



# The Book

Number 12, July 1987

Newsletter of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture  
Published by the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

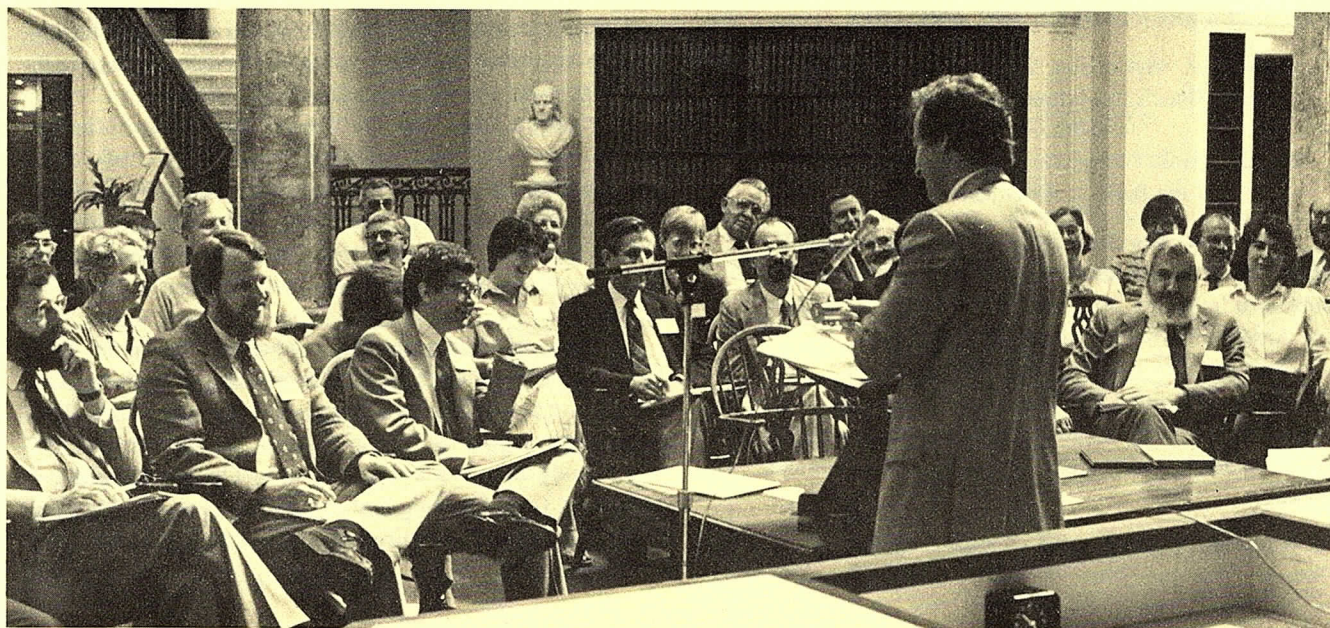
## *The Conference on Teaching The History of the Book*

What may have been the first of its kind, a conference on "teaching the history of the book," took place at the American Antiquarian Society on June 12 and 13 under the cooperative sponsorship of the Society's Program in the History of the Book in American Culture and the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress; the Exxon Education Foundation provided funding. This issue of *The Book* includes the paper Michael Warner (English, Northwestern University) read on literary theory and the history of the book. We plan to publish other conference papers, together with accompanying syllabi and a summary of the main points of discussion. Details on these materials follow this article.

By way of preliminary comments, let it be noted that the conference was organized around two sets of presentations, one on fields of study and institutional settings for book history, the other on actual courses or programs of instruction. A little more than half of the persons taking part in the conference work in libraries or teach in library schools, which is also where more courses in book history occur than in any other setting. A question that came up again and again was the "relevance" of book history courses in programs that increasingly rename themselves "Information Sciences," and that focus on the

present day. A parallel, though more muted question, arose from the perceived decline (if not disappearance) of the course in bibliography that once figured in graduate programs in departments of English and American literature. And, to move beyond specific settings, is it the case that book history is bounded by the "decline of the book," to quote Robert Gross?

In explicating his syllabus on "Books, Culture, and Society in America," Gross outlined a set of themes or problems—for example, the transmission of culture, the shifting structure of authority—that make book history central to an understanding of culture and society in colonial and modernizing America. Michael Warner, whose essay follows in this newsletter, explicated the connections between recent literary theory and book history. Broadly speaking, his point was that the concept of "mediation" reintroduces context (that is, the historicity and materiality of the text) into literary criticism. Richard Venezky (University of Delaware) and David Nord (Indiana University), speaking on the history of education and the history of journalism respectively, indicated how literacy and journalism were achieving redefinition in ways that bear on book history. Paul Koda (Catholic University) outlined the situation of this field in schools of library science. Roger Stoddard (Houghton Library, Harvard University) evoked the history of instruction in book history at Houghton from the days of W.C. Lane and



*Robert A. Gross (Amherst College), addressing the workshop session of the conference.*



David Hall at the conference on teaching the history of the book.

G.P. Winship to the present. Daniel Traister (University of Pennsylvania) recounted the rationale behind his history-of-the-book course, a rationale founded on a practical view of the intellectual needs of librarians in serving their readers. Terry Belanger described the development of the teaching program in rare books at the Columbia School of Library Service. Like others who spoke from the floor, Belanger has his students learn the technologies of hand printing.

American Antiquarian Society  
185 Salisbury Street  
Worcester, Massachusetts 01609-1634  
Telephone (617) 755-5221 or 752-5813

Marcus A. McCorison, Director and Librarian  
John B. Hench, Associate Director for Research  
and Publication

David D. Hall, Chairman, Program in the History  
of the Book in American Culture

*The Book: Newsletter of the Program in the History  
of the Book in American Culture* (ISSN 0740-8439) is  
published in March, July, and November by the Ameri-  
can Antiquarian Society at the above address.

Editors: David D. Hall and John B. Hench  
Assistant Editor: Sheila McAvey

The Editors welcome all news relevant to the interests of  
the Program in the History of the Book in American  
Culture.

Copyright © 1987 by American Antiquarian Society

Under the leadership of Alice Schreyer (University of Delaware Library), the workshop on syllabi identified a number of exercises and techniques that instructors have found useful. These include student-arranged exhibitions (and/or catalogue entries for an exhibition), creating a study collection of books that can be abused for the purposes of demonstration, and book biographies. Terry Belanger demonstrated the use of videotapes and film; others spoke of archival resources and the need for more access to classic (and non-English-language) sources.

Concluding, it was realized that no ideal course exists; we are each dependent on and constrained by the setting for our teaching. It was realized, too, that sharp differences exist between courses in the book arts and courses that begin and end with the history of society, differences that are not unlike the contrast in art history between connoisseurship and "material culture." Reaffirming variety, the conference succeeded in its goal of representing different points of view and in demonstrating possible connections.

D.D.H.

### *AAS to Publish Conference Report*

AAS plans to publish a pamphlet reporting on the recent conference summarized above, and also to make other conference materials available. The pamphlet, entitled *Teaching the History of the Book*, will contain an account of the proceedings of the conference, together with two of the papers given and syllabi distributed at the conference. These materials represent two approaches to teaching the history of the book. The first is Robert A. Gross's course "Books, Culture, and Society in America," taught in a history department. The second is a library school course, taught by Daniel Traister, on "The History of Books and Printing."

The Society will also issue the conference paper given by David Paul Nord of Indiana University's School of Journalism *The Children of Isaiah Thomas: Notes on the Historiography of Journalism and of the Book in America*.

The conference report and the Nord essay will be the first two numbers in a new series of *Occasional Papers in the History of the Book in American Culture*.

In addition, the Society will make available photocopies of other syllabi circulated by and to conference participants, i.e., syllabi for courses given by Nord, Paul Koda (library science, Catholic University), Donald Davis (library science, University of Texas at Austin), and Gordon B. Neavill (library science, University of Alabama).

The cost of the conference report will be \$4.50. The Nord paper is priced at \$3.00. The photocopies of the four syllabi are available (as a package only) for \$4.50. The conference report will be published in September; the other materials are available now. Orders should be addressed to John Hench at AAS. For mail orders, add \$1.50 postage and handling for the first item, \$.50 for each additional item.

## *Literary Studies and the History of the Book*

Let me begin with a brief and schematic history of literary studies in this country. My reason for doing so is that the various ways in which literary critics are now turning to the history of the book indicate a very important shift in the field, and one that is in part playing out longstanding patterns in the discipline's history.

When English departments were founded in American colleges and universities—mostly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century—they were really departments of English language and literature. For years many colleges had had somebody, usually the professor of rhetoric and oratory, whose job included the task of introducing boys to the golden passages of Shakespeare and the poets. Literary studies had not been conducted in any systematic way, and “criticism” meant being able to tell the good bits from the bad bits. You did it as part of being a gentleman. The founding of English departments, however, brought about quite a different business, and earned a very hostile reception from the rhetoric and oratory people.

The new English scholars were philologists. Nowadays we would call them linguists: their training was in the historical and comparative study of languages—though, as you no doubt know, philologists also developed for the first time a systematic bibliographic criticism. Their really innovative character, however, lay in the fact that they were trained at all; the influx of philology marked the professionalization of literary studies. To be a rhetoric-and-oratory critic, you only had to know the classics, have a pretty way of talking, and dabble in poetry. (Not much of an exaggeration. The paragons for this role were the men who succeeded each other in the Boylston chair at Harvard: Ticknor, Longfellow, Lowell). To be a philologist, on the other hand, you had to go to graduate school, something that at first existed only in Germany. In the 1870s and 1880s, Americans were going to Germany and coming back as philologists in droves, and when they got back they were helping to set up the new graduate programs in American universities. The graduate programs that they were setting up, not only in old institutions like Harvard but also in all of those new schools like Hopkins, Cornell, and Chicago, were of course graduate programs in philology. They were where you went to learn about the Great Vowel Shift. But the way you illustrated the Great Vowel Shift was by reading the texts that gave evidence of it. And this is where literature comes in.

Sometime in the 1880s, the professionalizing philologists began to realize that their lab experiments had a bigger appeal than their science. By offering not just the golden passages of the Bard but an enormous historical range of the texts that they were busily editing and reprinting, they were in a position to lay claim to the systematic study of literature. And that is what they did. “Literature,” obviously, meant something rather broader

for these enterprising philologists than it did for the high culture of the rhetoric-and-oratory people. It meant essentially the written archive, though in the years that followed, the philologists-turned-critics learned to sustain an ambiguity in their use of the word that is with us to the present. Criticism, also, was a different practice for the philologists: it is from this period that we can date the project of specialized interpretation, in which people began to debate not just whether Browning really was a major poet, but rather questions like: in what situations does Milton use latinate syntax? and, what were the sources for *A Winter's Tale*? For the philologists, an enormous amount of historical, biographical, bibliographical, and linguistic information was necessary for criticism.

Literary criticism became institutionalized in its essentially philological mode, though of course the university critics also had to make concessions to the genteel discourse about judicious criticism. The backlash against philosophy—and with it, against history—came mainly in the 1940s, in a movement called the New Criticism. The New Criticism almost certainly represents the model of literary study that you yourselves have been educated in. In many ways it was designed for classroom teaching, and it dominates our educational institutions at every level. Its hallmark was and is close reading—careful scrutiny of “the work itself.” Philology, bibliography, history, and biography, which had been the task of a critical science, became only a background for the task of criticism, which was an unmediated confrontation with the text. New Criticism developed very subtle and sophisticated techniques of reading to stand in place of the philological apparatus. It became possible to talk about ironies and ambiguities, about imagery patterns, about narrative devices, about thematic coherence, and so on.

All of these techniques of reading have at their core a task of appreciation for authorial control. What they are made to find is a well-crafted work of art. This means not only that people have gotten to be pretty good at finding well-crafted works of art wherever they can find ironic ambiguities and thematic coherence (which is just about anywhere if you're at all clever), but also that something strongly resembling the ideals of rhetoric-and-oratory criticism has crept back into literary study. Where the philologists' governing ideal was historical comprehension of the archive, the New Critics' governing ideal was the assumption that literary qualities can be apprehended immediately; and if literary qualities can be apprehended immediately it follows that they are timeless and universal. Because of this assumption, although the old evaluative language of the genteel critics was muted, the task of identifying the good bits had come once again to define the critic.

One result was the clarification of a literary canon. If you examine anthologies of American literature, for example, you will find that those of the 1920s include a vast range of samples, usually grouped historically and

geographically, while those of the New Criticism gradually do away with schools and regions, winnowing down the samples to the great authors—great authors being those whose works display most intensively the timeless and universal values of literature. One very influential anthology presented American literature as the work of only eight—count 'em, eight—authors. Even today, the most common anthologies arrange their selections only by birth date, and thus implicitly regard other historical and cultural information as no more than background. Part of the ongoing appeal of this way of doing things, of course, is that it's easy to handle in the classroom. But the classroom in question can no longer be that of a course on the history of the book.

Of course I exaggerate the clarity of the shift, as some of the older ways of doing things persisted—particularly in American studies, which always maintained a historical interest as a way of distinguishing itself from the English canon. And some projects in criticism, like the history of the rise of the novel, or like Marxist criticism, have always been capable of addressing the history of the book. But the schematic history I've given is a way of suggesting that doing so has not in general been seen as desirable for students of literature. From genteel culture to philology to New Criticism, then, we arrive at something like the present; and as you may have guessed from the fact that this is a program on the history of the book, current shifts in literary studies have returned historical and cultural issues to the center of discussion in a way that had been made impossible by New Criticism's reaction against philology.

The turn away from New Criticism is extraordinarily complicated and overdetermined, and I will not be able to do justice to it here, since I only want to suggest how it has created interest in the history of the book. So I will confine myself to two critiques of New Criticism: one of its theory of interpretation, and one of its theory of value. They are related, and are jointly motivating some very lively scholarship in literary history. I'll offer examples from two movements, one to illustrate each critique: following the critique of the New Critical theory of interpretation, there is now a much-debated movement called the New Historicism; while the critique of value has been picked up most astutely in feminist criticism.

The theory of interpretation has been such an explosive field for the last twenty years that I can't even take the time to name all of the relevant figures, much less to explain how it comes about that movements as different as continental language philosophy and American neopragmatism converge in their critique of New Critical assumptions. I shall summarize here an American version of the debate, though in an ideal world a historian of the book would also be interested in the work of Jurgen Habermas or Jacques Derrida. In a broad range of theoretical developments one thing has been agreed on by a newer generation: no one apprehends a text immediately.

This New Critical assumption could always be protected by reservations (for example, the reader has to be properly trained before he is competent to read closely), but the fundamental idea is that a determinate meaning is inherent in any text. This is true even if that meaning is an ambiguity—in fact, especially then, because your task in the face of an ambiguity is to recognize that the tension itself is a determinate aspect of craft and intention. Because an authoritative and *determinate* meaning is seen as inhering in the text, any competent speaker of the language should be able to elaborate it by paying close enough attention. Elaborating a meaning may be complicated (in fact, it had better be, or criticism would have no job), but there is a guarantee in advance that you can do it and do it right by an unmediated encounter with the text.

Interpretive theory, whether poststructuralist or Wittgensteinian or neopragmatist, has shown that this picture of interpretation is a myth. Language does not come with inherent meaning, and cannot be immediately apprehended. This is not to say that it cannot be apprehended—as the popular press's cartoon version of deconstruction would seem to be saying—but that the apprehension of meaning is always mediated.

Interpretation always takes place in action and in a context, and it is the contextual act of interpreting, including the assumptions and purposes of that interpretation, that determines the meaning of the text. Let's take as an example the first sentence from *Moby Dick*. I don't think that any readers of *Moby Dick* are exactly bewildered by "Call me Ishmael"; it seems rather plain and straightforward, and it is easy enough to do a close reading of it—its tone, the relation between reader and speaker, the ambiguities suggested by it, and so on. But nothing naturally inherent in the text produces those meanings, as will be clear the moment you consider what it would mean if you heard it in another context: if for example you were being introduced to a friendly person whose name were Ishmael, or if you were a security guard on a day when "Call me Ishmael" had been declared the password, or if you were playing *Jeopardy* and it showed up under the category of "Opening Lines." In any one of these contexts, the sentence has a meaning, and in most cases a plain meaning, but the meaning is a function of shared assumptions, expectations, and purposes. When you pick up a copy of *Moby Dick*, in that very act you establish a cultural context that will inform your reading. And the cultural context is a highly specific one, requiring not only literacy but familiarity with the cultural meaning of books, novel-consumption, education, taste, Biblical allusion, and so on. This dimension of culture, according to our newer theories of interpretation, is not just the background of a text that can be read independently; insofar as it always mediates meaning, it is the text.

Because interpretive assumptions and purposes are not just the features of individuals, but of communities, interpretation is always regulated for the individual. And

because some of the communities defined by assumptions are very broad—say, for example, the West—some features of interpretation are very stable. But they are not in principle so, and they are not immediately so. Any text, transferred to a different interpretive context, would have a different meaning. And there is no transcendental privilege for an “original” context, which anyway by definition could not be entirely or purely apprehended from another context. It is worth repeating that the newer critiques of interpretation do not deny meaning, and do not prevent interpretation. What they do is to expand the frame of reference to include the interpreter, the situation, the culture as the site of meaning. The newer theories, in other words, have redirected attention from the individual interpreter and the individual author toward the contexts of meaning that make interpreting or authoring possible.

One of the main results has been an interest in what is called “the politics of interpretation.” By that phrase is understood the collective purposes and presuppositions which generate meaning in any given context. The appeal of the phrase lies partly in the postimperial setting in which the critique of interpretation has been developed. It was realized that one of the reasons Westerners had such confidence in the universality of meaning was that they were accustomed to imposing their interpretive categories on other cultures. But it has also allowed us to realize that the cultural context of meaning is never uniform or monolithic; and since people’s purposes and assumptions could also be described as their interests, meaning is always the site of social struggle. Initially a theoretical argument about the mediation of meaning by presuppositions and action, the polemic has made issues of cultural politics central to interpretation. Thus historical inquiry has returned as a feature of literary studies, though history is no longer a background, but now a primary dimension of meanings and texts.

For that reason, the same theoretical arguments that have been associated with poststructuralism and deconstruction have also led to what is known as the New Historicism, and thus to a strong interest in the history of the book. New Historicism is a label that historians don’t like very much because they understand something different by historicism. But nobody’s asking historians; the people the New Historicists are reacting against are the New Critics, and historicism seems an important term for that purpose because it emphasizes that meaning is established in concrete historical situations, and ought not to be abstracted as though it didn’t matter who was reading or when or where or why.

So if the “Historicism” in the New Historicism is to distinguish it from the New Critics and their idea that a text means what it means regardless of what your cultural situation is, the “New” in New Historicism is to distinguish it from the somewhat dreary and encyclopedic historical work that the philologists used to do. And this latter distinction is no less important than the first.

Because while critics have realized on one hand that language and the symbolic are never essential and timeless but always contingent on cultural politics, on the other hand they have realized that cultural politics is always symbolic. New Historicism has a motto: “The text is historical; and history is textual.” The first part means that meaning does not transcend context but is produced within it; the second part means that human actions and institutions and relations, while certainly hard facts, are not hard facts as distinguished from language. They are themselves symbolic representations, though this is not to say, as many old historicists might conclude, that they are not real.

Take for example the artifact, the physical book in which you encounter “Call me Ishmael.” Since it’s a thing, you might think that it is fundamentally different from the language you read in it. But as we know, its existence as a thing is already meaningful; in the appropriate situation, let us say, it possesses bookness, where bookness gives it meaning within practices of literacy, technologies of writing and printing and binding, the politics of education and information, distributions of economic wealth and cultural wealth, divisions of labor and leisure time, and so on. So if a conflict arose over what “Call me Ishmael” meant, and you were to take your copy in hand and wave it in the air as though to call attention to its material existence, you would already be doing something with a very complex symbolic charge—something, in fact, just as complex and just as meaningful as the sentence “Call me Ishmael.”

Just so, when the Gloucestershire heretic James Bainham waved Tyndale’s printed New Testament in the air in defiance of the public tribunal that condemned him to death in 1531, both his action and the artifact in his hand—indeed, the sentence of death as well—were dense and powerful texts. The example shows that interpretation of texts, in this case the New Testament, is situated in political relations that themselves exist by means of interpretation. The example, moreover, is an especially convenient one for me, because it comes from a work that can be regarded as the watershed of the New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, first published in 1980, and enjoying an ever-widening impact in departments of literary studies. You will see its relevance to the history of the book when I tell you that the chapter about Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament is titled “The Word of God in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Here is a sample of Greenblatt’s analysis:

Only those who had been brought up to think of the Bible as a Latin work could experience the full shock of the voice of God speaking to them in English from its pages. Add to this the threat of persecution, and the effect must have seemed overpowering, almost irresistible. This is surely one of the reasons why, during a brief period, Protestantism in England could survive and spread without any significant institutional framework, on the force of the word. When Tyndale writes of arming oneself with the syllables of Scripture or Bainham speaks of his fear that this word of

God—pointing to the book in his hand—would damn him, we must take them at very close to the literal meaning: the printed English New Testament is, above all, *a form of power*. It is invested with the ability to control, guide, discipline, console, exalt, and punish that the Church had arrogated itself for centuries. And lest this be though inflated rhetoric, let us recall that James Bainham simply could not live with the pain of what he took to be his betrayal of the book; he preferred death.

Bainham, we might say, was doing close reading. But he wasn't coming up with the same results as New Critics, because he wasn't in the same culture or political situation. Because Greenblatt takes that fact as the condition of all interpretation, he also doesn't regard his own examination of the history of printing as mere background. The New Historicism advances this sort of historical business as a normal way for literary critics to interpret texts. In the process, it advances this sort of critical interpretation as a normal way of doing history. The printed testament, Greenblatt suggests, was saturated with meaning, and the meaning it was saturated with was a complicated set of political relations and cultural motives. So its meaning, we might say, saturated not only what was recognized as its text, but also its existence as a book, its possession, the acts of printing it, reading it, pointing to it, suppressing it, and dying for it.

Greenblatt uses the phrase "cultural poetics" to describe what the New Historicism studies; and he means by it not only that poetics are cultural but also that culture is at every point a dense fabric of symbolic practice and interpretation. Implicit, then, in the New Historicist scholarship is a very powerful challenge for the history of the book. Many of the dominant models for the history of the book—such as the broadly McLuhanite school that includes Walter Ong, Jack Goody, Elizabeth Eisenstein, and the literary critic Alvin Kernan—attempt to demonstrate that print has not only a nature and a meaning but also a causative force in human affairs that is not dependent on local considerations of culture and purpose. Print technology, for example, is seen as inherently rationalizing and democratizing. A New Historicist would regard this approach to print as an attempt to bypass the dimensions of culture and politics, without which no printed object could even be perceived, much less used or produced. So while print has meant many things and done many things, it can have no transcendental character or force. I don't intend to explore this theoretical problem today, but I do want to note that the new methods in literary studies contain revisionary potential for the history of the book, and are thus not merely parasitic upon it.

As had been the case with the philological criticism following genteel criticism, the New Historicism opens up an enormous range for interpretation beyond the canonized authors. And as I've been suggesting, the opening of that range has to do largely with our picture of interpretation and its relation to culture. But the move beyond close reading is also a move beyond the canonized authors, and we thus have to consider a second kind of critique against

the New Criticism, this time of its theory of value. You will remember that, since the central assumption of New Critical close reading is that you can apprehend a text without the mediation of presuppositions and social relations, it necessarily follows that the qualities and values of literature are timeless and universal. Independently of the critique of the premise, the conclusion has been coming under widespread skepticism. People noticed a basic problem: although the qualities and values of literature were said to be timeless and universal, the literary canon somehow happened to be white, male, Western, and in the case of American literature, New England middle-class. How had this happened?

After some very problematic efforts to locate black, female, or working-class writers whose works exhibited the timeless and universal values, critics began to realize that the problem was that assumption about value. In a landmark theoretical essay called "Contingencies of Value," Barbara Herrnstein Smith demonstrated that value, like meaning, depends on situations of use, social relations, cultural structures of significance, and the like. Estimable cultures across the world, she reminded us, have well-developed systems of value and meaning that have no place whatsoever for the categories assumed by New Criticism to be universal. For these peoples, she writes, "other verbal artifacts (not necessarily 'works of literature' or even 'texts') and other objects and events (not necessarily 'works of art' or even artifacts) have performed and do perform . . . the various functions that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare perform for us." The literary canon, it follows, is the product not of essential, natural, transcendental values, but of a historically specific cultural tradition. Its values are indeed intrinsic to its texts, but only when they are read within the appropriate cultural setting.

Like the critique of meaning, the critique of value has some radical implications for how we regard the symbolic character of human relations. It cuts against the familiar distinction between rhetoric and reality because, in Smith's words,

what we speak of as a subject's "needs," "interests," and "purposes" are not only always changing (and it may be noted here that a subject's "self"—or that on behalf of which s/he may be said to act with "self-interest"—is also variable, being multiply reconstituted in terms of different roles and relationships), but they are also not altogether independent of or prior to the entities that satisfy or implement them; that is, entities also produce the needs and interests they satisfy and evoke the purposes they implement. (p. 13)

If we take the example of the gothic novel, Smith's argument would be that the production and consumption of gothic novels is also part of the production of the subjects whose desires will be met—both satisfied and encountered—in the gothic narratives. The history of books is the history of subjects.

Two main kinds of project have followed from the critique of literary value. First, critics have begun the

attempt to reconstruct other cultural determinations of value: lost traditions, or marginalized traditions, or other social perspectives on the existing canon. This effort has given new prominence to comparative literary studies influenced by anthropological methods, but it has also given birth to reconstructions of other contexts of value within our own society's history. And nobody has shown this better than a new generation of feminist critics, such as Janice Radway, Lynn Wardley, Amy Kaplan, Lauren Berlant, Tania Modleski, Cathy Davidson, and Gillian Brown, to name only a few who are working in American literature. In various ways, these critics are developing an understanding of women's uses for texts, and for the cultural valuations implicit in those uses.

A second, related project has been to analyze the making of our canonical tradition given our new realization that it did not naturally make itself. Recall, for example, that anthology of American literature that consisted of eight major authors; all eight were white middle-class men. What is the history behind the promotion of eight white middle-class males to universal status? How did these eight get institutionalized? One recent study of the question can be found in Richard Brodhead's new book, *The School of Hawthorne*, in which he considers such questions as the nineteenth-century publishing industry, Hawthorne's relation to his publisher and to other writers. The subject opens narratives of American literary history completely different from that found in the Norton anthology headnotes. To a large nineteenth-century audience, for example, Hawthorne was not primarily the author of "Rappacini's Daughter" but rather of "A Rill from the Town Pump." This work, which first appeared anonymously and was believed to have been written by a woman, was probably the most anthologized piece of American fiction in the nineteenth century. Odds are that you have never heard of it. That's because it was written in the sentimental mode of the women's novel, and because subsequently Hawthorne, Fields, and well-connected followers like James succeeded in recharacterizing Hawthorne as an author. (In one letter to Hawthorne, Fields declared his intentions of "manufacturing you into a personage.")

In conceiving of the study of the institutionalization of Hawthorne, Brodhead is following Jane Tompkins's lively and controversial book, *Sensational Designs*. Tompkins's book is a convenient example not only because it has been hotly debated and broadly influential, but also because it combines the two projects that stem from the critique of value. In one chapter, "Masterpiece Theater: The Making of Hawthorne's Reputation," she considers the affiliations in the publishing, reviewing, and educational worlds that have winnowed, interpreted, and preserved Hawthorne's work as canonical. At the same time, in chapters on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and on Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World*, Tompkins argues that these books, far from being the drivel Hawthorne declared

them to be, were, in the cultural world of their female readership, valuable texts. The structures of meaning that make these novels worthwhile, in Tompkins's view, have not been apparent to the male institutions of literary criticism because they were structures of meaning specific to the cultural position of mid-nineteenth-century evangelical women.

The reevaluation of the sentimental women's novel by Tompkins and others has created several kinds of interest in the history of the book. First of all, the movement has returned to our attention potentially any cultural discourse, even—unthinkably enough—bestsellers. Janice Radway, for example, has written a lengthy and influential study of Harlequin romances. Second, since this branch of feminist criticism reappraises the sentimental women's novel by considering its cultural context, ostensibly nonliterary discourses become relevant and are seen to be informed by the same symbolic structures of value. In the case of Tompkins's book, for example, *The Wide, Wide World* is seen as exhibiting the same patterns of significance and value, even the same narratives and tropes, as the evangelical Protestant tracts of the American Tract Society, which are being catalogued even as we speak by the Antiquarian Society's Laura Wasowicz. The techniques of reading that are appropriate to Warner's novel and that make it valuable, says Tompkins, are also appropriate to these tracts and make them objects of value and significance. Now the tracts were made, in huge numbers, for a highly organized kind of distribution, which, I'm happy to learn, has been studied by David Nord. Tompkins suggests that, as textual objects, the tracts and their system of distribution articulated the evangelical community that would disseminate them. Many of the tracts, moreover, both represent the community of women that will distribute them and represent the relation between that evangelical community and the society as a whole. The printing of those tracts, their subsidization, reading, and distribution, can thus be seen as a form of political organization. (Recall that Greenblatt has made a similar point about the printed New Testament, that Raymond Williams has argued it for newspapers and Benedict Anderson for novels in general.) And given Tompkins's reading of the sentimental novel, we can see that the tracts are closely related to the popular novel, not only because much of the same language and figurative rhetoric carries over from one discourse to the other, but more importantly because both were ways of articulating a world for Protestant women.

Readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, will no doubt recall the death scene of Little Eva. In the past, when a literary critic has wanted to show that Stowe's novel was maudlin trash, he had only to cite the formulaic sentimentalism of that scene. And it is, in a sense, formulaic, because the scene of the angelic dying child can be found in many of the American Tract Society's publications, and in many of the earlier sentimental novels. But

all literature depends on generic conventions for intelligibility, and indeed perception itself depends on convention. Tompkins produces an 1829 report written by some New York City Tract Society fieldworkers following their visit to a house. What they report having seen is nothing less than a version of the death scene of Little Eva. They use the same language and the same narrative that Stowe and other sentimental novelists would later use, though they were not writing fiction so much as reporting the reality of their perceptions.

The real charge against novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is that of sentimentalism: the reader is expected to weep. Consider the following passage, which occurs just after Eliza and her child have escaped across the ice floes and sought shelter in the kitchen of Senator Bird:

His wife [Mrs. Bird, one of whose children has died not long before] opened the little bed-room door adjoining her room, and, taking the candle, set it down on the top of a bureau there; then from a small recess she took a key, and put it thoughtfully in the lock of a drawer, and made a sudden pause, while two boys, who, boy like, had followed close on her heels, stood looking, with silent, significant glances, at their mother. And oh! mother that reads this, has there never been in your house a drawer, or a closet, the opening of which has been to you like the opening again of a little grave? Ah! happy mother that you are, if it has not been so.

To the traditional male critic, little more need be said; that isn't how literature works. But sympathetic weeping is a more complicated and powerful cultural act than the traditional view allows. Talk about overdetermination—the tear welling up in the female reader's eye is simultaneously 1) an articulation of the feminine in the cultural system of mid-nineteenth-century America, 2) an articulation of suffering, including but not limited to the suffering of women in patriarchy, 3) an expression of the contradictions of maternity in a culture that was characterized both by affective familial relations and by high infant mortality, 4) an invocation of a Christian rhetoric of redemption, 5) the paradigmatic form of political relation in a powerful republican/liberal tradition exemplified by Rousseau, popularized in America, paradoxically, by the discourse against novel-reading, and 6) a relation of reader to text. So a woman who weeps over her novel is, by that very act which is determined for her as involuntary, linking her identity as a woman with her experience of suffering in a redemptive social vision built into the consumption of print. Particular narratives, such as that of Little Eva's death, organize, occasion, and add further dimensions of meaning to the tears shed upon their pages.

In this case, for example, Stowe's text thematizes the gender coding of its sentimentalism with the detail of the onlooking "boy like" boys (the chapter in which the passage occurs is headed, "In which it appears that a Senator is but a man"). Further, the narrative situation, in which Mrs. Bird is using the clothes of her dead child to clothe Eliza's living child, dramatically links the interior suffering of Mrs. Bird with a norm of collective care. The great

power of Stowe's novel rests in part on her continually renewed effort to articulate, in this way, the private sympathetic relation of reader to sentimental text with a prescriptive norm about social relations. Mrs. Bird is already on her way to provide material care when the narrative provides its occasion for private sympathy. That is why the reference to the reader as a mother is important; this kind of gendered allusion to readers is not unusual in the women's novel. In Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*, for example, we read: "Ruth broke the seal of the second letter. It was in a delicate, beautiful, female hand; just such a one as you, dear Reader, might trace, whose sweet, soft eyes, and long, drooping tresses, are now bending over this page." Through such scenes and such allusions, readers of these novels not only learned to imagine themselves and their interior experience in the terms of the novel's discourse, but also learned to imagine other readers in relation to themselves.

We could note other important details of the passage that invest sympathetic reading with local meaning. The whole drama, for example, revolves around a symbolic organization of space as an experience of privacy. It thus calls on a semiotic of the closet which simultaneously expresses the privacy of reading, the space of nineteenth-century women's labor, and the power of religion. Tompkins makes much of the last point, though she does not discuss this passage. She quotes the directions of the New York City Tract Society to its tract visitors in 1829: "Be much in prayer. Endeavor to feel habitually and deeply that all your efforts will be in vain unless accompanied by the Holy Ghost. And this blessing you can expect only in answer to prayer. Pray, therefore, without ceasing. Go from your closet to your work and from your work return again to your closet."

Each of these novels, each of these scenes adds to a collective self-representation of its female readership that is, in the deepest sense, political, even when it is not self-consciously so. For that reason, all the exultation that Robert Darnton displays over the inky pressman's thumbprint in the *Encyclopedie* could not match my exultation if I could find a salty tear stain in a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

To put the point differently, I could say that the history of the book, or the history of American literature, needs to consider the meaning of closets, the politics of weeping, and the history of sympathy. Obviously, any historian of American literature who considered such things would be working with a sense of the term "literature" that is very different from the one that organizes most English department curricula. But it has been remarked in many quarters, especially in Gerald Graff's incisive new book on literary study in America, that the force of change in English departments is leading toward the historical study of culture and an appropriately broad sense of literature. It would not be the first time that teachers of literature considered their duties so broadly. Nor would it



be the first time that their self-understanding led them to bibliographic scholarship, though it is ironic that such a turn of events should come now, when nearly every graduate program in English has recently dropped its required course in bibliographic method. (That, however, is a different subject, because more ironically still, the greatest investment in bibliographic scholarship came in the CEAA's effort to purify texts of the major authors for their New Critical close reading.)

It might be noted that "literature," like "culture," contains an important ambiguity. Literature is at once the world of letters and a special body of texts, just as culture denotes both the symbolic order of any society and a distinctive canonical tradition in Western philosophy and art. In the newer kinds of work, these ambiguities are developed and clarified: people commonly separate the two meanings by referring either to discourses, when they intend the general context of communication in society, or to traditions, when they intend the construction of value in a culture's self-representation.

It would be a mistake to conclude from the breadth of the newer conception of literary studies that critics are lapsing either into mere fact-gathering or into a shapeless relativism. Given the New Historicism's premium on interpretation, the former should be obvious. The critique of value, however, has occasioned the charge of valueless relativism from some quarters, though I think this represents a misunderstanding. The objection is familiar enough: people who spend so much attention on the consumption of sentimental novels are neglecting the great works, and are contributing to the failure of American universities to cultivate values. There are several reasons why I do not think this objection will finally have much force with literary critics. First, the critique of value itself accounts for the continuing importance of the canonical writers. The canon articulates the same culture that conditions ourselves as subjects. It is to be expected that we will continue to find valuable expression and satisfaction there. As for the so-called failure to cultivate values, the problem is who is going to get to say which values those are. We have a complex culture with conflicting values, and there is little use pretending that a single canonical tradition speaks for everybody.

But an even more powerful answer can be given to the objection of relativism, and one that says a great deal about emerging work in literary studies. What the traditionalist's objection misses is that the critical attempt to reconstruct alternative systems of value itself expresses a value. It is not yet clearly understood by the profession, and my saying this is as much a plea as an observation, but I'll say it in any case: the project of interpretively reconstructing the conflicts within the cultural tradition assumes a norm of democracy in a society of difference. Social difference, that is to say, can be a determinant of value rather than something to be covered over in the clarification of a single cultural tradition. What is emerging is a

literary criticism that assumes the relevance of social difference in the forming of discourses and traditions and sees its own task not as the eradication of such difference, but as the offering of the critical and utopian perspectives on society which are generated by its different groups.

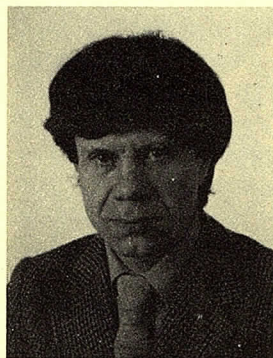
In any event, the turn from an abstractly conceived literature to a history of multiple discourses and traditions has given literary studies a vital perspective on the history of the book. No longer assuming the natural character of the archive it studies, literary criticism turns toward the position of various discourses in society, and toward the reproduction and transmission of the archive of cultural tradition. And because it regards traditions as multiple and socially constructed, it does not regard the history of the book as an accident befalling its canon. It is thus in principle committed to examine commodity markets, pricing strategies, binding, patterns of ephemerality and inheritance, readerships, library-building, and other social determinations of cultural heritage. By the same token, it is in the position to say to the history of the book that, for example, allusion is a way of constructing the archive of valued tradition, and thus belongs to the province of the history of the book every bit as much as does reprinting, or the recording of books in wills. Indeed, the history of literary study, like the history of the category of the literary to which it is related, is itself part of the history of the book, because the attribution of meaning and value to texts represents institutional and social struggles over how cultural tradition will be defined and reproduced. Criticism, among other discourses of meaning and value, shapes not only what will be reprinted, anthologized, and taught, but also how people will read the resulting heritage. Doing the history of the book, therefore, is a kind of critical self-reflection for literary criticism. It is a way of analyzing the very struggles for public representation and cultural tradition in which literary criticism now understands itself to be engaged.

Michael Warner, Northwestern University

#### WORKS DISCUSSED

- Brodhead, Richard. *The School of Hawthorne*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Graff, Gerald. *Professing Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. "Contingencies of Value." *Critical Inquiry* 10 (September, 1983): 1-35.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

## Chartier to Give Wiggins Lecture



Roger Chartier, a leading French historian of the book, will deliver the Society's 1987 James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture on Wednesday, September 30. Chartier's topic will be "Frenchness in the History of the Book: From the History of Publishing to the History of Reading."

The lecture will be given at 5 p.m. in Antiquarian Hall. The lecture is open to the public free of charge. A dinner, costing \$18.50, will follow. Those wishing to reserve places at dinner should send payment to Ann-Cathrine Rapp at AAS, 185 Salisbury St., Worcester, MA 01609 by Friday, September 25.

Chartier is director of the Centre de Recherches Historiques in l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He is, with Henri-Jean Martin, the co-editor of the multivolume *l'Histoire de l'Édition Française* and has published widely elsewhere in the history of the book and in other aspects of social and cultural history. He is a

member of the Advisory Board of the Society's Program in the History of the Book in American Culture and was a contributor to *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book: America, 1639-1876*, which the Society published in 1987. He has studied, taught, and lectured frequently at universities and research institutions on this side of the Atlantic, including the Davis Center at Princeton, the University of Montreal, the Newberry Library, Yale, and the University of California, Berkeley.

### *Third Summer Seminar Is Scheduled*

The Society plans to hold the third Summer Seminar in the History of the Book in American Culture June 18-28, 1988. David Hall will be seminar leader. He is a professor of history at Boston University and chairman of the Society's Program in the History of the Book in American Culture. He will be assisted by various visiting faculty, including AAS staff members. Full details on the seminar's theme and faculty will appear in these pages in November.

Previous seminars were held in 1985 and 1986, both under the leadership of the late Stephen Botein. The recent conference on teaching the history of the book substituted for the summer seminar in 1987.

Like the earlier seminars, this is intended for an interdisciplinary approach to the history of the book in American culture.

AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY  
185 SALISBURY STREET  
WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS 01609-1634

*Address correction requested.*

---

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
PERMIT NO. 416  
WORCESTER, MASS. 01609

---

