionalism has two such channeled approaches. First, since regionalism flourished concurrently

with realism, and since it seems to take literature in the same general direction begun by realism, it is usually regarded primarily as an extension or continuation of realism, only a little different. Second, there are the problems generated by this "little difference": is it really so little? if so, does a real difference actually exist between realism and regionalism? if not, where does one end and the other begin?

It is true that regionalism is a particular variety of realism, but it was actually recognized and defined as a genre long before realism was because earlier regional works were usually a variety of folk literature and were often preserved through the oral tradition before being eventually written down. "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" are clear examples of this. But even while it can be ironically noted that regionalism in a sense predates that of which it is a sub-set, this is not to suggest that no essential differences exist between them.

In a general sense, regionalism refers to literature which focuses on and calls attention to the location of the setting and the particular customs, habits, and speech patterns of the characters as reflective of their culture and environment. It is, therefore, highly realistic because it is rooted in the accurate depiction of a particular region and its inhabitants. This is not to suggest that plot and characterization are unimportant elements of a regionalist novel, but it does imply that these elements are significant primarily as they reflect the characteristics of the region. Thus the essential distinction between realism and regionalism lies in the rela-



tionship between the literary elements of the work and the importance of the elements of setting (which include place and time as well as local particularities). Put another way, the difference between realism and regionalism can be judged by whether or not the plot and characterization of a given novel would be equally successful if transposed to another setting. George Washington Cable's *Madame Delphine*, for example, has no significance outside its Creole environment, for the plot is essentially commonplace and its interest lies in the exploration of the Creole mentality. The same is true of both *Pembroke* and *Jerome* by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: both novels tell virtually an identical story, but the interest of the narratives is in the characterization of the flinty and unyielding rural New Englanders caught in the last throes of Puritanism. But it is this very ability to recreate a region and an environment that is both realistic and memorable that defines the significance of regionalism as at least a minor strain in the history of American literature.

One of the outstanding realistic characteristics of regionalism was its use of dialect both in dialogue and in the narrative voice; the sense of immediacy created by the use of localized speech patterns was one of the factors which helped to fuel the popularity of these works among the general reading public. But at the same time, it was this very characteristic which was singled out for some of the harshest academic criticism of the regionalist movement. The Eastern "Brahmins," notes Pattee (387), called such language "barbaric" and denounced the entire movement as

“unworthy of serious literary consideration” because of its lack of “higher artistic elements.” It was just such critical invective which prompted Barrett Wendell to observe at the beginning of the twentieth century that “essentially only two types of fiction existed in 1870: the literature of the cultivated few [i.e., the academy] and popular literature” (268). Pattee, himself no admirer of regionalist works, does nonetheless offer faint praise of the movement in his judgment that while it cannot be denied that regionalist novels are “lacking in the higher elements of literary art, in structure and style and creative imagination,” no one can declare that “they are lacking in truth to life or power to move the reader” (388). Subsequent historians likewise single out the realistic conventions found in regionalist works as a key element in their overall popularity. In this sense, then, regionalism would seem to be primarily an extension of realism.

It was, however, the localized elements of regionalism rather than the presence of realistic detail which account for the overwhelming though short-lived popularity of the movement. The regionalist technique of identifying characters with their surroundings, often with acute psychological penetration, was appealing to the reading public of the post-Civil War period for a number of reasons. One of the thrusts of the Reconstruction period was the cultivation of a unified national identity in the final breakdown of sectional thinking. Regionalism served this purpose in two important ways: first, by depicting the particularity of America’s many cul-

tural variations in different parts of the country, these works sought to undercut the sectional mentality by showing that "Americanism" could not be limited to a single definition, nor could one cultural or regional expression of Americanism be seen as either "typical" or superior to another. In other words, regionalist novels attempted to show that there could be unity in diversity, that "we are all Americans," regardless of which part of the land a person claims as home. At the same time, regionalist works served the important purpose of being something like a "family album" by preserving "snapshots" of an America that was quickly passing away. The completion of the transcontinental railroad made travel between formerly isolated sections of the country a commonplace activity, and with this travel came the rapid spread of industrialism and the gradual homogenization of culture; regionalist literature, then, became an important source of documenting and preserving primarily our rural and small town heritage. The subsequent rise of naturalism and muckraking in the latter part of the century, and the advent of modernism after the turn of the century, doomed regionalism to relatively short-lived popularity since the concerns associated with the unbridled growth of big cities and big business distracted people's reading tastes from the nostalgia and (frequently) sentimentalism of regionalist works; but although regionalism was quickly assigned the status of "minor" within the canon of American literature, its place is nonetheless secure because of the historical and cultural significance these works. Individual works, such as the novels of Mark Twain,<sup>3</sup>

will always remain nearer the center of the canon because of their theme or characterization or craftsmanship, but the overall corpus of regionalist novels will probably always remain at the periphery of the canon, but—most important—always *in* the canon.

John Crowe Ransom makes a case for regionalism both as an economic structure and a conservative aesthetic which is in opposition to the rapid growth, change, and progressivism usually associated with the late nineteenth century. For him, regionalism means “flourishing on the meaneast capital, surviving stubbornly, finding a way of life satisfactory, and preferring it to all other lifestyles” (46). Hence an established culture offers two benefits: economic—having sufficient means and being free from peripheral economic securities—and aesthetic—recognizing that the way of life is pleasant and “feels” right. Non-regionalism, according to this theory, can have a variety of names: cosmopolitanism, progressivism, industrialism, free trade, internationalism, eclecticism, or just simple rootlessness (47).

Ransom contends that a regionalist mind-set is essentially more realistic (i.e., natural) than a non-regionalist one because the industry is in sight of the natural resources of the region and of its population; thus individuals support themselves and their neighbors, thereby emphasizing a local market. A region which is physically distinct supports an economic unit of society; but since its population will have much more of “domestic” trade than of foreign, the people will develop special ways and cus-

toms and be confirmed in them. Then as economic patterns become perfected and easy, they cease to be merely economic and become gradually aesthetic: "They were meant for efficiency, but they survive for enjoyment, and men who were only prosperous become also happy" (49). That is to say, their economic actions become also their arts. It takes a long time for regionalism to become established. It is the work of many generations, of which the earliest ones must live and die in war with the region, exploiting it, trying to impose their own economic wishes upon it, not knowing the sort of peace that would be lasting. After all, as Ransom points out, "the Fathers of the Republic were not savages; they were European regionalists, and they set about to apply to their new regions as much of their European regionalism as they could" (52). For that reason we can scarcely know for certain of any regional culture anywhere that can be called strictly indigenous, for a regional culture ordinarily represents an importation, or series of importations, that has been lived with and adapted for so long that finally it fits, and looks "native." For example, the peculiar institution of slavery set the South apart from the rest of the nation and gave it a particular continuity. New England had likewise achieved a rather strong regionalism. Its states were older as compared with those of the South and West; and particularly with those empty areas west whose states were not yet born, was more highly developed, its economy more stable, and its mode of life more aesthetic. According to Ransom's theory, the western part of the United States could hardly be

said to be regional in an American sense since white men had lived there for less than half a century and an authentic regionalism had not yet had time to develop; only the Native American culture was long enough established to be considered as the culture of the region.<sup>4</sup>

According to Ransom's theory, regionalism as a literary movement came to attention and fruition when it did because after mid-century the North and the South, the older sections of the country, had come under the powerful and destructive influence of industrialism. While this influence was not the primary tension which led to the Civil War, it was certainly one of the incidents which played a part. For the machine economy, carried to the limit with the object of "maximum efficiency," is the enemy of regionalism. The South was awakened to the threat of industrialism and recognized that its entire way of life was at stake, and so it resisted. In a machine economy, the laborer is preoccupied with simply tending an abstract machine and there is no opportunity for the cultivation or expression of aesthetic attitudes; one can easily recall the image of "Sister" Carrie Meeber sitting by the hour mindlessly sewing shoes in a dingy factory. Ransom's assertion is that "aesthetic character does not reside in an object's abstract design but in the sense of its natural and contingent materials" (56); hence the manufacture of domestic goods becomes very nearly a religious act, for in such labor there is a communion of person and environment. The products of machines are used, to be sure, but they are scarcely enjoyed because they have so little aesthetic

character. Regionalism is further an essentially rural aesthetic because a city of any sort removes people from direct contact with nature, the source of raw materials, and so city living must necessarily be regarded as "un-natural" or "ab-normal." Wealth, Ransom reasons, is a sure sign that regionalism has disappeared, for money is mistaken for an aesthetic principle which replaces regionalism; hence what is called progress is more often destruction.

Ransom's aesthetic theory of regionalism makes a significant contribution to our understanding of regionalism as a literary movement in that it does much to explain to other thinkers the conservative ideology and antiquated pastoralism of the Agrarians' philosophy and characterizes the struggle of the South in the face of rising industrialism. Regionalist writing was a way to argue for the preservation of a long-held way of life that was on the verge of passing into extinction. Once set in motion, the forces of rapid change and mechanization were not to be stemmed, but despite the exciting (and lucrative) prospects which the "new way" promised, the regionalists seemed to sense that the price they would have to pay would be a dear one and could involve concessions they might later regret.

It is not uncommon that writers will use the terms regionalism and local color interchangeably, but it is not precise to do so; local color contains all the same characteristics of regionalism, but the difference is one of degree and intention.

Whereas the intent of regionalism is fidelity to the particularities of a specific area, local color writing consciously exploits the speech, dress, mannerisms, habits of thought, and topography of the region it depicts. As pointed out earlier, all fiction obviously has a specific physical setting. Regionalism calls attention to the setting and gives it a prominence in the narrative that is not found in non-regionalist works; one way to test the degree of regionalism in a work is to determine whether or not the action and the characters could be moved to another location without significant loss or distortion. Local color goes a step beyond geographical representation in making the setting and characters (as personifications of the region) the primary focus of the work. Put another way, local color works generally lack the essential seriousness of realism in that they are content to be entertainingly informative about surface peculiarities of their region. They emphasize verisimilitude of detail at the expense of being concerned enough with truth to larger aspects of life or human nature.

A frequent criticism of regionalism, and especially local color writing, is its sentimental strain. It cannot be denied that these works do indeed tend toward the sentimental, but the point at issue is whether or not such a criticism is to be taken as complimentary or derogatory. In the twentieth century, sentimentalism is a less desirable characteristic in a novel, but as both Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins have demonstrated, the overlay of sentimentality was regarded by nineteenth century critics as an asset in a work and a trait which helped account for its popularity.



As an instrument of reconstruction and nascent nationalism, regionalism and local color both promoted unity among the diverse sections of the country while providing an authentic and comprehensive record of the culture to be found in these areas. Regionalist and local color works were products of "insiders," either life-long residents or firmly rooted "transplants" who combined a knack for story-telling with a sense of place and a realization that their localized culture was on the verge of an immense change which might well irrevocably alter that culture. Their inclination, then, was to celebrate as well as record the uniqueness of their "place."

It has been difficult for the twentieth century to evaluate local color writing properly because local color does not conform to the norms of modernism. Merrill Skaggs summarizes local color as "primarily story-telling, not prophecy; narrative, not symbolism; character sketch, not psychological analysis" (219). This helps to explain why most local color works (and many regionalist works as well) are subsequently accorded the status of minor literature: the elements which such narratives stress are the very ones which New Critics tend to regard as secondary. Only those regionalist writers who succeed at skillfully blending structural elements (plotting, character, etc.) with depth of insight into the human condition—Mark Twain and William Faulkner are good examples—tend to achieve major status in the canon. Nonetheless, the works of minor regionalists and local colorists serve an invaluable historical and sociological purpose,

and without them our literary and cultural heritage would be all the poorer.

We must remember that changes in taste, as much as immutable or "objective" aesthetic criteria, account for canonical reputations, and so in assessing the "value" of certain regional works, it is necessary to set aside our twentieth century critical mind set and attempt to read the works "on their own terms." That is to say, we must attempt to locate the work in the context which produced it and to ascertain, first, what made the narrative so popular and accessible in its time and, second, what qualities about the work might recommend it for deeper consideration in our own time.<sup>5</sup> Certainly not all regionalist works will fare well under such scrutiny, for some are simply too deficient in essential ways (faulty plotting, shallow characterization, etc.) to merit re-consideration and are best left at the periphery of the canon as historical pieces which are, at best, merely "interesting" by most any standards.

The foregoing chapters have been concerned with issues of canon formation and the shifting reputations of authors and works within the canon; the particular question of how reputations rise and fall has been a central consideration. The remaining chapters are specific "cases in point," that is, incidents of works which enjoyed high critical and popular acclaim at the time of their appearance but which have subsequently fallen into near critical oblivion. In each case, the intent will be to examine the aspects of the works which later New Critical or modernist stan-

dards have judged as flawed or inferior, and to argue that a New Historical perspective, on the order of that presented by Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs*, offers a way of approaching the works that more fairly and realistically judges them in terms both of authorial intention and their reception by their initial readers and critics.

### Notes for Chapter 3

1. There is nothing about this observation which makes it characteristic of or unique to this moment of literary history. As the previous discussion has shown, the academy, which finds much of its *raison d'être* in the preservation of tradition, is always hesitant to sanction works or authors which represent significant departures from established norms. Even in our "liberal" times, popular or "marginal" works may be reluctantly allowed into the syllabus of literature courses, but never with any suggestion that these works are to be considered canonical. Hence realism can make no privileged claim to having struggled for acceptance at the time of its inception.
2. Harry Levin points out that etymologically, realism is "thing-ism": he notes that the adjective "real" derives from the Latin word *res*, and in Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary* it refers "to things, not people" (*Gates* 34). René Wellek observes that English realism tended to assume that the real is both meaningful and good, while French realism has consistently tended away from such moral assumptions to lead more directly to the notion of an indifferent universe, i.e., naturalism (245).
3. The problem of defining the difference between realism and regionalism, of determining "where realism ends and regionalism begins," is well demonstrated with someone like Mark Twain. Many historians regard him as one of the earliest (and always as one of the best) of the realists, yet all the characteristics of regionalism are found in most of his works, notably the use of dialect. In the end, his classification as a realist or a regionalist in a particular canon will be determined by which elements in his works are seen as primary.
4. *A Great and Shining Road*, an historical account of the transcontinental railroad, devotes an entire chapter to "The Indian Problem." The problem was that the developers and builders of the railroad failed to appreciate that their great enterprise, no matter how beneficial to the United States, could be realized only by displacing the Indians and, in the process, destroying much of their culture, both economic and aesthetic. The uprisings and massacres perpetrated by the Indians were much less the result of a supposed hostile nature as the desperate attempt by the Indians to preserve their way of life.
5. This type of reevaluation is not, of course, unprecedented. Herman Melville's canonization in the 1920's, the shifting fortunes of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the renewed interest during the past two decades in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and short stories are cases in point.

## CHAPTER IV

### A GOOD STORY AND THEN SOME:

#### BRET HARTE'S *GABRIEL CONROY* RECONSIDERED

*"Bret Harte was, in a sense, the cartographer of this exciting and mysterious West." – Henry Boynton*

Just seven short years after Bret Harte's death in 1903, John Erskine chose him for inclusion in his *Leading American Novelists*, a study which included only five other authors: Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, William Gilmore Simms, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Erskine acknowledges that "it is always a daring thing to name the leaders among men [*sic*] of genius," but with a "proper sense of critical frailty" has selected those American writers whom "time has already sifted out . . . for special remembrance" (ii). Canon history shows that Erskine's list was even more frail than he feared. Hawthorne's reputation has remained firmly established, but the others, although they remain firmly in the canon, have been the victims of shifting critical winds through the years.<sup>1</sup>

The point here, however, is that Bret Harte, both in his own time and afterward, was considered one of the leading writers of American fiction. He is still well known as the first internationally famous writer of

short stories about the American West, but despite his prolific output, only a handful of his shorter works remain visible in the canon. His career as a novelist, dramatist, lecturer, and editor are interesting, but secondary to his popularity as a writer of short stories about the California gold rush days. Following his early successes as a short story writer, Bret Harte was persuaded to try his hand at novel writing in order to present a panorama of California life at mid-century which was depicted, he felt, only in "miniature" in his various short stories. Harte's readers were already eager for anything he might produce, and so *Gabriel Conroy*, even in its initial serialized form, met with enthusiastic success at the time of its appearance and likewise underwent several editions both in the United States and abroad until the First World War. Despite its original popularity, however, *Gabriel Conroy* has not found a place in the canon for more than a half-century; the reasons for this devaluation are many, and some of them are readily justifiable, yet there are aspects of the novel which, when considered from a New Historical rather than a New Critical formalist perspective, render the work both valuable and interesting for a late twentieth century audience. Defining the relationship of *Gabriel Conroy* to the culture which created it and which it helped to define will not erase certain of its flaws which are obvious by most any critical standards, but it will help to account for its initial popularity and its subsequent fall from critical favor, and to establish a framework in which modern readers can appreciate this work of breadth and dimension.

This present inquiry, therefore, is two-fold: it is concerned, first, with the factors that have effected or at least influenced the dramatic change in Bret Harte's overall canonical reputation in the twentieth century, namely the tenuous critical nature of regional literature in general and Harte's literary craftsmanship in particular, both of which have ultimately resulted in most of his works being forgotten and the few remaining ones relegated to the status of minor literature. It is tempting to offer simplistic explanations in this regard, but these do not do justice to the complex mesh of ideas and circumstances that have defined Harte's position in the canon. But the more important focus here is on what things made *Gabriel Conroy* so significant to its original readers and on the extent to which these same things can engage a vastly different audience more than a hundred years later. No attempt is made to provide an exhaustive biography of Harte; rather, only the facts and incidents necessary to appreciate the context of *Gabriel Conroy* are included.

### 1. The Shaping of Bret Harte The Writer

Francis Bret Harte (he dropped the use of his first name when he became a writer) was born in Albany, New York, on August 25, 1836, the same year that Dickens in England began the publication of *Pickwick Papers*. Despite his later and relatively brief migration to California, Harte remained essentially an Easterner in attitude and sensitivity, a fact which has significant bearing on his credibility as a reporter of Western life.

Owing to frail health in childhood, his formal education was rather minimal; however, he became very early a voracious reader and cultivated a particular fondness for the works of Dickens, which he read several times. By the time he was in his teens his father had died, and for reasons which are not entirely clear in any of his biographies, he and his mother left the quiet security of the East for the fledgling civilization of California, which was still in the early throes of the great gold rush. His mother remarried almost immediately upon their arrival, and shortly thereafter the young Harte struck out on his own.

Typical of most young men of the time, Harte moved among a number of jobs in various locations, several of which were mining towns. He was a sensitive observer of his surroundings, though he made no attempt to re-create them in fiction at this time; what little he did write was mostly sentimental romantic poetry which his biographers generally agree was "of generally poor quality." However, in 1858, while working as a typesetter for the *Northern Californian*, he was invited to become a writer of local interest news items, an event which did much to transform his style as a writer. When he began as a staff writer, his style was about as bad as it could be; just the switch to writing prose itself brought about notable improvement, along with the fact that he was writing about definite subject matter for a particular audience. His style, however, continued to be highly imitative and uninteresting; it would be another five years before Harte would discover his own voice and learn that the read-



ing public would recognize him as a writer only when he spoke as himself.

Harte eventually earned the title of assistant editor with the *Northern Californian*, and it was in this position that he made the acquaintance of another young writer who had chosen the pseudonym of Mark Twain. Harte listened with rapt attention as Twain recited a humorous yarn and then persuaded him to submit it in writing to *The Overland Monthly* for publication, which Twain did, entitling it "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." The friendship between Harte and Twain was a long and enriching one, both personally and professionally, for Harte labored over Twain's writing, helped him to recognize some of its obvious crudities, and assisted him in correcting them. Following his own rise to fame, Twain introduced Bret Harte to several influential literary friends, which helped in no small measure to promote Harte's career when he finally began to submit serious works for publication.

Harte's tenure with the *Northern Californian* ended rather unhappily after he editorialized too personally and savagely about an Indian massacre in the absence of the editor-in-chief; however, it was during this time that he made the commitment to prose writing and began to invite stylistic criticism. He subsequently returned to the staff of the *Northern Californian*, during which time he published several poems and a few prose pieces, but made his final break with that journal as the Civil War came to a close.

Through a series of happily positioned friendships and connections,

Harte was invited in 1868 to edit *The Overland Monthly*, California's first quality literary journal. It is as an editor that we learn much about Harte's stance on matters relating to literary theory and the principles which guided his own story writing. Patrick Morrow's exhaustive critical study of Harte's letters and editorial memoranda was particularly helpful in shaping the following discussion.

Given that the primary task of any narrative is to tell a good and engaging story, Bret Harte stressed the importance of action, insisting that a good author must show and not merely tell his reader what is happening. Harte felt that a story should build action around "the prolonged struggle of man with his particular environment and circumstance." To be meaningful, action needs some kind of shape, something which an unusual and well-developed conflict can provide:

For the more hopeless the preliminary situation, and the greater the obstacle to the action, the greater the interest. The highest form of art is reached when the hero's difficulties are such that apparently nothing short of divine intervention would seem to save him, and his triumph is consequently exalted in the mind of the reader to seem to partake of divine retribution. It is especially reached in a novel dealing with what might be called personal revenge—yet a revenge for wrongs so inhuman and a revenge carried out under such masterful intelligence and direction, as to seem divine justice. (qtd. in Morrow, 42)

Clearly Harte's guidelines for a successful story formula are in the melodramatic tradition, and Harte had no hesitation about employing blatant melodrama in his stories. For example, accident—always a convenient and effective device—is one of the primary devices he uses for plot resolution. Modernist judgment sees the plot of *Gabriel Conroy* as so filled with

accidents—especially the numerous earthquakes—that it is difficult to view the characters as intelligent or creative persons; instead, they merely seem to keep responding to situations over which they have no control. Thus it is not surprising, in this view, that we find mostly external action and very little of the internal workings of characters' minds in the novel.

But this opinion does not take into account, first of all, that melodrama was not considered as negatively by nineteenth century standards as by ours; in fact, quite the opposite was true. In his own time, Harte was frequently criticized for flaws in his technical craftsmanship but never for being an unengaging storyteller. Readers (and in our own time, both readers and viewers) have always taken delight in highly plot-oriented narratives, and the inclusion of “close calls” and *deus ex machina*-type rescues serve only to enhance that enjoyment. *Gabriel Conroy* succeeded with its original readers because it was a combination of so many things—but first and foremost it told a good story which held the interest of its readers. To rely on modernist criteria in judging *Gabriel Conroy* is to overlook the standards of taste which informed the novel's original audience as well as to negate one of the norms that continues to influence popular fiction today.

Twentieth century criticism frequently faults Harte's writings as overly sentimental, though as the previous discussion pointed out, sentimentalism, like melodrama, was not looked upon as negatively in Harte's

time as in our own. In fact, as a critic Harte scorned sentimentality every bit as much as he scorned the didactic. In order to understand his values, therefore, it is necessary to recognize his belief in a definite distinction between sentiment and sentimentality. Harte based his liberal faith in humanity on the two ideas that people were readily capable of strong emotions, and that the weak and sad were capable of dramatic recoveries. Harte called self-sacrifice, moral transformation in situations of high emotion, and bravery in the face of defeat, realistic elements (for example, as demonstrated by the characters in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat"). Contemporary criticism tends to call this sentimentality, but Harte used the term "sentimental" to mean sham and unrealistic sentiment. In other words, while human nature remained unpredictable, people were always capable of bettering themselves, and the depiction of when they did so Harte judged as realistic sentiment.

By realistic, Harte does not mean that the writer should attempt a photographic duplication of life and abandon the selective process which is the very nature of art. Not only must the details of a work be engaging, he posits, but the characters should also be striking. Next to his captivating manner of presenting life in the mining camps, Harte is perhaps most memorable as a writer because of the many carefully delineated characters who populate his stories. The influence of Dickens in Harte's style of characterization is remarkably evident, and this is much to Harte's credit, for Dickens is unrivaled in his ability to create charac-

ters defined in terms of minute detail and mannerism. They are frequently only two dimensional because they are closer to types than to real people, and whether they are static or developing characters, they always act according to reasonably predictable norms in keeping with their character. But they are never cardboard because the combination of their personality and their particular idiosyncrasies of manner impress the reader just as strongly as the various plot situations through which they move.

Ideologically, Harte the critic was a transitional figure whose critical writings show elements of both realism and romanticism, but with a preponderance of the former. While committed ultimately in his fiction to romanticism, Harte learned to stay clear of literary theory in his critical writing and to concentrate on a close reading of particular works. He did not try, either as a critic or as an author, to resolve the difficult ideological problems of being both a romantic and a realist by leaping to one position or the other and then expending much ink in defense of his action. He was never a systematic thinker and seldom approached literature from what today would be called a clearly labeled critical perspective, but instead he concentrated on writing a practical criticism which both reflected and informed his own fictions.

Even before Harte became an editor, he had not only been working on developing his prose style, but was also consciously attempting to write honest stories about a particular region which would reflect a genuine American experience (what would later be called "local color"). Ac-

According to Harte's own account, it was his purpose to aid in establishing "a distinctive Western American literature" (qtd. in Stewart, 104). Harte discouraged later attempts by such writers as Mark Twain to dub him the "Father of Local Color," but he is certainly one of the first to gain popularity in this mode and did much to encourage other aspiring local colorists.

It was when he became an editor that he somewhat abruptly began to emerge from his habit of imitation with a style of his own, though it was never, as Boynton observes, "an altogether pure or good style"; that was a period of "loose"<sup>2</sup> and "picturesque" writing (98), and Harte, with his journalistic training and self-cultivated taste, was not exempt from the vices of the period.

When the amount of copy for a particular issue of *The Overland Monthly* was especially light, Harte decided to run "The Luck of Roaring Camp," which he had just recently finished. However, the copy editor, a young woman, complained to the publisher that the profanity in the piece offended her morals and she refused to prepare the manuscript for publication. The publisher attempted to get Harte either to withdraw the manuscript or to edit it to a more acceptable level of propriety. Harte, however, vehemently refused on the grounds that bowdlerizing the language would undermine the realistic intent of the story. He also contended that the entire issue was a test of the publisher's belief in his editorial taste and judgment: to bar the manuscript would be an indictment

of Harte's performance as an editor. The publisher recognized the literary merit of the story, though he himself was somewhat put off by the pedestrian language and seamy incidents; however, he relented and allowed the piece to be published as submitted.

Reaction was almost instantaneous. Californians almost universally condemned the story as a false representation of life in California and the residents of California. They contended that mining camps were but one aspect of life in California; large cities populated by sophisticated and cultured people were rapidly springing up. By failing to at least allude to these other strata of society, a distorted picture of far Western American life was being delivered.<sup>3</sup>

This criticism brings up two points deserving of mention. Bret Harte himself cannot be described as either a Westerner or a Californian. Not only was he born in the East, but shortly after his rise to fame he left California for the East and never returned to the West. He was, in effect, much more an Eastern observer of Western life than a Californian or a miner writing his reminiscences. For this reason there is a certain validity to the criticisms leveled by the Californians. Even though Harte came to full maturity in the West, he was apparently still an Easterner at heart, and the principles which guided selection and shaping of his story material necessarily belie an Eastern influence. Because of the difficulties of travel before the completion of the transcontinental railroad, a large number of people who ventured to California in search of its wealth never

returned East; as a result, much of what Easterners conceived California to be was shaped by impressions received through letters and generated by people's imaginations. California was, of course, much more civilized than the "Great American Desert" which lay between it and the Mississippi, but Easterners tended to think of everything west of Missouri as all one. To them, California was a virtually lawless and dangerous place where subsistence was eked out by grubstaking, where gunslinging was an everyday occurrence, and where justice was dealt out more in vigilante style than through the workings of a civilized court system.<sup>4</sup> The long-established Spanish aristocracy was somewhere (and somehow) far removed from this scene of plebeian rabble.

These are the sorts of impressions that filled Harte's mind when he was setting out for California as a young man. It is true that we will see in an experience or an event what we are conditioned to see, and Harte found all these things, at least to a degree, in mining camp life. Owing to his natural optimism and his tendency to romanticism, he conveyed his impressions in a more positive light than he originally imagined they would be, but he was still seeing California with the eyes of an Easterner and essentially writing to an Eastern audience. When charged by Western critics that his depiction of California life was unfairly narrow, he responded that he was content to portray that part which fascinated him; what he was really saying, however, was that he was depicting only those parts which he was conditioned to see. Thus it is not surprising that his



appeal to Californians was always so limited and guarded.

The California reaction, however, was by far the minority voice of dissent. "The Luck of Roaring Camp" was immediately and immensely popular among East coast readers, and even earned the recognition of such notables as Emerson, Lowell, Longfellow, and Howells (Beasley 28). The public clamored for more stories of this type, and Harte responded with a steady stream of similar sketches (including the still popular "Outcasts of Poker Flat").

Harte's popularity continued to grow with both the general reading public and with the academic scholars of the East. His Western audience continued to respect him as an editor but still had little regard for him as a supposed chronicler of California life. The Eastern literati finally persuaded him to move back to New York in 1871, assuring him that he would be happier and more productive in an environment in which his talents were appreciated. The move, however, proved to be the beginning of the end of his career.

Harte did continue to write after his triumphant repatriation in the East, but in noticeably diminished volume. He quickly grew comfortable with the lifestyle of a gentleman of leisure, content to rest on his literary laurels rather than working to develop his style and produce new works. His indolence quickly led him into debt, for which he frequently had to borrow money from his friends. As a way of raising funds, he turned to lecturing throughout the East, but with only occasional and moderate suc-

cess. The lyceum tradition was still strong at this time, and Harte proved to be more charming than intellectual when he spoke; fortunately, he had enough charm—and enough good earlier narratives—to sustain his reputation for quite some time.

It is difficult to account for this change in Harte's temperament after his return to the East, but the consensus of his various biographers seems to be the unfortunate circumstance that success simply turned his head. The fact that he came as the literary "man of the hour" seemed to cultivate within him a feeling that the world now owed him a living, and indications are that he never overcame this opinion throughout the rest of his life. His youth had been characterized by aggressive ambition, but having once tasted success on a large scale he seems to have been lured into believing that it was a once-and-for-all situation, that neither hard work nor no work could ever rob him of his status. It is unfortunate that when his critical fortunes began to fail, Harte was inclined to accuse his audience and critics of being "unappreciative" and "insensitive" rather than locating the source of the problem within himself. But until his reputation began to falter, he certainly rode—and enjoyed—the crest of popularity.

Within a year of his return from California, Harte experienced what George Stewart (225) calls an "inevitable law of literature—that the successful writer of short narratives will later attempt the novel" (as did, he points out, such people as Hawthorne, Maupassant, and Kipling). The

reason for this, he surmises, is the "tendency of mankind to judge quantitatively rather than qualitatively, and so to consider a mediocre epic or novel a 'greater' work of art than an excellent sonnet or short story." Thus a number of Harte's friends felt that if he was to assume his full stature as a writer, it was time for him to undertake a novel. Not only would a best-selling novel bolster his literary reputation, but it would also hold much brighter financial prospects than a collection of short stories.

## 2. The Adventure of Composing *Gabriel Conroy*

Harte entered upon the writing of his novel with a vigor and enthusiasm he had not felt for some time. Choosing the subject matter was easy; he would write about what he always wrote successfully about: life in the California gold mine camps. As he thought back over his many short stories, he imagined them as the bits and pieces of a larger mosaic of Western life, a huge tapestry whose elements would be brought together in his novel. His earlier stories were usually called "sketches," a term synonymous with line drawings or outlines; they were more like miniatures depicting two or three characters placed in a tiny detail of the setting. Here he would break away from the confines of limited area and few characters and produce a narrative that even Californians would admire as representative of all that was the West.

Harte submitted an abstract and a few preliminary chapters to the American Publishing Company, a firm in which Mark Twain was already a

leading member. Twain did not hesitate to repay Harte's earlier favors, and with little hesitation the editors offered Harte a contract for the novel. With the shrewd eye of a professional writer and editor, Harte chose the name of the main character for the title because "the shorter the title, the better the chance for its quotation and longevity" (qtd. in Stewart 227).

*Gabriel Conroy* is structurally an introductory narrative followed by a lengthy story of the aftermath of the prologue.<sup>5</sup> The novel opens with a vivid narrative of an emigrant train snow-bound in the Sierra mountains and the attempts of these people to survive while waiting to be rescued. One member of the party is an eminent botanist who has discovered a silver mine quite by chance, and with his dying breath imparts the location of the find—and the title to it—to a young woman in the party who has cared for him in his last weakness. The young woman has fallen in love with another member of the party who is traveling under an assumed name and identity, a fact of which she is unaware; the two of them, because they are stronger than the others, decide to leave under cover of night to try to reach civilization and send help for the others. Despite the perils of their mission, she manages to become impregnated by this man, who eventually abandons her when they do finally reach an occupied army outpost. Harte introduces further conflicts into this initial narrative through such circumstances as the characters having traded items of clothing among themselves so that when the rescue party eventu-

ally tries to identify the dead by the description of their clothing by the other survivors, their list of victims and survivors is seriously in error: some who were thought to be lost are actually alive, and vice versa. Thus the stage is set for all the comedy and intrigue which follow from a tale of mistaken identity.

The major part of the story begins six years after the rescue when the survivors have gone their separate ways and have established their lives in various parts of California. Gabriel Conroy and his young sister Olympia (Ollie) are honest and hard-working miners, though utterly simple and little more than illiterate. Their sister Grace was the young woman to whom the botanist willed his silver lode and who has not been seen since she left with her lover to seek help. The other survivors are variously lawyers, bankers, and con artists who appear in an assortment of names and identities and eventually converge around Gabriel when it is learned (by everyone except Gabriel) that his rude hut is sitting directly on top of the silver mine which the botanist has deeded to Grace Conroy. The widow of the botanist, enraged that the mine has been given away to a total stranger, first tries to capitalize on Grace Conroy's absence by posing as the missing sister and trying to claim the mine; realizing that Gabriel can easily expose her masquerade, she instead arranges to meet Gabriel under her real identity and eventually persuades him to marry her. In the denouement all comes round right: Grace is found to have been adopted by the Spanish army officer who led the rescue party into

the Sierras; she finally meets up with her lover and they are married; one of the frequent earthquakes completely buries the silver mine, thus wiping out Gabriel's short-lived fortune and causing his wife to leave him; the various villains either die off, are killed off, or get their come-uppance in one way or another. The novel closes with Gabriel and Ollie once again living simply but honestly in a miner's hut in the woods built from the ruined timbers of their original cabin.

Before Harte was even half finished writing *Gabriel Conroy*, he received a generous offer from *Scribner's Monthly*: for the right to issue the novel serially, they advanced the author six thousand dollars—which Stewart claims was the highest price ever paid (at least at the time he was writing in 1935) for an American novel. Harte was becoming more financially strapped all the time, and this was truly an offer he could hardly refuse; thus he informed American Publishing that the full manuscript of *Gabriel Conroy* would be delayed for at least a year while he concentrated on shaping the novel into a serialized format and meeting those individual deadlines.

Serially published stories require a somewhat different structure than that found in through-composed<sup>6</sup> narratives. Each chapter or installment must be a self-contained episode which not only grows out of previous episodes, but must also conclude with unresolved tension so as to entice the reader to purchase the next issue of the publication and continue reading. Harte found himself with the task of substantially re-writing

portions of his finished manuscript to give it this clearly episodic structure; however, when he gathered the chapters together for American Publishing's single-volume edition, he made hardly any changes in the serial manuscripts, which is frequently cited (e.g., Boynton and Stewart) as one of the weaknesses of the novel. While it is true that most of the chapters end with what would be termed "cliff-hangers," this does not seem inappropriate in a work which is as clearly conceived as a mystery story as much as it is an adventure narrative or local color sketch. Even in contemporary popular fiction such attention-holding devices are used with great success as a means of sustaining reader interest. Nina Baym asserts (64) that even in the earlier part of the nineteenth century the primary criterion for a successful novel was that it "told a good story," one which could both captivate and entertain readers from beginning to end; there is no reason to believe that Harte's readers were motivated any differently. Harte is often a bit clumsy and conspicuous in the way he pays out "clues" and introduces his disguised characters, but the story is no less intriguing and sometimes even spell-binding for these occasional shortcomings of craftsmanship. Literary history attests that mystery stories have always been a mainstay of popular literature; the fact that there were few other works of this type being written at this time likewise gave Harte, an already popular writer, an immediate and appreciative audience. Rather than being a detriment, as twentieth century criticism often tends to view it, the episodic structure of *Gabriel Conroy* is actually

one of the factors which made it so appealing to its original audience and prompted its re-issue through so many subsequent editions.

Because Bret Harte wrote according to a rather narrow formula, most of the same components found in his short fiction are found in *Gabriel Conroy*. Therefore, the following discussion will consider the characteristics of Harte's fiction in general as a way of showing how these elements contributed to the immense popularity of his short stories, and of establishing a point of reference for assessing how these same components functioned in *Gabriel Conroy* and eventually influenced the subsequent devaluation of the novel.

The pursuit of local color and the local type was, first of all, something comparatively new; Erskine (212) observes that "hardly before or since have colour and type offered themselves so glowing and salient as in the California which Bret Harte knew." Thus the almost overpowering realism of the stories, coupled with the novelty of their local color, virtually assured their vast popularity.

But fidelity to the local fact, as Henry Boynton points out,

is a subordinate virtue in the practice of fiction, and it may well be that the public which was startled and delighted by Harte's early tales fancied a charm in the accessories of his art which really inhered in its substance. They were fascinated not more by the oddity of the theme than by the author's unmoral attitude toward it. (81-2)

Harte saw himself as a humorist, not a moralist; in this regard the similarities between him and Dickens, whom Harte patently imitated in his earliest stories, become evident. Both of them had a faculty for keenly



minute observation and practiced an unerring sense of realism in depicting what they saw. Realistic minutiae is inherently humorous simply because it calls attention to details which are usually only scanned as part of the background. Thus there is a great variety to the humor found in Harte's stories, often occasioned by focusing on what Morrow describes as the "poetry of circumstance" (19), that is, the incongruous intrusion of the background (i.e., detail) into the foreground.

Harte's brand of humor, like that of Dickens, is always optimistic and humanitarian; they both espouse a hope and belief in the best of life, but always as dramatists, not advocates. Thus there is no attempt to argue for the improvement of mining town conditions in Harte's stories, no effort to moralize about gamblers or prostitutes, but only an endeavor to portray them as realistically as Harte observed them. Similarly, Harte is able to bring out the surprising presence of good qualities in the low and the outcast, but does so in a way that is neither maudlin nor laden with pathos; he simply contrasts situations and characters without further analysis or comment, much the same way that Twain does in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg." Harte wished to record the truth, but it was his instinct to give the truth a conventionally ideal turn. When for this reason Boynton calls Harte a "realistic idealist" (102), he came as near to classifying him as anyone can come.

One of the reasons *Gabriel Conroy* suffers in the critical judgment of the modernists and the New Critics is that the minor characters attract

more attention and are more memorable than are his principal ones. Gabriel himself is little more than a one-dimensional type throughout the narrative; he symbolizes the simple, honest working person who refuses to be tainted by sudden, immense wealth. In fact, so insistent is he about refusing to change his lifestyle that he actually seems dull-witted in not taking advantage of the opportunity his wealth affords to at least educate himself (although he does insist that Ollie be sent away to a private school). Likewise, nearly all the other characters in the main plot are strong "types" who evidence little depth or development in the course of the story. Characterization of this type lends itself well to didactic works in which the message (i.e., the theme) is much more important than the narrative itself, and even though Harte disclaimed any didactic intentions, his readers had little trouble finding—and appreciating—one. A poor and humble miner who could suddenly come into untold wealth and never lose either his integrity or his respect for work was the paradigm not only of an "ideal" American, but also a foil to the stereotyped "Wild Westerner" depicted in the dime novels that flourished in the East. Whether by coincidence or by design, every blatant scoundrel and dishonest character in the novel is either dead or justly punished by the time the novel concludes; this did not strike the original audience as sentimental but rather as one type of model of American values and social morality.

If Harte's major characters are frequently lacking in broad dimension, his secondary characters take on a life so vivid and memorable as to

offset what otherwise might be a dull and plodding narrative. Harte frequently develops minor characters and weaves them into humorous sketches independent of the main plot. These vignettes are never an entire chapter in length and have no direct influence on the resolution of the main plot, but they are continuous threads which run through the entire narrative. Colonel Starbottle, for example, is the quintessentially shrewd and "just-shady-enough-to-be-honest" lawyer who represents clients in any sort of "delicate" situation, provided the fee is adequate. He is obviously drawn as a composite of several Dickens characters, but is portrayed as such an engaging Yankee Gentleman that even an experienced reader hardly notices the literary borrowing. "Sal" Clark, assistant to the proprietress of the local boarding house, is perhaps Harte's triumph of characterization in the entire novel. One of the least important characters in terms of the plot (and one of the least frequently seen in the course of the narrative), she assumes a largeness for the reader because of her sharply drawn comic outlines. She sees and hears everything, but always manages to remember and repeat it just slightly askew of its proper perspective. Ever unsuccessful at finding a husband, she misconstrues most everything that men say or do as having romantic overtones directed to her. Characters such as these are highly appealing to popular audiences, but do not fare so well with formalist critics because they frequently overshadow the major characters, particularly in a work where the principal characters are essentially static and uninteresting. In the main plot, the

emphasis is more on the story and less on character, while just the reverse is true in the sub-plots. It can safely be said that Harte's greatest achievements of characterization are realized in these minor figures.

If characterization turned out to be one of Harte's greatest rewards in writing *Gabriel Conroy*, plotting proved to be one of his greatest challenges. In his short stories, his genius was presenting the contrast between scene and character, but in attempting a novel he was forced to shift a good deal of emphasis to working out the myriad details that comprise a complex and intriguing plot. The very length of the work often drew him away from what he did best, with the result that in trying to manage the plot, the characters and scenes sometimes nearly escape his control. Owing to his inexperience, Harte often found himself able to do only one thing at a time well; thus when concentrating on working out details of the main plot, his characterization tends to flatten, and when developing the major characters, the plot is characteristically thin and sometimes even lifeless. (The notable exception is found in the sub-plots discussed above. In these smaller, self-contained units, Harte was able to apply the formula he had polished and perfected in his short stories.)

The plot of *Gabriel Conroy* would seem to be plagued by an overabundance of characters, when in reality there is a relatively small number, but many of these appear under an assumed identity in the course of the story. The overall impression is that Harte began with a general rather than a specific idea of how he intended to develop the story and

how the characters in their various identities would interact to dramatize the plot. Within individual episodes these relationships are usually clear, but when Harte leaves one thread of the story to pursue another and then returns to the former one, the earlier context is not always clearly re-established. This sometimes causes the reader to have to refer back to the earlier episode in order to understand the present one. Since this flaw is more noticeable in the latter two-thirds of the novel, it is probable that Harte began to approach the writing of the novel in an episodic frame of mind after *Scribner's* made the offer for serial publication. Given the rigid deadlines that such publication demands, it is plausible that Harte had to forego some of the careful planning which had marked the writing of the first part of the novel. It is likewise possible that many serial readers never really noticed the relatively few loopholes which exist in the plot until the novel was published as a single volume; at the same time, the intrigue of a complex plot spread out over some fifty-six episodes may have prompted many of these readers to fault their memories rather than the craftsmanship of the author.

As was discussed earlier, there is in most of Harte's stories a blending of picturesque and realistic details within a romantic setting, with the result that his narratives often seem like parables in that the characters and situations give the impression of being more symbolic than literal. Harte's aim, however, was always to be descriptive, never didactic; he chose to depict the aspects of life he found interesting and humorous, and

if the reader finds allegorical or moral implications in the stories, it is a by-product of his own reading, not the intention of the author.

*Gabriel Conroy* was conceived as the portrayal, in epic proportions, of an event in American history whose keynote was incongruity. The westward movement, incited by the discovery of gold and fueled by the promise of easy wealth, was exciting and picturesque, but resulted in no real progress of ideas. Because it involved no clash of civilizations, it produced no heroic material such as Cooper's frontier had yielded earlier. Thus Harte got everything out of the movement which could be gotten: romance of incident and humor of character. Had the gold rush generated anything of more enduring value, or, even more important, had Harte been able to transform these events into something of greater artistic value, *Gabriel Conroy* might have had a better chance of finding a place closer to the center of the canon rather than simply on the periphery.

Nevertheless, *Gabriel Conroy* was greeted by an enthusiastic audience precisely because it was chronicling a new and exciting chapter of American history. Transcontinental expansion and settlement continued despite the Civil War, and the spirit of nationalism which characterized the reconstruction years gave the novel an immediate appeal to a variety of reading publics. Californians were generally more pleased with *Gabriel Conroy* than with Harte's short stories because they felt the novel gave a more cosmopolitan picture of west coast life instead of only mining camp characters and situations. Easterners were intrigued by the culture which

was developing in this far-away part of their own country, an area which, until the completion of the transcontinental railroad, could be reached only by arduous overland wagon train or by an often equally dangerous steamship voyage. Thus *Gabriel Conroy* effectively functioned in many ways: it served as a work of public relations propaganda as well as an exciting piece of travel literature (a genre to which many notable writers such as Mark Twain contributed), while always being an entertaining narrative. Its acuteness of detail, furthermore, recommends it as an historical document of some significance, for precious little other material exists which provides so complete and so accurate a picture of California settlement.

One of the characteristics of Harte's stories is his use of the omniscient narrator as storyteller, not merely as an intrusive narrator, but as a device for authorial control. Harte the narrator does not so much tell a story as interpret it—giving it his version, withholding or emphasizing material, overtly analyzing the scene, characters, and audience while at the same time relating the action. Harte saw the function of the narrator and literary-cultural critic as one, asserts Patrick Morrow (27), a joining of roles further exemplified by the narrator's frequent asides on a number of topics, but most especially literature. Thus in Harte's stories we find the use of a narrator who at the same time assumes the persona of a literary critic.

In order to avoid pirating, a British edition of *Gabriel Conroy* was

published even before the final episodes had been run in *Scribner's*, thus giving the novel immediate international appeal.<sup>7</sup> Despite the enthusiastic reception which both *Gabriel Conroy* and the early short stories received, however, Harte was never to repeat these first successes, and, ironically, for many of the same reasons which initially made them successful.

### 3. Early Twilight: The Decline of Bret Harte

Bret Harte's gradual fall from popularity was the result of many factors, and not all of them literary. As discussed above, Harte succumbed to a certain complacency and indolence when he returned to the East, which manifested itself in deepening financial difficulties as well as diminished literary output. In 1878 Harte was offered a German consulate, an essentially honorary position quietly engineered by several of his influential friends who were, in a word, tired of funding his irresponsible lifestyle through perpetual loans. Harte accepted the position ostensibly to broaden his audience and to have more time to write, but in his heart he saw it as being politely forced into exile. Once abroad he did little to change his rather prodigal lifestyle, although he did try to write another collection of short stories patently imitative of his first successful collection when his financial situation became a problem, but the magic was gone. Unfortunately, Harte's moves both to the East and to Europe did not, as happened with Henry James, open a new career for him. His later attempts to write stories while abroad portraying middle- and upper-class



people were not successful; he was not himself a sophisticated person and evidenced little ability to portray sophistication either interestingly or credibly. He seems to have been destined to do but one thing, and he did it very well; beyond that, it seems, his talent did not reach.

Bret Harte had the wisdom to realize that the romance of the California gold rush was not so much in outward things as in the curious mixture of characters and races brought together for the moment in a mining town, but he failed to recognize that that moment and sustained interest in it were largely past. His stories are nostalgic re-creations of places and events that existed a generation before he wrote about them, but his stories were being read by an audience which was rapidly being transported into an industrialized, urban future under the influence of naturalistic realism. Harte's simple formula worked—once; but because he failed to grow and develop as a writer, he could only march in place while his audiences moved ahead.

Any consideration of canonical reputation, as this study makes clear, is as much a matter of perspective as it is of "fact." Donald Glover's recent study of Bret Harte's later career shows that Harte's later stories are qualitatively very similar to his earlier ones. This being the case, then Harte was not necessarily writing increasingly inferior art, but creating virtually the same product for a changing audience, one that was becoming increasingly less sophisticated (i.e., less academic and more popular). In the 1870's Harte was publishing in *The Atlantic*, *Lippincott's*, and

a handful of the most respected literary journals, but by 1895 he was for the most part publishing in slick and conservative illustrateds such as *Weekly Graphic*, *Windsor Magazine*, and *Cosmopolitan*. The more sophisticated literati had moved on to new forms and ideas. Over a thirty-year period, Harte's successful, essentially unchanged literary product increasingly appealed to those who wanted familiarity instead of discovery; these were not the readers whose tastes formally shaped the canon. Bret Harte may have stagnated as a writer, but he continued to attract new readers—a fact attested to by the numerous reprintings of *Gabriel Conroy* until the First World War as well as the continued publication of his short stories—who admire him as much for telling a good story as for capturing the picturesque. Well past the turn of the century his academic critics continued to praise his contributions to the development of local color; their serious critical interest in him waned, however, only because he failed to develop beyond a certain point.

#### 4. *Gabriel Conroy* Then and Now

It is clear that Bret Harte's writings in general and *Gabriel Conroy* in particular appealed to their original audiences for reasons that did not appeal to subsequent critics, as the arguments in this chapter demonstrate; as a result, the novel, originally an immensely popular and widely read work, has virtually disappeared from the canon. New Critical and modernist critics tend to downgrade the novel on the basis of such criteria

as structural flaws, sentimentality, lack of character development, and episodic structure. These are key considerations from those points of view, but they overlook other factors which are just as important from the perspective of determining what made the novel appealing to its original readers and that recommend it anew to our attention today.

Patrick Morrow posits that "Bret Harte did for the Mother Lode a minor league version of what Faulkner did for Jefferson County, Mississippi" (14): both created an entire mythical region based upon fact, and both had first-rate ability to develop a story. The difference is that only on occasion did Harte seek beyond the skillful exploitation of a tale or legend, and out of myth create artistic insight into the human condition, as Faulkner learned to do so well. Harte was a storyteller and a precise recorder of impressions. But it must be noted that Harte had no pretensions about being anything other than a good storyteller, and herein lies the point which sustains interest in *Gabriel Conroy*. Harte intended nothing more than to entertain his readers, and the history of the novel's publication attests that he did just that very well. *Gabriel Conroy* is worthy of re-reading in our own time not just because it captures a brief though picturesque moment of our history, but more because it still retains its power to engage and challenge thoughtful readers—the very reasons Harte's contemporaries praised the novel.

Harte's interpretation of early California mining camp life appears to have been strikingly complete. Erskine speculates (234) that given the

results of his later career, however, it seems likely that had he remained in the West, he would have been unable to make effective literary use of the more complicated conditions which were already developing. He seems to have been born to understand and to chronicle just that one picturesque episode in American life; certainly there never came another moment which he knew how to interpret in the same way. But this assessment is not an entirely negative one, for the fact that Harte "poured himself out" in depicting mining camp life and, in *Gabriel Conroy*, a cross section of California makes the novel all the more important as a record of its time and culture. At this point in his career, Harte did not attempt to handle material with which he was not intimately familiar, so we can place well-founded trust in the accuracy of his impressions and interpretations.

The historical significance of the event Harte chose to chronicle is in no way diminished by its relative brevity. As an historical document, *Gabriel Conroy* is even more important than Harte's short stories because it presents such a complete panorama of California life during the gold rush days and the early settlement of the state. Despite the rather conventional characters and situations contained in the narrative, it also portrays the life of the Spanish aristocracy as well as that of many non-mining class people, particularly professionals (i.e., doctors, lawyers, bankers, etc.). Descriptions of life in California at this time tend to be topical and stereotypical; *Gabriel Conroy* helps to fill in the gaps presented by such

limited views by offering detail to a picture which otherwise would be painted in halftones at best.

Serial publication was much more common in Harte's day than in ours, primarily as a way to stimulate sales of literary publications. The episodic structure which characterizes *Gabriel Conroy* is, in this context, a positive term (or at least a neutral one) which reflects the method of the novel's publication, not a negative one which implies fragmented structure. The one thing Harte always does best is tell a good story; one aspect of this art involves the craftsmanship to construct a narrative in discrete units which function in much the same way as incremental repetition does in the ballad: each time a particular thread of the story returns, enough of the previous situation is re-presented to bring the reader back into the context of the story until the denouement finally ties together and resolves the various conflicts which have been developing simultaneously. Serial publication, then, engages the emotions as well as the intellect because the most effective way to entice the reader to return to the story is to interrupt the narrative at a crucial moment, thus withholding the resolution of a critical turn of events. Harte was not always as successful at re-introducing an interrupted narrative as New Critics wish he were, but his enthusiastic audience was so attracted by his skill at telling an engaging story that they hardly seemed to notice the structural lapses.

Despite John Erskine's singling out of Bret Harte in 1913 as one of only six leading American novelists worthy of discussion, Harte remains

as a minor figure in the American canon and his place there is undoubtedly secure; however, the absence of *Gabriel Conroy* from his canon is a serious omission because the novel, as this discussion has shown, is an important work for many reasons. It is the fullest expression of Harte's powers as both a storyteller and a recorder of a significant chapter in American history. Western settlement happened so rapidly that only the topical aspects and stereotypes attracted the attention of other writers; Harte has presented not only a fuller picture of California's development, but also a more realistic one. *Gabriel Conroy* likewise served as an important catalyst to national unity in the years following the Civil War by presenting typically American characters and attitudes as found in the westernmost part of the country; at the same time, Harte's local color technique preserved the peculiarities which distinguished Californians from their Eastern and Southern countrymen. The novel is worthwhile to us today because it is a noteworthy page in the diary of American expansion as well as a significant facet in the literary accomplishment of Bret Harte; to ignore *Gabriel Conroy* is to devalue both the writer and the events which he chronicled, as well as the audience of Harte's time and its interests.

## Notes for Chapter 4

1. Cooper and Simms have been central to the study of American literature all along, while Brown and Stowe have attracted a good deal of critical attention in the past few years. In the modernist canon, however, they are regarded as "important" but not necessarily as "major," the distinction being one of historical importance as opposed to literary greatness.
2. Boynton does not make clear what he means by the term "loose," but the context would suggest that such works were sketches or impressions more than plot-oriented pieces, that is, more reportorial than narrative. The context further implies that the pieces were probably rather sentimental.
3. California, of course, had no trouble attracting fortune seekers since the gold first discovered nearly two decades before continued to attract prospectors. However, California at this time was actively trying to recruit other classes of immigrants from the East: business men, financiers, and people of breeding and culture. It is curious that the negative California reaction to Harte's short stories seems to overlook the fact that their setting is a generation earlier. *Gabriel Conroy* was among Harte's few prose pieces which earned the respect of Californians because it did present glimpses of a cosmopolitan California.
4. Consider the character of the Easterner which Stephen Crane draws in "The Blue Hotel": he is constantly fearing for his life in the hotel, and speculates that many people have probably been killed in that very room. Pat Scully, the hotel owner, kindly but firmly reminds him that the west is no longer the sort of primitive place depicted in the dime novels in the East.
5. The myriad complications which Harte weaves into the plot are too numerous to be recounted in so brief a summary as what follows, but the intent here is merely to give a taste of the plot so as to provide a context for the discussion of the novel.
6. "Through-composed" is a term I have borrowed from music to describe a work which its author envisioned would be read within a relatively uninterrupted period of time, with the result that the relationships between characters and events would remain clear to the reader. Serialized works are predicated on the assumption that the reading of each instalment will be separated by an appreciable period of time.

7. Harte's popularity among foreign audiences, notably German readers, extended well beyond his death. George Stewart reports (227) that no fewer than fourteen German versions of *Gabriel Conroy* appeared following its American publication, many of which went through several printings.



## CHAPTER V

### **“A PLEASING STORY OF THE HEROIC IN IMAGINED LIVES”:**

#### **GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE’S *MADAME DELPHINE***

*“It is not sight the story teller needs,  
but second sight . . . not actual experience,  
but the haunted heart.” – G. W. Cable*

The dozen years following the Civil War are referred to as the Reconstruction Era because it was during this time that the victorious North attempted to “re-build” the defeated South by implementing the social and economic reforms which had helped to shape the conflict between the two sections. Of all the issues on the Reconstruction agenda, the thorniest proved to be the securing of civil rights for the blacks newly freed from slavery, a matter which is still problematic over a century later. The greatest obstacle to this cause was the “free but not equal” attitude which prevailed almost as strongly in the North as in the South and which only in our own time has begun to subside. It is easy to see, however, that such an attitude became so prevalent because blacks were not accorded the same social, cultural, and (especially) educational opportunities that whites had, with the result that the Emancipation Proclamation had little effect on the lives of blacks except to free them from the status of legal chattel; only a few of them had but minimal educational skills

(and this was primarily a basic reading ability), which resulted in the blacks themselves affirming their second-class status.

The so-called "Negro question" was not, however, the only issue with which Reconstruction had to grapple; there was also the matter of breaking down the barriers of sectionalism in the move toward national unity, a subject almost as repugnant to Southerners as was black enfranchisement. The South in general had developed a rather narrow cultural mind-set which stemmed from their plantation economy and was characterized by a gentility which was peculiarly Southern. The South also had its cities, though they were hardly the cosmopolitan centers of business and culture found in the North or even in far western Sacramento. Southern cities, like Charleston, tended to be urban clusterings of genteel people descended or transplanted from the plantations; for this reason, they shared a culture among themselves to which outsiders (and this included the newly-freed slaves who had lived in the South all their lives) could never be fully admitted, even by marriage. To those Southerners who viewed the Civil War as simply the vehicle for emancipating the slaves, the immediate task was to re-establish the old order of the South: "business (and culture) as usual," but now with a paid work force. But the march of commercialism and industrialism was not to be abated. "The South will rise again!" became as much a cry of despairing recognition as of wishful optimism.

The post-Civil War South, then, was an area undergoing cultural

transmogrification at a rapid pace; in a short time, there would be little left of the structures which had defined "Southern" for so long. Such circumstances are fertile ground for both the local colorist as well as the social philosopher; the former functions as the chronicler and archivist of the area before it disappears, while the latter challenges the assumptions underlying the claims for both change as well as preservation. George Washington Cable found himself in the unique position of growing into and through both roles. He was born in New Orleans in 1844 during the "golden age" of the Creole culture and its accompanying caste system, and remained there until 1886 when the rancor of the South against Reconstruction — and against him — was at its height. Originally a recorder of the quaint Creole stories he had heard, Cable was gradually overtaken by his moralistic impulses as his stories became increasingly polemical pieces on the plight of the Southern blacks. But somewhere between these two poles comes *Madame Delphine*, one of his personally favorite and overall best-made works. It is the story of a reclusive quadroone<sup>1</sup> woman who appears to have become resigned to her own social station within the New Orleans caste system, but when her beautiful daughter falls in love with a white man who loves her just as strongly, the mother vows to "do whatever is necessary" to see them wed, even at the price of sacrificing her own integrity — and, in this case, her life. Although one of Cable's shortest works, *Madame Delphine* was always one of his most popular stories and attracted nearly as much critical attention as did *The*

*Grandissimes*, Cable's longest and most ambitious novel.

However, *Madame Delphine* has not fared well in terms of canonical status, though it is certainly one of Cable's most important works; its devaluation began even during the author's lifetime, albeit more for political reasons than literary ones. This chapter will show that *Madame Delphine* is a much more important example of literary merit and historical significance than contemporary criticism has recognized or acknowledged, and that even within the canon of Cable's own works it deserves a place of higher rank.

### 1. The South of George Washington Cable

When the journalist Edward King visited New Orleans in early 1873 as the *Scribner's* representative for their series on "The Great South," he discovered more for his Northern audience than he or his editors could have expected:

Louisiana to-day is Paradise Lost. In twenty years it may be Paradise Regained . . . It is the battle of race with race, of the picturesque and unjust civilization of the past with the prosaic and leveling civilization of the present. (qtd. in Richardson, 199)

King was quite perceptive. The conflicts he described—past versus present, Creole versus American, black versus white, traditional versus progressive values—would help to stimulate a significant literary movement, what Warner Berthoff calls a "New Orleans renaissance in the '70s, '80s, and '90s" (108).

Just as New England bears the indelible character of its British

roots and Puritan heritage, so does the peculiar institution of slavery set the South apart from the rest of the country. New Orleans, furthermore, reflects the culture of the French who originally settled there and who bequeathed that culture along with their soil in the Louisiana Purchase. The economy of the South had always been an agrarian one with each plantation virtually a community unto itself. The Creoles, enriched by slave labor and nourished by French culture, had developed a life of great luxury, their houses filled with tapestries and fine French furniture. "Pride of possession added to pride of race," observes Edward Tinker (311), "had made of them a haughty, high-strung tribe." But slave holding and the easy accumulation of fortunes likewise bred an intellectual indolence and from this "mental inertia," as Cable himself called it, sprang an "invincible provincialism" (qtd. in Eidson, 212). New Orleans with its European ideas stood aloof from the new era in America. In the rest of the country, manufacturing was fast becoming more important than agriculture, but the people of New Orleans confronted these facts with what Cable described as "serene apathy," boasting of their city's natural advantages and forgetting that now it was not nature, but man—with machines—that they had to contend with. The provincial thinking expressed itself in numerous ways, and perhaps the strongest was the South's inhospitality toward unflattering or unpalatable truths about itself. It was no secret, for example, that the quadroones' mixed blood was the result of slave women being raped by their white masters, but to speak of

such things at all was an affront to Southerners' sense of gentility and chivalry, so the matter was simply not discussed. The fact that quadroones looked much more white than black but yet were denied full social status with whites became one of the burning issues after the Civil War, but any attempts to dramatize or moralize their plight were met with indignation by the Creoles. Cable rapidly became one of the leading voices of social reform, and just as rapidly became a *persona non grata* among his own people.

Unlike Bret Harte, George Washington Cable was no stranger to the area which formed the backdrop of his stories, but in one sense he was as much an outsider to his subject matter as was Harte in that he came from staunch Presbyterian and abolitionist stock. His mother was descended from New England Puritans, and after his father's early death, his mother compensated for the lack of a husband-father figure by instilling a sense of religious severity in her children. In fact, Cable claims to have read no novels before he was middle-aged because of his religious bias against them as instruments of the devil (Pugh 71); the implications of this fact will be taken up later in the chapter in the discussion of Cable's style. As a young man, Cable fought in the Civil War in the service of the Confederacy because he felt himself a loyal Southerner. Because slavery was such an accepted and unquestioned fact of Southern life, it had never occurred to Cable that it might be a moral or even a social issue; it was only when he witnessed the injustices heaped upon the for-

mer slaves by recalcitrant Southerners that his religious indignation kindled a loathing for the South and its intransigent ways. After this, he made little effort to avoid the appearance of attacking the South herself rather than simply her ways.

Cable's approach to depicting the South in his fiction is reflective of the philosophy of progress which underlies the entire Reconstruction movement. After the Civil War a group of social and political leaders dedicated themselves to the task of "preserving inviolate the sentiments and . . . transmit[ting] the characteristics of the Old South" (qtd. in Edison, 212). They hoped after Appomattox to save what armies could not conquer: a Southern civilization. But the "New Southists,"<sup>2</sup> nationalists more they were Southerners and "in tune with the times," preaching universal equality and universal education, commercialism and industrialism, were "marching rough-shod over the old order with George Washington Cable as one of the chiefs of the march" (Edison 212). He never compromised with the old order, but supported every major tenet of the New South movement. Fighting against everything characteristic of the antebellum South, Cable was the most consistent and most extreme of the New Southists and is today probably the most important.

Like so many local colorists, Cable began his writing career as a journalist rather than a belletrist. While working as a cub reporter for the *Picayune*, he began to write sketches (under the occasional pseudonyms of "Drop Shot" and "Felix Lazarus") about the Creoles he had

met and the tales he had heard about them. Initially for Cable, the Creoles seemed to have all the charm of the dissimilar in that their carefree life was so very different from his own rigid Puritan-influenced life. Edward Tinker speculates that "perhaps the describing of their volatile emotions may have assuaged his own inhibitions, and writing of their warm, exotic impetuous love affairs, and of the quadroone balls, may have given him a certain psychological release" (315). It is probably also true that as Cable became more and more fixed in his religious idealism, he found the Creoles and the plight of the quadroones an inviting target for his impulse toward reformism.

Despite Mark Twain's efforts to designate Bret Harte as the "Father of Local Color," Cable's earliest stories (later collected as *Old Creole Days*) were already in manuscript awaiting a publisher when Harte began to publish (Pugh 69). As individually published pieces, these early stories attracted relatively little attention in the South (at least at first) because they were published in a Northern journal; however, they met with an eager audience in New England. They owed much of their popularity to the quaint, quasi-foreign setting that Creole New Orleans and Cajun Louisiana offered a curious Northern public, for perhaps more than any other American locale, the bayou country with its rich French history and complicated social structure satisfied the thirst for local color writing which was so strong in the post-Civil War years. Cable had an especially good chance for popularity because the rapidly vanishing community he por-



trayed was far removed from the lifestyle found anywhere else in America. The passing of the Creole culture, with its best values as well as its worst, afforded Cable and other local colorists rich themes of transience and defeat drawn from a tradition richer even than history. But there were other reasons that Cable found such an enthusiastic Northern audience in those Reconstruction days: the cankerous secrets of Louisiana history which came to light under literary scrutiny, combined with the tensions in the contemporary postwar Southern culture and the still volatile relations between North and South, gave the former abolitionists of the "New South" movement all the more reason to promote their cause and welcomed this new attack upon one of slavery's most heinous consequences: the tragedies born of miscegenation.

Although Joseph Holt Ingraham, William Gilmore Simms, and others besides Harriet Beecher Stowe had written stories of Louisiana before Cable, it was reserved for him to make American lovers of romance fully aware of the peculiar richness of the New Orleans background. Nowhere else in America could a novelist have found such picturesque types representing contrasting civilizations. The editors of *Scribner's*, who published all of Cable's early stories, told him: "You have made a field and are its only occupant" (qtd. in Hubbell, 810). Like Sidney Lanier, Cable had no intimate connection with plantation life, and in his fiction he made less use of plantation tradition than did Joel Chandler Harris or Thomas Nelson Page. Cable was a thoroughly urban product, having spent all his life

in the largest commercial center in the South. From the outset of his career, Cable's sympathies as a storyteller owed less to the writers of the Old South and more to New Englanders.

While Cable's sympathies may be more Northern than Southern, his style is much more difficult to identify. As mentioned earlier, he claims to have done no novel reading until he was middle-aged as a matter of religious conviction. Precisely what "middle-aged" turned out to be is not made clear in either Cable's own writings or his biographies, but the important point is the absence of other writers' influence on his style. For this reason, his style is far more original than it might have been. His writing is notably free from the clichés and grandiose rhetoric of most Southern literature of his day. Edward Tinker (316) describes the bulk of other writers' stories as representative of the "magnolia and mockingbird" school of writing: these narratives were stilted and artificial, and painted glowing portraits of members of the ruling class and the social structure which gave them their power and influence. Cable's deepest instincts were always artistic: he had a strong interest in old New Orleans which enabled him to turn up details of local history that gave both substance and body to his stories. "He was no mere facile painter of surfaces," asserts Alexander Cowie, "but a patient craftsman who turned back fold after fold of fact in order to reach the essence that lay within" (556). Because of this, *Old Creole Days* (which includes *Madame Delphine* in later editions) is almost unrivaled for picturesqueness and dramatic form.

Use of dialect at that time was regarded as a new departure, and Cable was an important pioneer in this respect. At the same time, his artistry is coupled with a profound moral purpose; there is to be found a strong humanitarian impulse born of religious conviction in Cable's stories. In a word, then, Cable's style is distinctive because of its purity and originality; it contains no echoes of other authors and brings a perspective to Southern writing that was not yet found in other stories but would soon be imitated by numerous authors. In fact, the editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica* were so impressed by the realism and insight they found in Cable's stories that they invited him rather than Charles Gayarré, the famous Louisiana historian, to write the article on Louisiana (Hubbell, 815).

Cable did not start out with the expressed intention of being a social philosopher or reformer, but rather the recorder of a culture which at once fascinated and repelled him. "A story's most obvious aim—the aim which should never for a moment be evidently directed by any other purpose—should be to entertain, not to inform," he responded when asked by *Scribner's* if he was working out a reformist agenda in his early stories (qtd. in Hubbell, 818). It was always the old South, not the new, that captivated Cable, as was the case with Harris and Page, but unlike them Cable introduced a bias which was peculiarly his own. He not only was the first Southern writer to treat objectively and realistically the life he saw around him in New Orleans, but was also the first to break the taboo against writing about blacks. Furthermore, he always cast his fic-

tional blacks and quadroones in a much more favorable and sympathetic light that he did the Creoles and other whites. Previously no one ever wrote of blacks except as loyal, humble family retainers or as black-faced buffoons. The black person as a flesh-and-blood human being, as a living problem in adjustment, was so sore a subject that by tacit agreement Southern society ignored the existence of this aspect of Southern life. As Cable's career progressed, he became more and more the outspoken critic of the South and champion of the black cause, an evolution which both disappointed his critics and eventually brought about his expatriation to the North.

## 2. The Evolution of *Madame Delphine*

Cable might have continued to be the mildly controversial recorder of Louisiana life had it not been for an unsolicited reaction to his story "Tite Poulette." In this piece, the marriage of Tite Poulette to the Dutchman Kristian Koppig, which was considered impossible because of laws against miscegenation, had at the last moment been permitted when the quadroone Madame John produced papers showing that Tite Poulette was not her own daughter but the child of a Spanish couple. Cable recounts that he received a letter from an anonymous quadroone:

If you have a whole heart for the cruel use of us quadroons, change the story even yet, and tell the inmost truth of it. Madame John lied! The girl was her own daughter; but like many and many a real quadroon mother, as you surely know, Madame John perjured her own soul to win for her child a legal and honorable alliance with the love-mate of her choice. (qtd. in Turner, 105; Rubin, 101; Butcher,

32)

Cable did indeed change the story, re-shaping essentially the same plot into the richer and more complex *Madame Delphine*. Originally published in 1881 as a three-number serial in *Scribner's Monthly*, it was published later the same year as a book and is usually included as the opening work in *Old Creole Days*. *Madame Delphine* also revolves around a quadroone mother, Delphine Carraze, and her beautiful daughter Olive, with whom a white man is in love. The man, however, is not a Dutch immigrant but a Creole, Ursin Lemaitre, who after some years of privateering has come back to New Orleans under an unfamiliar name to enter the banking business.<sup>3</sup> The story line is built upon the kind of romantic plot so familiar and so popular at the time: the daughter, returning from France aboard ship, confronts a pirate who has taken control of the ship, hands him a missal, and bids him read the Apostles' Creed, whereupon the pirate is both repentant and smitten with love, and allows the girl to leave the ship unmolested. It turns out, of course, that the pirate is the very same Ursin Lemaitre. When Madame Delphine asks her banker, Vignevielle, to help her find a white husband for her daughter, Vignevielle presents himself, proposes, and is accepted. But friends of the banker who know that Madame Delphine is of mixed blood threaten to forbid the marriage because it violates the law, so Madame Delphine perjures herself by insisting that she is not the child's real mother. After the wedding, she goes to confession, explains her lie to the priest, and dies; the sympa-

thetic priest looks up to heaven and cries, "Lord, lay not this sin to her charge!"

The action of the story takes place about 1820, when the people of New Orleans had lost but little of the "disbelief in the custom-house they had in the days of the Laffites," notorious French pirates of the early nineteenth century with whom Lemaitre is associated, and when the beautiful, silk-clad quadroones at the balls "wore, withal, a pathos in their charm that gave them a family likeness to innocence." The first pages of the novel, however, suggest the lower end of the Rue Royale in Cable's own time. The area has settled into "a long sabbath of decay"; the "batten shutters . . . are shut with a grip that makes one's knuckles and nails feel lacerated." Descendants of the quadroones who once were exquisitely described in the letters and diaries of visitors to the city now sit inside their close-fenced gardens "staring shrinkingly at you as you pass, like a nest of yellow kittens." Thus Cable approaches the time of the action, sixty years before, by introducing the same kind of "palpable imaginable *visitable* past" which Henry James later spoke of in his preface to "The Aspern Papers" (xii), a past in which the strange and the familiar can be held in delicate balance. He saw old New Orleans as James saw Venice, in an "afternoon light" which illumined some object with complete clarity and left others in a shadow. In this way, Cable achieved a kind of reality which is more real for the enveloping haze which his description creates. It is a story told delicately and (despite its brevity) leisurely. Revelation

comes through glimpses here and there: "with a touch of suggestion, a figure of speech, an ironic turn of thought, a hint of feelings only half expressed," the reader is "gently led through events that leave an effect as delicate as the odor of orange blossoms but also as haunting and unforgettable" (Turner 107). The lush backdrop of early Louisiana history is more than a setting; it is the real strength of the tale.

With the stage thus set, Cable introduces Madame Delphine and summarizes the events of Lemaitre's early life; the narrative begins after he has already abandoned piracy and smuggling and has become the benevolent banker in his native New Orleans, where he roams the streets in search of the beautiful girl who has converted him. As Cable describes her, Olive would have converted any male:

From throat to instep she was as white as Cynthia. Something above the medium height, slender, lithe, her abundant hair rolling in dark, rich waves back from her brows and down from her crown, and falling in two heavy plaits beyond her round, broadly girt waist and full to her knees, a few escaping locks eddying lightly on her graceful neck and her temples . . . (66)

Passages such as this and the observations made in the opening chapter especially rankled the Creoles because quadroones and octroones were accorded such lavish and flattering descriptions while the Creole women were little more than mentioned. But such descriptions likewise serve to heighten Olive's tragic circumstances by making her the traditionally beautiful young heroine of all romances, while at the same time putting her into a situation in which culture and the law give her no opportunity to fulfill that role with the man of her choosing. Thus Cable further

offended Creoles who were quick to recognize that the practice of depicting such women of mixed blood as virtuous and beautiful was a device for criticizing the society that exploited them.

Madame Delphine, as the title suggests, is the principal focus of the novel, for while the story is at least loosely allegorical of the plight of all quadroone women (and Cable makes the point that such social strictures applied only to women), the allegory is particularized in Madame Delphine's struggle to liberate her daughter from the oppression of the caste system. But if hers were the only voice in the story, the narrative would be little more than descriptive and maudlin. Cable seems to have chosen Père Jerome, the humble parish priest of simple theology and great heart, to share the stage with Madame Delphine and to echo his own commentary on the action; even Vignevielle and Olive, the "Romeo and Juliet" of the story, make few appearances in the novel (except by mention) and offer little to either the action or the drama of the story.

Père Jerome is the one character whose life intersects with those of all the other principal characters in the story; thus all the action of the story revolves around him and is interpreted through his eyes. He is Madame Delphine's confessor in his role as parish priest, and in his private time the jovial companion of two boyhood friends, the three of whom used to have "another companion, but a companion no more," namely Ursin Lemaitre. Thus it is through the conversations of all these characters with Père Jerome that the reader gradually learns all sides of the story



while having the benefit of hearing the priest's first-hand commentary on the action as it develops.

Père Jerome voices early in the story the precept which underpins his entire theology and which is capsulized in the closing line of the story when Madame Delphine dies in his arms after confessing that she has lied in order to allow Olive to marry Vignevielle: "Lord, lay not this sin to her charge!" In discussing with the other friends from his youth how Vignevielle happened to go astray, Jerome theorizes that the former pirate's family, friends, and indeed the whole of society are in part responsible:

It is impossible for any finite mind to fix the degree of criminality of any human act or of any human life. The Infinite One alone can know how much of our sin is chargeable to us, and how much to our brothers or our fathers. We all participate in one another's sins. There is a community of responsibility attaching to every misdeed. No human since Adam—nay, nor Adam himself—ever sinned entirely to himself. And so I never am called upon to contemplate a criminal but I feel my conscience pointing at me as one of the accessories. (21)

This theory is elaborated only one other time in the novel, when Père Jerome is invited to be the Christmas preacher at the cathedral. He uses as a keynote the story of the martyrdom of St. Stephen in which the saint begs God not to hold his persecutors responsible for his death, but this time he broadens the implications of his precept from merely religious ones to include social attitudes toward various groups of people as well. Père Jerome never specifically mentions Creoles and quadroones, but the implication is all the more forceful for being understated. Cable's Creole readers, having already become familiar with Cable's reformist

views in *The Grandissimes* and "Tite Poulette," could easily recognize that the fictional priest's voice was really Cable's own voice, and they hated him unrelentingly for it. Cable reinforces the notion of societal guilt throughout the novel by such touches as Olive's timid acceptance of not being allowed to marry Vignevielle, her mother's impassioned and frantic protests, the uncompromising law, and the equally intractable attitude of Vignevielle's friends, who threaten to expose him to the law if he does not abandon his suit for Olive. All of these are contrasted with Père Jerome's lucid and cogent understanding of Madame Delphine's plight after she has told the priest the details of how she came to be pregnant with Olive:

"Well, Madame Delphine, to love is the right of every soul. I believe in love. If your love [for Olive's father] was pure and lawful I am sure your angel guardian smiled upon you; and if it was not, I cannot say you have nothing to answer for, and yet I think God may have said: 'She is a quadroone; all the rights of her womanhood trampled in the mire, sin made easy to her—almost compulsory,—charge it to account of whom it may concern.'" (42) (punctuation *sic*)

Père Jerome functions as Cable's voice of reason in the story; through him Cable condemns the caste system of the old New Orleans and, by implication, of the South of his own day.

Philip Butcher speculates that

the use of an "alien," like Père Jerome, as hero is a common device in Cable's fiction. Often the hero is a man estranged by national or sectional origin from the culture in which he functions, or somehow out of sympathy with it. There is every reason to suppose that this approach was adopted as an aid in describing the locale—it is common in local color literature—but perhaps it is also an unconscious reflection of Cable's own position in his native city. As a Protestant American, he was in a sense a "foreigner" to the Creoles, and his lack of sympathy for Bourbon traditions, discernible in even his early

writings, soon made him an alien to the South's political principles. (*Northampton Years*, 31)

Following from this, it is quite plausible to take Père Jerome for Cable himself: Cable is the outsider, the man of Christian principle and practice, the Puritan in a sinful land where the laws condone and the customs perpetuate social iniquity; for Cable as for Père Jerome, it is a duty in conscience to be the voice of challenge against such injustice. Cable's zeal for reformism, which seems to have gathered strength with the writing of *Madame Delphine*, would eventually prove to be his downfall as a belle-trist (as will be discussed later in this chapter), but Cable nonetheless plunged himself into his task without hesitation or regret.

The reader meets Madame Delphine as the retiring, nearly reclusive resident of what was once one of the grandest houses in the Rue Royale; she is one of the "lucky" quadroones who not only owns her own home, but received it as a gift "given her by the then deceased companion of her days of beauty." She lives alone for her daughter had been sent to Europe to live with and be raised by the girls' father's family upon his death. Though her neighbors saw little of her, they judged her "an excellent person . . . a very worthy person; and they were, may be, nearer correct than they knew." But there was a "defiant spirit hidden somewhere down under her general timidity" which suggested itself in such small ways as her insistence, against conventional prohibition, on wearing a bonnet instead of the turban of her caste, and carrying a parasol. Thus she does not passively accept the laws which stigmatize and oppress her

caste, and when these laws loom in the way of her daughter's happiness, her indignation escalates to fever pitch. While explaining to Père Jerome that she has engaged Olive to Lemaitre in defiance of the law against mixed marriages, she rages against that law which was supposedly designed to keep the races apart:

"They do not want to keep us separated; no, no! But they *do* want to keep us despised! . . . But, very well! from which race do they want to keep my daughter separate? She is seven parts white! The law did not stop her from being that; and now, when she wants to be a white man's good and honest wife, shall that law stop her? Oh, no! . . . No; I will tell you what that law is made for. It is made to—punish—my—child—for—not—choosing—her—father!" (97)

Although Cable speaks primarily through Père Jerome in the novel, it is clear that Cable is likewise putting his own words and feeling into Madame Delphine's impassioned speech. That Madame Delphine (and hence Cable) conceives of marriage to a white man as the only real solution to Olive's problem affirms the pervasive strength of the caste system, but even that does little to detract from the force of the story's social criticism. It is the power of such scenes as this that prompted Philip Butcher to call *Madame Delphine* "Cable's most thorough analysis and revelation of the plight of the quadroon" (*Northampton Years*, 33).

*Madame Delphine* was an immediate success among Northern readers, both as a piece of local color writing and as a social commentary. They were enthusiastic about these fresh stories of an exotic, foreign life so full of color and quaintness, the existence of which was hardly imagined before. Qualities such as these were among the same factors which

made Bret Harte's writing so attractive to Eastern audiences, but in the case of Cable's stories the Creoles were so alluring because they represented both an economy as well as a culture which were so unlike that existing in any other part of the country. Other Northern readers found *Madame Delphine* a powerful weapon in the post-Civil War struggle to improve the social lot of enfranchised blacks, still an inflamed question between North and South. The Creoles, of course, found the entire novel offensive because the novel insinuated that they had some Negro blood, an implication which only added insult to injury. Nor could they miss the implication of Cable's Creoles speaking an obviously lacerated dialect as contrasted with the notably more sophisticated speech of such characters as Madame Delphine, Père Jerome, and Vignevielle.

### 3. In Defense: "I shall always be glad I wrote it"

Cable found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to defend both *Madame Delphine* and *The Grandissimes* to hostile Southern audiences and critics for several years after he wrote them. They felt Cable's chief offense against the South was that he had deliberately violated what Southerners understood to be the meaning of the Compromise of 1877 (Hubbell 805). They had accepted the end of slavery and of secession with the understanding that the Negro was the Southerners' problem and that the North would not again interfere in the matter. Thus when Cable began writing in Northern magazines about "civil equality," they

felt he was deliberately stirring up trouble. It seemed to them that he was advocating *social* equality, perhaps even miscegenation. But Cable was wise enough to recognize that the term miscegenation carried strongly pejorative connotations, and so focused on discrimination and social freedom (the issues) rather than on the possibilities of inter-racial marriage (a potential solution).

In a word, the very reasons which made Cable famous in the North made him infamous in the South, and this is not difficult to understand. Louisianians had been deeply humiliated by the Negro rule which the Carpetbaggers had forced upon them during the Reconstruction and, having but recently engaged in bloody riots to bring back white supremacy, they could not forgive Cable, himself a born Southerner, for sympathizing in print with the quadroone cause. "Besides," asked one critic, "are there no Southern ladies and gentlemen to write about, that he has to parade quadroon women across his pages and dish up the very dregs of society?" (qtd. in Tinker, 318).

However, despite his efforts to justify both himself and his novels, he eventually felt compelled to leave the South in 1886 and settle in the North because of the rancor against him which his writing had incited among Southerners. Before finally moving to Northampton, Massachusetts, however, Cable attempted to define and preserve the integrity of the man of letters in the South. "Literature in the Southern States," the 1882 address at the University of Mississippi, is Cable's effort to assure—

or reassurance—himself of the critical freedom that could allow him to remain in the South as a critic of the South (Martin, 101). He traces the dissolution of Union into the sectional rivalry of North and South to their divergent ideas of popular liberty:

The North has continued in and expanded the Western European tradition of human rights while Southern thought has failed to fit any of the basic categories of Western social theory, and so our life [in the South] has had little or nothing to do with the onward movement of the world's thought. . . . Let us cease to be a unique people . . . . We want to write, as well as read, our share of the nation's literature. . . . Works by Southern writers should be written to and for the whole nation. (qtd. in Eidson, 212)

Cable contended that by reverting to and cherishing antebellum ideas in literature, the Southern audience and its writers merely imitated the old and thus lost touch with the revolutionary, progressive heritage that as Americans they swore allegiance to, a heritage that was being supported only in the North. Southern literature of this type was simply providing a means of escaping from the contradictions of slavery into unproductive fantasy: "It was to uphold the old. It was to be cut by the old patterns. It was to steer by the old lights." The South, he argued, was not laying the foundations of a permanent prosperity, for such plans cannot be laid on either the old plantation model or the sectional isolation that grew out of that economy. Cable further calls for the destruction of provincial distinctions by the elimination of the constraint of civil liberties wherein separation first originated. What he was calling for, he said, was neither the Old South *nor* the New South: "What we want—what we ought to have—is the No South" (qtd. in Martin, 101). Cable was issuing a radical

call for the dissolution altogether of sectional distinctiveness.

A year later, addressing the graduating class of the University of Louisiana, he suggested that the breakdown of sectionalism could best be accomplished by literature, and thus he called for literary independence as a necessary corollary to the Emancipation Proclamation: "We [must] throw our society, our section, our institutions, ourselves wide open to [writers'] criticism and correction, reserving the right to resent only what we can refute" (qtd. in Tinker, 318). These addresses show that Cable was clearly feeling the conflict between his vision of social justice and the failure of Southerners to support his efforts to enact his vision in fiction.

Cable did, however, find substantial support from other writers, which is not surprising since they ultimately had as much at stake as Cable did. Joel Chandler Harris, for example, expressed dismay at the reaction of the South to *Madame Delphine* by challenging that

if the South is ever to make any permanent or important contribution to the literature of the world, we must get over our self-consciousness and so control our sensitiveness as to be able to regard with indifference—nay, with complacency—the impulse of criticism which prompts and spurs every literary man and woman whose work is genuine. We must not forget that real literary art is absolutely impartial and invariably just. (qtd. in Rubin, *Southern Heretic*, 100)

Harris's concluding assertion may be somewhat critically suspect, but his point that the South needed to overcome its thin-skinned and thick-headed response to criticism could hardly be questioned.

When Bret Harte repatriated to the East, he entered a period of marked decline both in output and overall quality; when Cable exiled



himself to the North, he continued to write even more prolifically than he had previously but, as all critics agree, his later works are marked by a growing religious indignation. There is a consensus among his biographers that he was a talented fictionist who somehow went wrong in his moralistic zeal for social reform; by the 1890's, Edward Pugh notes, Cable had become much more the social reformer than the belletrist (71). Edward Tinker characterizes his later works as "preachy" and posits that his propagandistic excesses "murdered his creative ability" (321). *Madame Delphine* is probably that pivotal point in Cable's career which marks the onset of his literary decline, for it is with this novel that his emphasis seems to shift from the picturesqueness of local color to the polemic of social criticism. But despite this apparent decline in artistic power, both *Madame Delphine* and its author have made significant contributions to Southern as well as American literature that subsequent critics have tended to minimize when judging according to modernist critical standards.

#### 4. Reconsidering *Madame Delphine* and George Washington Cable

Discussion of the significance of any novel necessarily entails a number of considerations, for every work functions in a variety of ways. *Madame Delphine*, like all novels, is first of all a work of literary art and as such is subject to the critical norms which have been established for works of its kind. The point of this entire study, however, is to show that these criteria can and do change from one era to another, and that

understanding a novel in the context out of which it grew and to which it contributed often yields a quite different appreciation of the work than later criticism produces.

*Madame Delphine* is at the outset an exceptionally evocative example of Louisiana local color writing. The natural beauty of the area coupled with the exotic uniqueness of the Creole culture provided Cable and so many others with native material which without embellishment was far richer than what they might have been able to fictionalize. But even as successful an artist of local color as Cable is, he seems to have become so as almost a "by-product" of his other aims. Writing in "Afterthoughts of a Story-Teller" in 1894, he asserts that the novelist's choice of a setting is essentially unimportant:

"Truth is. The only discovery worth making . . . is not a new field of romance with geographical or chronological boundaries, but the fact that the field of romance is wherever man is, and its day every day; that wherever in place or time there is room—and where in the habitable earth is there not?—for wars of the heart against environment, circumstance, and its own treasons, there is the story-teller's field; and though old as Nineveh or as hard trodden as Paris, it will be, to his readers, just as fresh or stale, as small or great, as his individual genius, and no more" (qtd. in Hubbell, 819)

Cable seems to be saying that he does not see himself as a *deliberate* local colorist, but that the characteristic of local color is "something that happened" to his stories. But as Jay Hubbell notes, Cable "fails to see that although the materials of romance are to be found everywhere, an individual novelist can rarely portray effectively anything but the life he has intimately known in his formative years" (819). This same point was

made earlier about Bret Harte: despite his enthusiasm for and close observation of life in the California mining camps, he was always writing as a reporter and an observer, not as one who knew the people and their circumstances with the intimacy that comes with being a part of their tradition. By the time Cable made these observations, he may have lost sight of the fact that his earliest stories—the ones that brought him popularity and critical attention—were narratives not just about “people,” but about particular people (the Creoles) living in a particular place (New Orleans). His shift to being “merely a recorder” of significant human experience came early in his career, but certainly not at its outset. Although he seems to have misjudged how the relationship between a story and its setting affects the assessment of a work’s effectiveness, he was wise enough to follow his natural instinct to repeat his initial pattern of writing about the place he knew most intimately.

In his discussion of local color in Louisiana, Thomas Richardson observes that writing of this type generally avoids the shallow idealism so often found in the local color of other regions. Cable, for example, “saw the connections between the decline of the Creoles and their self-destructive pride, and his best work makes it clear that such racial arrogance has direct application to broader problems of Southern history” (201). This description succinctly and clearly sums up both *Madame Delphine* and Cable’s obvious intention in writing it. If in “Tite Poulette” he is merely exploiting the sentimental possibilities of a unique situation, in this novel

he seems to be consciously crusading. *Madame Delphine*, then, emerges as a work of social protest bordering on what would later be termed muckraking, and thus the novel has historical merit for its presentation of one very serious aspect of antebellum Louisiana life which Cable implies is unchanged by the time of the Reconstruction.

It is not surprising that a story such as *Madame Delphine* might be colored by some occasional melodramatic episodes, but such lapses were counted more as virtues than as shortcomings in an age of sentiment and gentility. Most of the instances involve Lemaitre: for example, early in the novel there is rather blatant foreshadowing when the reader learns that none of Lemaitre's family "ever kept the laws of any government or creed"; in conjunction with this, Cable provides no clear motivation for Lemaitre's transformation from pirate to public benefactor. Later there is the scene in which Lemaitre, now the respectable banker, discovers that Madame Delphine has unknowingly presented a counterfeit note for payment but suddenly decides to cash it for her as a means of establishing his kindness; this episode comes across as somewhat artificial. Coincidence, further, is strained when Lemaitre discovers Olive's identity without disclosing his own. Finally, the scene of Madame Delphine's death at the close of the novel is contrived and unconvincing. As melodramatic as these incidents may seem, Cable never gives the impression of being clumsy or awkward in his handling of them.

But what saves the story, at least in part, from seeming overly

melodramatic is the pervasive presence of Père Jerome who, according to Louis Rubin (*Southern Heretic*, 101), is remarkable among Cable's characters as being one of the very few Catholics who is sympathetically portrayed as a Catholic. This humble priest possesses what in Cable's eyes are somewhat atypical characteristics: he is much more interested in the Bible than in dogma (the very quality which endears him to his parishioners and earns him the scorn of fellow clerics), and is an outspoken critic of the Creole community's morality and ethics, as citations earlier in this chapter suggest. Be that as it may, however, later formalist critics look not at how skillfully or successfully Cable may have handled the melodrama in *Madame Delphine*, but rather that it is present in the story at all.

It is clear that while *Madame Delphine* was meant as a piece of social criticism, it is a work which at least by implication suggests a solution to the problems it presents, but the solution, it turns out, is as controversial as the problem. The South was gripped in the throes of racial antagonisms. Cable, to be sure, seems free of certain prejudices characteristic of most Southern white people of his time, a fact which influenced the reception of both the novel and the approach it proposes. While his contemporaries branded him as sentimental and impractical (Cowie, 557), Cable presumably considered his suggestions as logical and, at the same time, in keeping with the ideal of Christian philosophy, and seemed surprised and hurt at the reception given his proposals by his fellow-Southerners. Griffith Pugh judges that

what Cable did was to formulate an abstract solution of a real prob-

lem. Had men behaved as he wanted them to, had they been unprejudiced in the same way as he, had they been motivated by the same thoughts and ideas, then his proposals would have been accepted—and a solution of the problem (whether fortunate or not) would have been effected. It might be well to remember a phrase attributed to Grover Cleveland: “Not a theory but a condition confronted them” (74)

In other words, life had to go on, if at all, while the races were adjusting themselves to a lifestyle based on different principles. Questions concerning what *ought* to be had at times to be subordinated to issues of what *was*. However realistic Cable may have judged his approach to be, he seems to have missed the point that it is easier to change a theory to fit human nature than to change human nature to fit a theory. Pugh concludes that “however assuredly Cable may have spoken about solutions to the Negro question, and however ably he was opposed or defended, the fact remains that we have the Negro question with us yet, and it is yet to be solved” (75). Perhaps the stoicism associated with Cable’s Puritan upbringing led him to believe that all people were or at least could be as motivated by strength of will as he was, but the Southern mentality proved to be as committed to its heritage as Cable was to his personal ethics.

In addition to being a serious—if not inflammatory—piece of social criticism, *Madame Delphine* also contains a note of feminist awareness that critics have generally overlooked, which is evidenced by Cable’s deliberate “feminized” spelling of “quadroone” (cf. n.1). The descriptions of New Orleans life imply that quadroon men, because of their fair skin

color, could rather easily pass as white or were at least accepted as white with little or no argument; this, of course, entitled them to the full complement of social and legal privileges associated with enfranchisement. Cable makes a point of noting that the quadroons were already a "free" caste at the time of the story's action, but makes the equally strong point that the privileges of this freedom were gender-associated. Thus quadroon women found themselves in the oppressive double jeopardy of being both female and neither-white-nor-black, with the result that they were outsiders to both races. Madame Delphine's determination to "do whatever it takes" (as Madame John had done in "'Tite Poulette") to allow her daughter to marry the man of her own choosing is the determination of all quadroones who rage—along with Cable—against the injustice of being forced into an ignominious existence by a society whose laws are supposedly predicated on the ideal of freedom and equality for all. Cable's attitude that even legal deception in order to break the cycle of such oppression is morally acceptable (or, put another way, that the end justifies the means) foreshadows the revolutionary determination that both blacks and feminists would adopt in later years as a means to take what they see as their rightful place and due privileges within society.

Edward Tinker asserts that no book since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stirred up so much emotion as did *Madame Delphine* (319). But regardless of the literary artistry and social message embodied in the novel, it is possible that modern readers will judge its melodramatic episodes distracting,

its love story plot stereotypical and insipid, and its reformist overtones heavy-handed; such negative appraisals are unfortunate because they do not judge the novel in its own context. But even appraisals such as these cannot diminish the contributions which Cable made to his generation of Southern writers and the influence he exerted on those who came after him. He has, first of all, rendered a great service to literature in portraying the fast-disappearing Creole culture, and in doing so has done for them much the same thing which Hawthorne did for the Puritans—and surely that is no small service. He was a realistic recorder of the life he saw around him, and his courage freed the authors who followed him of the necessity of gratuitous praise for all things sectional. He taught them their right and duty to analyze and portray truthfully—and even, when necessary, to criticize—the social conditions under which they and those around them live. Even before Cable's death in 1925, Ellen Glasgow, Mary Johnston, and James Branch Cabell had begun to follow his example and were attacking Southern traditions in literature and in life with a freedom which among the writers of the New South only Cable had dared to claim (Hubbell, 821). They were to be quickly followed by such outstanding writers as Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner. George Washington Cable thus proved to be an important literary pioneer, though he accomplished this at the cost of ostracism among his own people; for this reason Edward Tinker posits that Cable “may well be called the first martyr to the cause of literary freedom in the South” (326). Both as an



artist and a polemicist, Cable made his impression on his own age and still has something valuable to offer to ours.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER V

1. Although Cable's references early in the novel to the quadroons are spelled in the conventional way without the final *e*, he makes a point of noting that he has "contrive[d] a feminine spelling to define the strict limits of the caste as then established" (8) and subsequently uses the feminized spelling throughout the novel. For that reason, Cable's contrived spelling of the word is used in this chapter's discussion. A later portion of the chapter will consider the feminist implications of Cable's choice of spelling.
2. "New Southists" is a term used by John Olin Eidson in his discussion of Cable's philosophy of progress. It refers to the attitudes of both Northerners and Southerners whose aim it was to abolish sectional isolation in the South and bring about a spirit of nationalistic unity which would espouse the goals of the country at large rather than promote a return to the antebellum economy and social structure.
3. Cable makes parenthetical reference to Ursin Lemâitre's full name being Lemâitre-Vignevielle (15), but does not allude to the origin of the compound name. The reader is simply left with the impression that he was known as Lemâitre during his youth and the days of his pirateering, and as Vignevielle after his return to New Orleans and respectability. There is no inference that anyone besides Père Jerome and his other boyhood chums is aware that Lemâitre and Vignevielle are the same person.

## CHAPTER VI

### “THE DRAUGHTY CORRIDORS LATELY ABANDONED

### BY PURITANISM”: MARY WILKINS FREEMAN’S *PEMBROKE*

*“There was a resolute vein in their characters; they managed themselves with wrenches, and could be hard even with grief.” – Mary Wilkins Freeman*

Perhaps no other word comes to mind more quickly when speaking of New England than Puritanism, for it is the stern religious mentality of people of this area which has had more influence on its memory than any other aspect of its many contributions. New England Puritanism was something more than mere religion; it was an outlook about all of life which cast its shadow over even the most mundane areas of everyday life. As Puritanism began to be diluted with the passing of years, the religious idealism which fired its early adherents was transformed to motives and behaviors far removed from religion, though these later expressions were always regarded as extensions of the original Puritan nostrums. Unrelenting control of the will combined with the necessity of eking out a bare existence in a strange and hostile land produced some of the hardest specimens of early Americans as well as some of the most headstrong and stubborn people ever to live; their obdurate will became not only their lifestyle but their legacy.

The New England about which Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote was at the lowest ebb of its cultural history; only the memories of its old vigor remained. The social and economic changes which had begun two decades before the Civil War developed into both a culture and a Puritanism that Cotton Mather would scarcely have recognized had he been alive after Reconstruction. But there was yet a remnant of the old way which still survived in the small village towns of Vermont where both the old stock and their descendants continued to pursue the old ways, untouched by the growing modernism that was transforming the country all around them. It was of this remnant, persistent even in the face of overwhelming misfortunes, that Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote, and in doing so, described the very essence of the New England character, both in its social and individual aspects.

Of Freeman's many novels, *Pembroke* usually receives the highest critical praise, undoubtedly because of the broader range of characters it develops in comparison with her other works. *Pembroke* depicts an entire New England village by that name, not so much as a continuing story of the inhabitants' ancestral development as a realistic portrait—often a harsh one—of what had happened to the human personality as a result of generations of the unrelenting rigors of Puritanism, and perversion of will that produced a breed of New Englanders as flinty as the soil on which they lived. *Pembroke* was initially popular both because of the pathos of its several plots and the portrayal of insular village life it provides, but

went out of print even before the author's death in 1930. Subsequent literary history and revisions of the canon assign a higher status to Freeman's shorter works, particularly those collected in *A Humble Romance* and *A New England Nun* (which contains "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" probably her best known and most frequently anthologized story) while *Pembroke* receives little more than passing mention. It is the purpose of this chapter to show that the novel is a seminal work in the study of the Puritan psyche in New England during the quarter century before Reconstruction and so deserves greater recognition both within literary history in general<sup>1</sup> and the canon of Mary Wilkins Freeman in particular.

### 1. Freeman's New England

Reading a variety of Freeman's stories leaves the reader with a distinct feeling of desolation, both of place and of spirit. She does not depict her characters as hermits, although they may often live isolated from their fellow villagers, but the towns and villages themselves seem remote and out of touch with the society of the cities and the larger issues of politics and culture. But it was not always like this: Perry Westbrook notes that in the Green Mountains outside of Bennington, Vermont, about midway between the New York and New Hampshire borders, is a sign which recalls that "Daniel Webster addressed 15,000 here" during the Presidential campaign of 1840, yet a mere fifty years later "even the most golden-tongued orator would have spoken here only to the pines and the

chipmunks" (*Freeman*, 16), for the population of the entire township by the time of the Civil War had been reduced to only a few hundred. Many had gone to their graves in the war; others were lured by the promise of wealth and exciting living in the manufacturing towns and either moved there or chose not to return to the hill country after the war; still others responded to the call of adventure sounded by the westward movement. In a word, the best of the village people had been lost to either the Civil War or to the cities, and only the ambitionless, the "leavings," remained to inbreed both their flesh and their mind set. The farmers who decided to stay, perhaps because they had the best land, battled uncertain markets as engines replaced horses, and were finally driven into lumbering and dairy farming. Village merchants, deprived of their customers, closed their shops; poorhouses flourished, and the young continued to flee from the hills in pursuit of a living that seemed easy in comparison to following a plow around the boulders of their thin-soiled meadows. It is easy to see how such desolation of place easily leads to the spiritual desolation which overshadows so many of Freeman's stories.

It is important to understand the political and social structure which forms the backdrop of Freeman's stories. There is a remarkable similarity among New England towns in their physical arrangement, the ideals they uphold, and the character traits they nurture; thus Freeman's fictional *Pembroke* is as realistic as any actual place from Maine to Connecticut. The town itself is usually comprised of a number of small vil-

lages, all of which, along with the intervening countryside, are under the same government. The central village (the one called "the town") is usually built at a crossroads near the center of a township, and is the site of the town offices as well as the largest schools, churches, and shops; here, also, are the residences of the professional men—the bankers, doctors, and lawyers. Presiding over the religious, intellectual, and political life of the town are a set of popularly elected or appointed dignitaries. Pastors and deacons are congregationally chosen to supervise the spiritual welfare of the members. The secular government resides in the town meeting, made up of all voting citizens. Each year the voters gather to discuss community affairs and to delegate their power to elected administrative officials (i.e., a treasurer, constable, clerk, school board, various road agents, etc.).

The effects of such a closely knit community organization are obvious. With such universal participation in town affairs, the sense of membership is intensely strong. Through the agency of the churches and schools, the ideals, values, and mores of the group are inculcated early and indelibly into every child, which in turn develops a sense of security based on one another in the community. But this arrangement also engenders an overwhelming concern for what others think, and so social approbation (as well as censure) becomes the source of much conflict in the lives of the villagers. Such was the environment into which Mary E. Wilkins was born in 1852.

## 2. From Randolph to Pembroke

Although Randolph, Massachusetts, was only fourteen miles from the center of Boston, it was nonetheless a typical rural New England town. In Freeman's day, Calvinistic orthodoxy had softened considerably. Throughout New England the old religion was in conflict with Unitarianism, which had gained control of many of the Congregational churches, especially in the cities. But a Calvinism only slightly modified was far from extinct in most of the villages, and nowhere in New England was its spirit dead. For the thirty years prior to Freeman's birth, the pulpit of the Randolph Congregational Church had been occupied by a pastor who preached only a slightly diluted Calvinism; there followed two preachers more tainted with liberalism who played down the pivotal doctrine of election and who placed little emphasis on the wrathful nature of God in dealing with sinners (Westbrook, *Freeman*, 24). This was the moderate, almost kindly, religion that Freeman adopted for herself, but she knew from her parents and others of their generation the spirit of the old-time religion handed down from the Puritan forefathers.

Religion was a much more significant influence on Freeman than was school because, owing to her generally frail health (she was the only child in her family to live to adulthood; all but one of the others died in infancy), she was unable to attend school either very long or very consistently, though she did complete a public high school education. She was gifted, however, with a life-long thirst for reading coupled with an eye for



detail and a fertile imagination.<sup>2</sup> One might never guess from her writings that her formal education was so limited.

Growing up in Randolph, then, made Freeman into a typical New England villager, regardless of what she would eventually become or where she might ultimately settle. She grew up with the sense of security that comes from living in a close-knit, homogeneous community in which everyone had a thorough knowledge of everyone else's family history for generations, as well as a familiarity with all the local gossip and the people associated with it; she also knew the corresponding insecurity that such homogeneous community living could foster: the fear of "stepping out of line" and of becoming the target of the latest round of village gossip. All of her early life was, therefore, a preparation for what she would later write, for all the elements of both her family life and her life as a member of the Randolph community would become the plot, characters, and setting of her stories.

Because of her generally frail health and lack of a suitor, Freeman was content to remain living at home and helping with household chores. Within a period of less than a year, both her mother and her only surviving sister died, leaving her to take care of her father. In order to supplement their income, she wrote *vers de société* and numerous children's sketches which were popular and sold easily. After her father's death, she made her home with a childhood friend and her family while helping to support an aunt; financial concerns became more pressing, and so she

turned rather abruptly from the kinds of writing that she had been doing and started turning out adult novels, admittedly for money. Observes Fred Pattee:

She became a writer of short fiction, a literary craftsman, writing to the limit of her strength, not what she would, but what she must if she was to sell her product and win immediate success, which in her case was necessary. "Circumstances seemed to make it imperative for me that I do that one thing and no other," she commented later in life. "I did not at the time think much about the choice." (Terminal Moraine, 182)

Neither Pattee nor other critics fault Freeman for the monetary motives which underlay her decision to take up serious fiction writing; in fact, Pattee later in the same passage praises Freeman for her shrewdness in making profitable use of her talents: "There are fashions in literature as there are fashions in wearing apparel, and one who would live by literature must be aware of them or else write for posterity" (184). Freeman was well aware that local color writing was immensely popular in the '80s and wisely chose to bring her own lived experience into her fiction; her instincts proved to be more successful than she could have hoped.

Mary Wilkins Freeman was not the first to use New England as a background for fiction—the names of Sarah Orne Jewett and Nathaniel Hawthorne come readily to mind as examples of others—but there had been little attempt as yet to study New England with a fixed focus, to seek for the strange and the unique in both the background and the characters it produced. The times were calling for Gabriel Conroys and Madame Delphines; to find such people in New England meant to seek for

them in the human specimens which Calvinistic Puritanism had left in its wake. Freeman looked to abnormalities of conscience, to freedom of will transformed into narrow wilfulness, to unswerving allegiance to an idea which had degenerated into intractability. She saw frugality engendered by a scanty soil warped into a meanness of soul, and the sensitivity born of isolation transposed into the very essence of sullen pride and egotism. To Freeman, the New England mind was a complex of the morbidly sensitive conscience and the overly developed will; so well was she able to convey this in her stories that her best works are studies of the lingering Puritanism of her own times.

Freeman is essentially a local color writer in that she seeks to portray particular people in a particular region with all their local peculiarities. Her approach, however, is a marked divergence from the methods used by other local colorists in that there is little emphasis at all on description beyond the sketching in of a typical New England setting. Unlike Cable and Harte who chose actual locations for their settings, Freeman's villages are all fictional in that they are generalizations of what *any* New England village would be like. In the same way, her characters are generalized rather than individualized; often they seem more like symbols or caricatures—in the vein of Ethan Brand or Rev. Mr. Hooper—than ordinary people. By using this approach, Freeman creates portraits not of specific persons or places—or even of particular conflicts—but a broader canvas which embraces a whole region and the peculiar kind of people

who inhabit it.

Writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Julia Bader posits that this other famous local colorist located the tragedy of New England in the relentless wrestling of the mind against the forces of evil (197); the abnormal struggle of the conscience cast a shadow across the lives of nearly everyone who grew up there, the same shadow in which Hawthorne dwelt and which formed the substance of his novels. Freeman does not portray this struggle, but the *result* of generations of such a struggle. Her characters do not brood much upon the mysteries of sin and death, but the pattern of existence into which they are born has been warped and twisted by all the intense introspection of their ancestors. But like Stowe, Freeman felt the New England character had been molded by its religion rather than by the frontier, and so concluded that the disappearance of frontier conditions forced the vigorous New England will to find an outlet in petty and ignoble ends. Such a conclusion leads Perry Westbrook (101) to observe that most of Freeman's stories leave the reader wondering what the meaning of it all is: what are we to think of a society in which such potentialities of dedication and self-sacrifice must be expended on such futilities? The answer can only be a matter of speculation: perhaps this is the only way left for these people to maintain their self-respect, and in this rigid dedication, however perverted it may seem to an observer, there is the compensation of knowing that a task—even a task of the will—has been done thoroughly.

Freeman as well as her contemporaries were interested in effects rather than causes—in the consequences of the passing of old village ways and the disintegration of the Puritan character into balkiness and eccentricity—but most of them tended to ignore or underplay the poverty that was there. This is not the case with Freeman. The stock condition surrounding most of her characters' lives is poverty, sometimes as grim as that found in *Tobacco Road* or *As I Lay Dying*, and sometimes the poverty of a decayed gentry trying to keep up appearances as in *The Sound and the Fury*. There is often a merciless realism in her depiction of village life; her touches of sentiment are few and light. But there is always a spiritual overtone in Freeman's stories, for to read life solely in terms of economics would be impossible for one with her background. The economics are always present, but she does not make wealth the main issue. The chief question to her is not how many cows or silk dresses one of her characters may have, but how much peace of mind, self-expression, and a feeling of oneness with God and one's fellow humans that person has; more often than not she found a hopeless spiritual bankruptcy among her characters. By emphasizing the spiritual poverty over the material, Freeman has added an element of horror to the bleakness that already characterizes much of their lives.

Whatever else might be the subject of her fiction, the center of Freeman's art is always humanity, the individual person. Unlike Bret Harte, with whom the physical landscape is often one of the characters,

she strips her stories of background to the point that the reader is hardly aware of the setting; her backgrounds are meager because it is the human element which interests her. But her characters tend to be of the Dickens type in that they are paintings rather than photos, individuals who are intensely alive, yet drawn not so much from life as from the heightened images of her own imagination. Thus there is no "Freeman country" as there is a "Jewett country"; there are only "Freeman people." She further tends to stand apart from her material, making no comment. Harte was the obtrusive and often overbearing storyteller who interpreted and judged the action as it unfolded; Freeman was content to let her characters speak for themselves and to let the drama of a situation present itself more by suggestion than by direct authorial statement. In this way the characters themselves develop the story. Hers, then, is the anonymous technique of the old ballad in which the subjective is completely repressed, a technique which makes her stories in some ways like those in the *Spoon River Anthology*.

This combination of pathetic, generalized characters in rather bleak surroundings gives the impression that these characters

are like plants that have sprung up from a sterile soil. As subjects for fiction they seem highly unlikely: tillers of rocky hillsides, their natures warped by their poverty-stricken environment; old maids, prim and angular, who have erected a secret shrine in their hearts in commemoration of a moment in the long ago to which a more sophisticated maiden would never have given a second thought; work-worn wives of driving men; stern, practical-minded women whom generations of repression have rendered sexless. . . . The result was survival, not of the fittest, but of the worst elements—abnormalities, reliance upon inherited dogma, stubbornness and often meanness.

(Pattee, Terminal Moraine, 202)

Thus in Freeman's stories we find neither the high tide New England of Harriet Beecher Stowe nor the transitional one of Sarah Orne Jewett, but a picture of New England's swift decline and final wreckage, the distorted fragments of what once had been glorious.

### 3. The Loneliness of Meaningless Idealism: *Pembroke*

"Do you see that house? . . . the one with the front windows boarded up, without any step to the front door? Well, Barney Thayer lives there all alone. He's old Caleb Thayer's son, all the son that's left; the other one died. There was some talk of his mother's whippin' him to death. She died right after, but they said afterwards that she didn't, that he run away one night, an' went slidin' downhill, an' that was what killed him; he'd always had heart trouble. I dunno; I always thought Deborah Thayer was a pretty good woman, but she was pretty set. I guess Barney takes after her. He was goin' with Charlotte Barnard years ago—I guess 'twas as much as nine or ten years ago, now—an' they were goin' to be married. She was all ready—weddin'-dress an' bonnet an' everythin'—an' this house was 'most done an' ready for them to move into; but one Sunday night Barney he went up to see Charlotte, an' he got into a dispute with her father about the 'lection, an' the old man he ordered Barney out of the house, an' Barney he went out, an' he never went in again—couldn't nobody make him. His mother she talked; it 'most killed her; an' I guess Charlotte said all she could, but he wouldn't stir a peg.

"He went right to livin' in his new house, an' he lives there now; he ain't married, an' Charlotte ain't. She's had chances, too. Squire Payne's son, he wanted her bad." (305-6)

Such is the main plot of *Pembroke* (except for the dénouement in which Barney finally has a change of heart and goes to Charlotte's house to ask her to marry him) as told near the end of the novel by the village gossip to a friend from a neighboring village. Freeman first heard the story as a child, for the novel is based on an actual incident in her moth-

er's family, and was still being recounted after thirty years (Westbrook, *Freeman*, 92). Freeman's mother explained the obstinacy of the people by simply saying that it was "their way," a phrase that comes up frequently in *Pembroke*. But it was Freeman's curiosity about what makes a person develop such a "way" that caused her to remember the incident and to eventually work toward a solution in her fiction.

There are in fact numerous subplots going on in the novel as well. One of the most poignant is the twenty-year courtship between Charlotte's mother's sister Sylvia and Richard Alger which ended the same night as Charlotte's courtship to Barney.<sup>3</sup> Alger had visited Sylvia every Sunday evening for all those years, and was finally about to ask her to marry him. However, Sylvia was delayed at her sister's house because of the argument between Cephas Barnard and Barney; when Alger came to call on Sylvia and found her not at home, he took that to be her way of saying that she did not wish to marry him, and so he simply quit coming to call. Over the years, Sylvia had saved and spent her meager income on furnishings for her house to make Alger's visits more pleasant. She finally comes to the end of her finances and while being driven to the poor-house past Alger's house with only her rocking chair and mattress left, he rushes out to rescue her and at last marries her after they learn that they have both been in love with each other for all the past ten years but each mistakenly thinking the other was angry. The reader's first inclination is to wonder how such a crucial misunderstanding could be perpetu-



ated for a whole decade, particularly in a small town, but part of Freeman's purpose is to show both the stubbornness and the overwhelming adherence to social mores that consumed these people.

The "Introductory Sketch" to the 1899 edition of *Pembroke* provides the fullest glimpse into Freeman's views both on this novel and on her writing in general; her remarks deserve extensive quotation:

*Pembroke* was originally intended as a study of the human will in several New England characters, in different phases of disease and abnormal development, and to prove . . . the truth of a theory that its cure depended entirely upon the capacity of the individual for a love which could rise above all considerations of self . . .

When I make use of the term abnormal, I do not mean unusual in any sense. I am far from any intention to speak disrespectfully or disloyally of those stanch [*sic*] old soldiers of the faith who landed upon our inhospitable shores and laid the foundation . . . for the New England of to-day; but I am not sure, in spite of their godliness, and their noble adherence, in the face of obstacles, to the dictates of their consciences, that their wills were not developed past the reasonable limit of nature. What wonder is it that their descendants inherit this peculiarity, though they may develop it for much less worthy and more trivial causes than the exiling [of] themselves for a question of faith, even the carrying-out of personal and petty aims and quarrels?

There lived in a New England village, at no very remote time, a man who objected to the painting of the kitchen floor, and who quarrelled furiously with his wife concerning the same. When she persisted, in spite of his wishes to the contrary, and the floor was painted, he refused to cross it to his dying day, and always, to his great inconvenience, but probably to his soul's satisfaction, walked around it.

A character like this, holding to a veriest trifle with such a deathless cramp of the will, might naturally be regarded as a notable exception to a general rule; but his brethren who sit on church steps during services, who are dumb to those whom they should love, and will not enter familiar doors because of quarrels over matters of apparently no moment, are legion. . .

However, this state of things—this survival of the more prominent traits of the old stiff-necked ones . . .—can necessarily be known only to the initiated. The sojourner from cities for the summer months

cannot often penetrate in the least, though he may not be aware of it, the reserve and dignified aloofness of the [village] dwellers . . . when the surfaces are broken by some unusual revelation of a strongly serrate individuality, and the tale thereof is told at his dinner-table with an accompaniment of laughter and exclamation-points, he takes that case for an isolated and by no means typical one, when, if the truth were told, the village windows are full of them.

However, this state of things must necessarily exist, and has existed, in villages which, like *Pembroke*, have not been brought much in contact with outside influences . . . In towns which have increased largely in population, and have become more or less assimilated with a foreign element, these characters do not exist in such a large measure, are more isolated in reality, and have, consequently, less claim to be considered types. But there have been, and are to-day in New England, hundreds of villages like *Pembroke*, where nearly every house contains one or more characters so marked as to be incredible.

There is often to a mind from the outside world an almost repulsive narrowness and a pitiful sordidness which amounts to tragedy in the lives of such people as those portrayed in *Pembroke*, but quite generally the tragedy exists only in the comprehension of the observer and not at all in that of the observed. The pitied would meet pity with resentment; they would be full of wonder and wrath if told that their lives were narrow, since they have never seen the limit of the breadth of their current of daily life . . . Though the standard of taste of the simple villagers, and their complete satisfaction therewith, may reasonably be lamented, . . . they are not to be pitied, generally speaking, for their unhappiness in consequence. It may be that the lack of unhappiness constitutes the real tragedy. (qtd. in Westbrook, *Freeman*, 92-96)

Freeman is clearly making a case for the inherent realism of her novel in asserting that only a city dweller would find her more "bizarre" characters unbelievable. She also warns against reading the story as a tragedy, a point which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The main plot of *Pembroke* is essentially the story of Charlotte and Barney's broken engagement—precipitated by a triviality—and the years of stubbornness during which Barney refused to swallow his pride and return to her house; it is likewise the story of Charlotte's unwavering

love for Barney and the patience she is willing to show in the fact of his recalcitrance. Obviously this plot has more to do with personalities than events, and such is the case with the various subplots, as the above discussion of one of them shows. While everyone in the story is a typical New England villager, this is not to say that they are all clones of one another, for not even a strongly homogeneous environment can stifle the individual personality. To appreciate the novel, then, it is necessary to understand the various kinds of people who inhabit Pembroke and the interaction that occurs between them. And in order to understand the people, we must remind ourselves of the many generations of Puritanism which conditioned them.

#### 4. The Hawthorne Connection

One does not have to read much of Mary Wilkins Freeman to recognize the many echoes of Nathaniel Hawthorne which are found there. (It is interestingly coincidental that both Hawthorne and Freeman were descended from Salem witchcraft trial judges.) Paul More makes an interesting case for Hawthorne being the connecting link between the "old" and the "new" in American literature—that period when the moral ideas of New England were passing from the conscience (as demonstrated by Cotton Mather) to the imagination (as seen in Freeman's works). "All of Hawthorne," he posits, "may be found in germ in the group of ecclesiastical writers among whom Cotton Mather rises as pre-eminent—such

that it is a wonder that any literature at all ever sprang from Puritan New England" (174). Isolation from the world and absorption in an ideal of life-long guilt left an echo in many lives after the death of Mather and his contemporaries; the inability to surrender to the emotions of human nature and the dark brooding of damnation did not die—they changed but they did not go away.

In the nineteenth century the Northern states asserted themselves against religious control and shook off the bondage of orthodoxy; this, however, only moved the burden from one shoulder to another, for the inner tyranny of conscience became as exacting as external Puritan authority. "This shifting of authority from without to within brought about the transition from conscience to imagination," More notes, "and in Hawthorne's stories the awful voice of the old faith still reverberates" (178). The dogmas of faith have passed and left the loneliness of unmeaningful idealism. There is a discernable progression from the religious intolerance of Mather to the imaginative isolation of Hawthorne, and from that to the nervous impotence of Freeman's characters. Mather sought to suppress all worldly emotions; Hawthorne made of the solitude which follows this suppression one of the tragic symbols of human destiny (Ethan Brand is a good example of this); Freeman portrays a people in whom some native spring of action has been dried up and who suffer in a mute, unreasoning inability to express any outreaching passion of the heart or to surrender to any impulse of the body. Hepzibah Pyncheon, according to Charles

Thompson, is the "true parent of all those stiffened, lonely women that haunt Mary Wilkins Freeman's stories, except that Freeman's women have no moral imperative" (664); that is to say, there is no significance to their actions beyond the pathos of the lonely isolation depicted.

In a word, then, the whole progress from Cotton Mather to Mary Wilkins Freeman was determined by Puritanism's original attempt to stamp out humanity's natural and legitimate hungers and drives for the sake of an all-absorbing pride of the spirit. And now, when the spirit, after having been victorious in the long warfare, has itself starved away and left the barrenness of a dreary stagnation, the natural reversal may well be looked for, and we may expect these hungers and drives to grow out of the resulting waste, untempered by spiritual ideals—in other words, humanitarianism for its own duty-bound sake, not impelled by any genuine spiritual motive.

Freeman shares with Hawthorne an underlying tone of moral seriousness, but one which is never so obtrusive as to cloud the story. Their stories frequently border on allegory, yet "art for art's sake" seems too much to expect from a people whose ancestors for three hundred years had had only a limited acquaintance with literary forms other than the sermon. It is not surprising, then, that so many suggestions of Hawthorne are to be found in Freeman's stories.

*Pembroke* is concerned primarily with the romantic struggles of Charlotte and Barney, but by far the character who looms largest in the

story is Barney's mother, Deborah Thayer. She is so taken up with unflinching dedication to Calvinistic doctrine that she cannot even admit to her own human feelings: it is well known throughout the village that some years before when another infant child died, Deborah cleaned all the windows in her house and baked bread on the morning of the funeral because these were "her duties." Upon meeting Deborah Thayer, one is reminded of Harriet Beecher Stowe's description in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of Miss Ophelia from Vermont:

Her theological tenets were all made up, labelled in most positive and distinct forms, and put by, like the bundles in her patch trunk; there were just so many of them, and there were never to be any more. So, also, were her ideas with regard to most matters of practical life,—such as housekeeping in all its branches, and the various political relations of her native village. And, underlying all, deeper than anything else, higher and broader, lay the strongest principle of her being,—conscientiousness. Nowhere is conscience so dominant and all-absorbing as with New England women. It is the granite formation, which lies deepest, and rises out, even to the tops of highest mountains. (175)

Freeman might well have written the same description of Deborah Thayer, whose conscience was indeed granite and never softened even a little. In her own household she was something of a demigod, ruling and berating husband and children alike;<sup>4</sup> "Deborah's blue eyes gleamed with warlike energy as she listened [to Scripture being read]: she confused King David's enemies with those people who crossed her own will" (3). Everything she does, no matter how cruel or heartless, is rationalized by an allusion to Scripture and religious dogma.

A character as headstrong and unmoving as Deborah Thayer is a

prime target for rebellion by those under her authority, and such is the impetus for much of the subsequent action in the story. Barney, as we saw above, takes after his mother, and perhaps no conflict is as gruelling as that between people of equally strong wills. Barney is equal to his mother not only in stubbornness, but in religious conviction as well, and this is the cause of his problems in the novel. Barney's refusal to return to Charlotte's house is not so easily explained as merely being due to his wilfulness. To begin with, Cephas Barnard is by no means a formidable adversary. He is certainly stubborn and "set" in his ways, and given to making horrible threats—from which he usually backs down. A militant vegetarian ("Eating animal flesh brings out the animal in a person," he asserts), he browbeats himself and his family into eating pies made of weeds, but this is as far as his despotism goes; his wife and daughter are more than a match for him. The villagers regard him as a harmless eccentric. Had Barney gone back and apologized, Cephas would have gladly received him as a guest and a future son-in-law; in fact, Cephas soon regrets his expulsion of Barney from his house and goes personally to Barney to apologize but is rebuffed.

So "set" is Barney in his ways that he has no regard for what the other villagers think of his behavior; thus he acts out of no fear of public ridicule. The reason he will not apologize to Cephas and win back Charlotte—whom he still loves and who still loves him—is that it never occurs to him that he could do so. "His natural religious bent, inherited from

generations of Puritans, and kept in its channel by his training from infancy, make it impossible for him to conceive of sympathy or antagonism in its fullest sense apart from God" (18); this is to say that Barney sees both his joy in loving Charlotte and his misery in having Cephas break their engagement as "settled and inevitable," in other words, predestined. All he can do is exert his will in harmony with what he conceives as God's will. "The possibility that his misery might not be final never occurred to him . . . he could not grasp any choice in the matter" (19). Even Charlotte realizes that he has "a terrible will that won't always let him do what he wants to himself" (68). He does as he wills, but he cannot will as he chooses—which was Jonathan Edwards' thesis in earlier Puritan times. Barney battles with himself to break what he senses is a distorted resolution: when he learns that Squire Payne's son is courting Charlotte, he can hardly endure the thought of losing her, but he can do nothing except to fall into convulsive grief.

It is obvious that Barney has been helpless from the start. "His life becomes an allegory of the dehumanized heart," theorizes Fred Pattee (*Terminal Moraine*, 185). The day after Barney breaks his engagement, he moves into his unfinished house—which now serves as a symbol of his own incompleteness—and boards up most of the windows, thus shutting himself off physically and spiritually (he eventually stops going to prayer meetings) from society. As the novel progresses, he develops a curvature of the spine, an external manifestation of the internal moral struggle in



which he is engaged. Finally one winter he is bent double by a wracking attack of rheumatism brought on by frenzied woodchopping in a frozen swamp. Through weeks of cold and snow and fierce winds that kept other men huddled at their hearths, Barney battles with the forest, itself an important Puritan symbol:

He stood from morning until night hewing down the trees, which had gotten their lusty growth from the graves of their own kind. Their roots were sunken deep among and twined about the very bones of their fathers which helped make up the rich frozen soil of the great swamp. (312)

As everyone had predicted, Barney becomes ill with rheumatic fever—the culmination of his spiritual sickness as well as of his physical exhaustion. Charlotte insists on nursing him, despite the remonstrances of her parents who fear that her reputation will be compromised by her staying alone in Barney's house. Though Barney feels guilty accepting such kindness from the person he has so severely wronged, he is still too spiritually aloof to appreciate that Charlotte is laying herself open to the most vicious gossip. When Barney discovers that the minister and the deacon are preparing to take public action against Charlotte, he orders her back to her own house. This realization of the propriety of the social order is his first step back into the warmth of normal life. He again does battle with his will, but this time to undo the damage which it has wrought. If his perverted volition had twisted his body, it could now straighten it. In great agony he rises and forces himself to stand erect; then he fights his way step by step to Charlotte's house. Finally he "stood before them all with that

noble bearing which comes from humility itself when it has fairly triumphed . . . And Barney entered the house with his old sweetheart and his old self" (329-30).

There is also rebellion, though in a different way, by each of Deborah Thayer's other two children. Because Deborah dislikes Silas Berry, the local storekeeper, she forbids her daughter Rebecca to associate with his son William. The two young people take to meeting clandestinely, which becomes known to everyone except Deborah; when Rebecca is found to be pregnant, Deborah, without a second thought or a bit of remorse, orders her out of the house during a driving snowstorm. Rebecca and William are married later that same day in the hovel of a villager who is herself an outcast. Their illegitimate child dies at birth, but Deborah will neither attend the funeral nor even speak Rebecca's name. The youngest son Ephraim suffers from congenital heart disease and is in poor health throughout his young life. Both his activity and his diet are severely restricted, but Deborah will show him no sympathy or warmth. To make up for not being able to ever physically punish him (by doctor's orders), she makes him study his Puritan Primer during any time he is not occupied with small household chores. Late one night, unable to sleep, Ephraim slips out of the house while his parents are asleep and goes coasting on his brother's sled with a neighbor boy; on his way to bed, he dares to devour an entire plum pie—his "most favorite food and the one most explicitly forbidden him" which he discovers in the pantry: "For the first

and only occasion in his life he had had a good time" (231). The activity and departure from his diet take their toll and he is quite ill the next day, though he dares not let on to his mother lest she find out the cause. When he fails to do one of his assigned chores, Deborah comes "to the end of her patience and restraint" and proceeds to whip the boy, even though the doctor has forbidden her to do so. She believes the punishment is necessary if the boy's soul is to be saved:

. . . it was a high purpose to Deborah Thayer. She did not realize the part which her own human will had in it. "Ephraim," said his mother, "I have spared the rod with you all my life because you were sick. Your brother and your sister have both rebelled against the Lord and against me." (239)

In the midst of the whipping Ephraim suffers a heart attack and dies, but Deborah, unaware of his previous night's activities, takes the blame for his death upon herself. She enters a long period of depression and spiritual doubt, questioning why she should be so punished for trying to carry out the will of God. When she finally finds out several months later that she was not the cause of her son's death, the news breaks her spirit and she herself dies of a heart attack.

If Deborah Thayer represents social power in the novel, Silas Berry symbolizes economic power. As the village storekeeper, he represents a level of wealth superior to that of most of the other Pembroke residents. He is also the owner of the largest cherry orchard in the village, and in his growing miserliness, keeps raising the price of cherries every year to the point that people refuse to buy them. Rather than give them away

or lower his price, he lets the fruit rot on the trees—and even hires a poor village boy to stand in the orchard all day with bell to scare away any birds which might happen to fly into a tree and eat the cherries. In order to quell the protests of his family, he finally agrees to let the young people of the village have a cherry-picking party, but only from the four poorest producing trees. Silas becomes so incensed at his wife's having made donuts and cider for the youngsters that while she is out of the house he hides what they have not yet consumed. Freeman's description of the party itself is, besides Ephraim's clandestine sledding, the only incident in the novel which might be described as "happy." But the happiness is short-lived when Silas, to the horror of his family, presents a bill to the revelers for the cherries he has calculated that they picked.

Deborah Thayer and Silas Berry are both driven not only to exercise their particular kinds of power, but to amass more and more of it, which results for both of them in gradual self-destruction and greater isolation, an ever-important symbol in Puritan thought.

Charlotte Barnard represents another type of Freeman character, the one who bridges the gap between those who rebel and withdraw, and those who themselves conform and try to force conformity onto others. She has quietly and naturally assumed the role of the one who cares for the sick of the village, who prepares the dead for burial, and assists the brides with their wedding dresses; thus she develops an acute awareness of other people's feelings and is able to be understanding and sympathetic

to everyone in every situation. She shows her largeness of spirit in being able to be empathetic to her father even though he is the cause of her problems with Barney. As Barney is like his mother, so is Charlotte like hers; together they suggest a healthy mean between aggression and conformism.

Through the blending and interaction of these various types of characters, Freeman achieves both balance and thematic unity in *Pembroke*. Her aim was to explore the workings of the human will, and in the range of characters from Deborah and Barney Thayer to Charlotte Barnard to Caleb Thayer, she shows the many faces of determination, sometimes in conflict with each other, but always in conflict with themselves.

### 5. A Great Deal of Important Tradition

“There is something like a craze . . . over Mary E. Wilkins!” announced the *Critic* shortly before the publication of *Pembroke* (qtd. in Pattee, *Terminal Moraine*, 186). Such effusive adulation followed on published praise by Holmes and Lowell directed toward Freeman’s *A New England Nun* and *A Humble Romance*. Said the *London Spectator* of those collections:

The stories are among the most remarkable feats of what we may call literary impressionism in our language, so powerfully do they stamp on the reader’s mind the image of the classes and individuals they portray without spending on the picture a single redundant word, a single superfluous word.

Pembroke's various episodes were later described in the same publication as "so vibrant with human life that they hold the reader now with intense sympathy, now with indignation, now with pleasure, now with something like fear" (both qtd. in Thompson, 666). When Freeman began the serial publication of *Pembroke*, then, her audience was, for the most part, already eagerly awaiting this latest work and received it with enthusiasm.

At the time Freeman wrote *Pembroke*, New England was exerting more influence on America than was any other individual section of the country, and her description of the New England character does much not just to preserve some of the fast-disappearing earlier demeanor of the region, but to explain the traits of character which enabled New England to assume such a position of influence. The shrewdness and strength of will that equipped the early settlers to conquer a hostile land later provided the impetus to those whose attitudes changed and softened with the environment to assume roles of leadership in business, industry, and education. In addition to being essentially optimistic, Freeman is "really an idealist masquerading as a realist," as Charles Thompson describes her (665), for her natural instincts are toward romanticism and poetry, avenues which she pursued before turning to fiction writing out of financial necessity. As from the study of disease we may learn what health is, Thompson posits, so from Freeman's study of abnormal individuals we may learn something of the "normal" New England character. The old Puritans exercised their stubbornness upon great issues, but these country

descendants, living in narrow ways and thinking narrow thoughts, exercise their stubbornness upon petty issues. But even these perverted and abnormal wills convincingly attest to the real strength of New England character.

Freeman, then, was highly popular with her original readers because they were so taken up with her attitudes toward life and her penetrating insights into the human character; at that moment when realism was giving way to naturalism and determinism, when urban industrialism was becoming the dominant influence on all of American life, *Pembroke* gave readers a glimpse at the darker side of what blind determination could lead to, in backwoods villagers as well as urban laborers and businessmen. Because they found the story so intense and gripping, these readers were willing to overlook some of the obvious crudities of style that are to be found in the novel. Freeman, after all, did not start out to be a writer at all; she was eventually forced to turn for her living to what had previously been a diversion, and (like Bret Harte) is essentially a self-made writer, with all the shortcomings of literary skill that such a circumstance implies. Later critics, however, especially the New Critics, have been much less forgiving of her obvious deficiencies and have limited their praise to her shorter works.

One of the issues of concern to New Critics is Freeman's use of the conventional "happy ending" not only in *Pembroke* but in most of her stories which have a romantic plot. Both the Charlotte/Barney plot and

the Sylvia/Richard plots in *Pembroke* have such a dénouement; for this reason Jay Martin (146) calls the novel "unrealistic" while Arthur Quinn (432) says such conclusions are "the weakest parts of what is otherwise a powerful and moving novel." But such plot resolutions were not out of character for Freeman, who believed that happiness and spiritual wholeness were one. When Barney Thayer and Richard Alger finally conquered their pride and were able to break out of their spiritual isolation, the only result possible was happiness for all concerned. It is for the same reason that the story of Deborah Thayer ends so unhappily: Deborah will not allow herself to relent from her moral righteousness even to experience her own ordinary human emotions, much less be sympathetic toward anyone else, including her own children. Thus Freeman is making no attempt to be sentimental or melodramatic; she is simply pursuing what she sees as a wholly realistic development of her plot.

A number of critics, however, (e.g., Thompson, Martin, and Pattee) are inclined to view Freeman's work as more tragic than realistic. Paul More and Perry Westbrook counter such assertions in noting that while it is true that Freeman does describe only a single phase of New England (as did Hawthorne), she has laid hold of the essential trait that underlies all those people, and in that regard is wholly realistic. While it is the claim of the realists to "tell the truth," they exercise as rigid a principle of selection in their choice of incidents and characters as does the writer of romance simply because no one work can possibly encompass every-



thing. *Pembroke* illustrates this idea in that it tells a story far from the average truth, but yet is accurate and realistic in terms of what it sets out to do. Art, after all, is the expression of personality; if *Pembroke* gives a picture of New England life which is more fairly to be called incomplete than inaccurate, the reason lies in the personality of the writer and the nature of her environment, the two factors which define her limitations.

Freeman's stories in general, and *Pembroke* in particular, are not tragic in the ordinary sense of the word, as her own remarks quoted above make clear; they have no universal meaning and contain no problem of the struggle between human desires and the human will, or between the will and the burden of circumstances. "They are, as it were," observes Paul More, "the echo of a tragedy long ago enacted; they touch the heart with the faint pathos of flowers pressed and withered in a book which, found by chance, awaken the vague recollection of outlived emotions" (181). Tragedy, to paraphrase Freeman herself, is in the eye of the beholder rather than in what is being observed. In Freeman's deeply rooted Puritan view, it is life itself which is tragic, but it is personal nobility and strength of spirit which give meaning—or at least inner peace if not outward happiness—to any individual's life. This type of outlook—certainly more optimistic than it is neutral or pessimistic—was one of the important factors that attracted Freeman's original readers to her work.

The original publication of *Pembroke* in serial form proved as prob-

lematic in some ways for Freeman as *Gabriel Conroy* did for Bret Harte. Serial publication ideally suited her more natural bent for writing short fiction, just as it did for Harte. Freeman, however, had a stronger sense of the overall unity of her narrative than did Harte, with the result that *Pembroke* has less of the obvious disjointedness that mars *Gabriel Conroy*. As suggested above, Freeman is frequently praised for the vividness of individual episodes in *Pembroke*; Fred Pattee and Charles Thompson both fault Freeman for treating the various episodes more like individual short stories collected under one title than as interconnected parts of a larger story. But this is a rather overstated judgment, for even though a certain looseness of structure can be found in the novel, there are the less obvious links both of the common traits the characters share, and the subtle ways in which the characters influence each other in the story. Modern critics, however, have seemed inclined to overlook these less obvious linkages.

Mary Wilkins Freeman and the environment of which she wrote seem dim and far away; a modern reader might well question what there is in *Pembroke* to challenge our return to it. Perhaps the answer lies in looking to the very qualities which made it exciting and appealing to its original readers.

Fred Pattee calls the decade after 1887 the "golden era" of Freeman's genius (*Terminal Moraine*, 187) because it was during this time that she made her strongest and most original contribution to American

literature. Written in 1894, *Pembroke* does not so much provide new information about Freeman's New England as it highlights the gripping intensity of her method and her power to move the reader's emotions; the passing of nearly a century since the novel's publication has done nothing to diminish this aspect of the work. Thus *Pembroke* meets Jane Tompkins' primary criterion for a successful novel: that it tell a good and engaging story.

Many of Freeman's novels focus on the traits of a single individual, as a glimpse at a list of her titles attests: *Jane Field*, *Giles Corey*, *Madelon*, and *Jerome*,<sup>5</sup> to name a few. The advantage that Freeman gains in *Pembroke* is that she is able to portray a much larger panorama of New Englanders; this not only makes for more interesting reading, but gives a more balanced view of the variety of people who populate New England villages. Any sentimentalism, propagandizing, or crusading for social causes came long after *Pembroke*, and so the novel remains one of the best examples of her finest writing. Apart from her early short story collections, it consistently enjoyed the highest critical acclaim of all her novels until the time of her death; since then it, like the rest of her novels, has all but disappeared from her canon except by mention. A writer's canon, if it must be selective rather than inclusive, should at least include a sampling of the various genres in which the person worked; Freeman's reputation rests primarily on her shorter fiction, but *Pembroke* deserves a more visible place in her canon because of its overall variety and high

quality among her longer works.

Henry James once remarked that "it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature" (qtd. in Matthiessen, 339); his observation is well illustrated in this chronicle of ebb-tide New England. The rise of industrialism had emptied out the small towns; men of vigor were going west or competing for city jobs. As a woman left behind in a small town, Freeman sought to give permanent shape to the tradition which was quickly passing away, as did other local colorists. Following on James's remark, it can also be said that it takes a great many years of living in a place to produce even a little tradition, and a great deal of tradition to give one the sense of being part of an entire civilization. Freeman's great contribution is one of "emotion recollected in tranquility" as she presents her portraits of New England village life. She has pictured an order of life which no longer exists but which is nonetheless an innate part of us today because we are, at least partially, its result. Through a knowledge of the aspects of that life which *Pembroke* provides, we gain valuable perspective on our own. Mary Wilkins Freeman has not only provided a link with the past, but has created, if not a world, at least a countryside of her own, one which is at least as important a part of our cultural and literary history any created by Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner, or Hamlin Garland.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER VI

1. Relatively few in-depth studies of Freeman and her work have been done since her death. The most significant ones are Edward Foster's 1951 book-length biography of Freeman (the only such work) and two critical studies by Perry D. Westbrook (*Acres of Flint*, 1951; and *Mary Wilkins Freeman*, 1967). The 1988 *Columbia Literary History of the United States* discusses Freeman's works primarily as they intersect with works of similar theme (New England local colorists, women's issues, labor-romance novels, etc.); however, the work does mention *Pembroke* as Freeman's most significant novel about the effects of Puritanism, though more attention is given to the two short story collections.
2. The question of "influence" of other authors is always an interesting one in literary study, but in the case of Freeman it is a somewhat confused issue. In *Acres of Flint*, Perry Westbrook asserts that

she read extensively in Ossian, Dickens, Thackeray, and Poe, and in Goethe and the Greeks in translation. She was a lover and later a writer of poetry, admiring particularly the Elizabethan lyricists and Rossetti. She became acquainted with the works of the local color writers, like Cable, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and *Sarah Orne Jewett*. (97) [italics mine]

Later in *Mary Wilkins Freeman* he observes that

she and her closest friend, Evelyn Sawyer of nearby Newfane, read and discussed Goethe, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickens, Thackeray, Poe, Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and *Sarah Orne Jewett*. (27) [italics mine]

Fred Pattee, however, in *Side-Lights on American Literature*, quotes Freeman as saying

Concerning any influence of other writers, it may seem egotistical, but there was none. I did, however strange it may seem, stand entirely alone. As a matter of fact, I would read nothing which I thought might influence me. I had not read the French short stories; *I had not read Miss Jewett's stories*. I will add that, although I have repeatedly heard that I was founded on Jane Austen, I have never read any of her books. (200) [italics mine]

Unfortunately Westbrook does not give the source of his information, nor does Pattee cite the source of the quotation. Perhaps it is not important to what degree Freeman read or deliberately avoided read-

ing Jewett or any other writers, but the implication of her statement (which we may assume to be authentic and accurate) is that she was deliberately trying to cultivate a unique, "pure" style, an interesting insight about someone who turned to serious writing out of financial necessity and went along with the trends of currently popular fiction in order to be assured of getting published.

3. Freeman's touching description of Sylvia Crane's and Richard Alger's timidity and nervousness around each other, even after so many years of courtship, and their hesitation to even hold hands is strikingly similar to how Frank Norris would later describe Grannis and Baker in *McTeague*.
4. In *Pembroke*, unlike in some of her other stories, Freeman generally pairs individuals with complementary personalities as spouses or lovers. Deborah's husband Caleb, for example, is as committed to religious observance as she is, but he is a much more easy-going and sympathetic individual than she is. Deborah honors the patriarchal social code by allowing her husband to be the head of the house, but he is often so only nominally in that he takes her word as his will for the sake of maintaining some peace. On the few occasions when Caleb does openly assert his own will, even Deborah falls silent in deference to his position. But when Deborah summarily expels Barney and later Rebecca from the house and the family, it is Caleb who attempts to befriend and assist them, always, of course, unbeknownst to Deborah.
5. By way of comparison, it is interesting to note that the later *Jerome* tells virtually the same story found in *Pembroke*, but was much less successful, primarily because the sustained portrayal of the struggle of only one individual with no other subplots to break up the story proved ultimately to be overwhelmingly tedious.

## CONCLUSION

What these final chapters have demonstrated, above all else, is that the regionalist novel is no different from any other major literary genre in its complex blending of form and theme, in its thematic depth and importance, and in its reflection of an author's individual temperament and experience within large generic similarities. Each of the three novels examined here offers strikingly individual and contrasting visions of experience, yet each one does so within a body of shared intellectual and literary assumptions belonging to their common historical and literary moment. The regionalists, furthermore, are no different from any other group or school of writers in the sometimes uneven quality of writing to be found among them; differing levels of experience and craftsmanship are as much a part of literary art as any other human endeavor. The point, then, is that regionalist works as a whole have been subjected to unfair devaluation at the hands of critics who weigh their merits more heavily by structural or formal criteria rather than considering these works in light of the historical and literary contributions they make both to the study of literature generally and to the canons of their individual authors.

Local color writers, as we have seen, run the risk of falling from critical (though usually not popular) favor rather early because they drew authentic pictures, but tried to make their material count for everything;

thus it soon lost its freshness. They tend to be so "in the middle" of what they are writing that they soon lose perspective on it; had they been more conscious of re-evaluating their writing, they might have developed new insights about it, with the result that their later works would evidence a ripening personality. The problem from the perspective of this study is that individual works, which may of themselves be important for cultural, historical, or literary reasons, often tend to undergo the same devaluation assigned to their author. The benefit of the approach taken here, then, is that both a novel and its author can be evaluated from a perspective which will yield an assessment of both which is based more fairly on criteria suitable to their genre and period.

It is important to remember that current arguments for canon revision are concerned essentially with more recent and contemporary works; the older portions of the canon have been argued and determined, for the most part, with some degree of finality, and so these authors and works are not apt to be easily unseated. It is a truism that *getting into* the canon is the difficulty, but once in, an author or work is more apt to experience varying degrees of centrality or importance rather than to suffer subsequent exclusion. There always have been--and always will be--many canons, but "*the*" Canon is that of Western high culture, that is, the academic culture. Seen from this perspective, major and minor works differ only to the degree to which they conform to the preconceived notions inherent in the definition of a particular canon. Literary history



shows, ironically, that perhaps the only stable aspect of the canon is its instability.

T. S. Eliot's conclusions regarding minor poetry have a good deal of currency for the evaluation of regionalist fiction. Few literary reputations, he reminds us (48), remain completely constant from one generation to another, and no reputation remains exactly in the same place. Minor works tend to fluctuate within a wider range of opinion than those works which are recognized as "classics," and so their real value must be assessed by an average taken over a span of time. Just as it is by hindsight and in historical perspective that a classic can be recognized as such, so it is the tribunal of time which ultimately determines the relative value of all literary works. A lesser reputation at one moment in history does not necessarily presage disappearance from the canon, for it is studies such as this which bring renewed attention to a particular work and its author, as well as the entire genre of which they are a part, thereby changing the contour of that reputation.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith's remarks cited in the Preface highlight the inseparable link between canon formation and the teaching profession. Teachers, first of all, learned the canon from other teachers, and pass it on to their own students through the medium of school textbooks. All teachers bring their own biases and prejudices, likes and dislikes, with them to both the selection of textbooks as well as the teaching of its contents; clearly, then, the challenge of canon revision is as much to

“open up the teachers” as it is to “open up the canon.” Thus the academy is again being challenged to consider what it teaches, to whom, and why.

At its worst, the canon is a Great List cast forever in concrete, but at its best is the aesthetic and cultural embodiment of a given time and which is continually subjected to scrutiny and revision. The recent trends toward revisionism have caused some to bemoan that the canon “isn’t what it used to be,” if, we might add, it ever was at all. This dissertation has followed the course of much recent canon study in both re-examining the principles applied to form a given canon and also calling attention to specific devalued and thus neglected works. I have not attempted to formulate the final word for all time on the subject of minor literature; like all considerations of the subject, this one is provisional at best, always subject to dialectical revision. My discussion of ideology, like all such discussions, is necessarily somewhat tenuous because the topic itself is always essentially intangible. My goal, instead, has been to establish a multi-faceted perspective for providing new insights into a body of works that will in turn advance the always ongoing re-interpretation of our literary heritage from the vantage point of our moment in history, which is our legacy to the future.

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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

June 2, 1989

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