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Introduction to *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* by Margaret Cohen

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INTRODUCTION

Reconstructing the Literary Field

OUT OF THE CENTURY'S CHAOS

Before 1830, the novel in France was “*pleasant entertainment for lazy gentlefolk [honnêtes paresseux]*,” to cite the noted critic, Charles-Marie de Féletz, himself quoting a celebrated seventeenth-century formulation.¹ After 1830, the genre became an authoritative form of social and cultural analysis imbued with the highest literary prestige.² “Racine and the coffee house are outmoded; asphalt and pavement will pass from fashion; but the novel will remain,” declared a reviewer in 1838 impressed with the novel’s new prominence, and history has vindicated his literary judgment.³ Jules Michelet testified to the novel’s increased authority in depicting social relations when he considered how to portray the class that had emerged as a political force with the Revolution in *Le Peuple* (1846). Dismissing statistical analyses and economic histories for their “partial and artificial results,” Michelet turned rather to “writers, artists”: the leading French novelists whose powerful works, in his estimation, now shaped international as well as national perceptions of French society.⁴

Throughout the twentieth century, the French novel’s transformation from polite entertainment into ambitious social analysis has been equated with the realist codes that have played such a vital role in French literature and culture as well as in literature and culture throughout the world. It has also been equated with two great authors, Balzac and Stendhal, inventing their brilliant poetics in a heroic struggle to make sense of the economic, social, and political upheavals resulting from the French Revo-

¹ Charles-Marie de Féletz, “*Eugène de Rothelin*,” in *Mélanges de philosophie, d’histoire et de littérature*, 6:138. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. The phrase is from Pierre-Daniel Huet’s *Traité de l’origine des romans* (1669). Féletz’s review was first published after *Eugène de Rothelin* (1808) appeared. It was then republished in the six-volume *Mélanges*, which commemorated Féletz’s election to the Académie Française.

² For details on the novel’s transvaluation in France around 1830, see Erich Köhler, “Gattungssystem und Gesellschaftssystem,” in *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte*, no. 1 (1977); Karlheinz Biermann’s *Literarische-politische Avant-garde in Frankreich*; and Margaret Iknayan’s *The Idea of the Novel in France*.

³ Emile Pages, “Bulletin bibliographique.”

⁴ Jules Michelet, *Le Peuple*, 60.

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lution. “Balzac dragged a world out of the century’s chaos,” asserted Heinrich Mann in an extreme version of a mythic narrative that has informed studies of realism attentive to the material factors shaping literary texts from Lukács and Auerbach on.⁵

When Balzac described these factors from the vantage point of his own present, however, he told a less heroic tale. “You will see that men, passions, and needs are at work underneath all these beautiful imaginary things. You will inevitably get mixed up in horrible struggles pitting work against work, man against man, faction against faction,” Lousteau warns Lucien concerning the competition shaping literary creation when *Illusions perdues* depicts the underside of literary history.⁶ Let Lousteau’s warning serve as epigraph for the revisionary narrative offered here. This study asks how the modern novel in France took shape in response to the local conflicts of literary production as well as sweeping social transformation, returning Balzac and Stendhal to the literary contexts of their time.

My attention to the *intraliterary* dynamics shaping arguably the most influential novelistic codes ever invented goes beyond the worthy imperative to take account of the terms a historical moment uses to represent itself. When Balzac relates literature to the “horrible struggles” of literary production, he also, I think, offers a promising solution to an underdiscussed but crucial question confronting contemporary literary studies. This question is how to write literary history in the wake of poststructuralism. From its inception, poststructural theory has taken shape as an attack on traditional literary history, thoroughly discrediting its organizing concepts.⁷ At the same time, however, the contours of a new literary history have remained surprisingly unexplored within the poststructural paradigm, where literary critics interested in history have focused on general questions concerning the relation between history and literature rather than scrutinizing the history of literature *per se*.⁸

⁵ Heinrich Mann, *Flaubert und George Sand*, 5.

⁶ Honoré de Balzac, *Illusions perdues*, 270. Subsequent page references will appear parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight*, in particular the essay “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” as well as Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* and “What Is an Author?” are seminal poststructural texts that include a challenge to literary history in their attacks on humanism.

⁸ On the challenges confronting literary history in the wake of poststructuralism, see the essays collected in *The Uses of Literary History*, edited by Marshall Brown. Lawrence Lipking observes the recent critical turn from questions of literary history to questions concerning the relation of literature to history in his contribution to the volume. This turn is evident whether critics pursue the deconstructive interest in the philosophical interrelations between the categories of literature and history or the materialist interest in how literature partici-

Perhaps as a result, the most rigorous and influential poststructural analyses are sometimes haunted by the discredited categories of traditional literary history despite themselves. No body of work makes this more apparent than poststructural materialist analyses of the modern novel that date its flowering in France to “the first great realisms” of Balzac and sometimes Stendhal.⁹ In doing so, materialist critics not only periodize literary history in terms of the same masterpieces and canonized aesthetics sanctified by an earlier generation of critics, they leave unexamined the notion of the masterpiece itself. Where these notions figure, other discredited notions have not been entirely left behind. If we accept literary history as a collection of masterpieces, the assumption follows that literature itself flows through “homogeneous, empty time,” in contrast to the conflictual process materialism understands as characterizing history on the level of the whole social formation.¹⁰ And if we unquestioningly equate realism with the modern novel, we give the form a retrospective teleology, perpetuating a narrative of literary history as progress.

As such blind spots illustrate, the last residues of traditional literary history are in how critics conceptualize the literary aspects to literary texts. To rethink these aspects in a fashion doing justice to the materialist strain of poststructuralism, my study proposes that we may well heed *Illusions perdues*, understanding literature as a web of social relations made up of formal and informal institutions ranging from academies and publishing houses to avant-garde movements and literary genres. I revisit the emergence of realism in France to ask, specifically, how realist codes were shaped by the novelistic contexts in which they appeared. Did Balzac and Stendhal in fact invent realism in literary isolation, or were realist poetics responding to other contemporary novels and novelists along with the century’s chaos? To answer the question, it is necessary to embed the foundational realist works in the landscape of the French novel during the first decades of the nineteenth century. This landscape must be reconstructed, for the triumph of realism has relegated it to all but complete oblivion.¹¹

The Sentimental Education of the Novel is thus a literary history written from the archive. Archive, first of all, in the sense of the dusty documents neglected in libraries. The practices shaping the genesis of French

pates in history conceptualized as transformations on the level of the whole social formation.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 104.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 261.

¹¹ Only a handful of specialists remember anything more about these “lean years” for the genre than a few exceptional works by Chateaubriand, Constant, and Staël, as well as some historical novels from the late 1820s. I take the phrase “lean years” from Margaret Iknayan’s *The Idea of the Novel in France*, which evinces what continues to be the dominant view of the state of the French novel between the Revolution and realism. See Iknayan, 138.

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realism are in novels which had to be remembered and then located before they could even be read. And archive as Foucault defined the term seeking to direct historical inquiry away from individual works to the discursive structures that support them, although I am interested in a significantly different archive from the critics who have given this notion a defining role in North American literary studies of the past twenty years. As new historicism illustrates, the archive has overwhelmingly been equated with non-literary discourses traversing the social formation. The archive is, however, not synonymous with the non-literary. Literature has an archive of its own. The books we now remember are only a fraction of the literary past, as Franco Moretti observes in recent important work on how the literary archive might provide crucial raw material for the renewal of literary history. Literary studies has much to learn from the shift that occurred in the discipline of history from a historiography of exceptions to a historiography of norms, dominated by conventions, “repetitive, slow—boring, even. . . . But then, are we so sure that boredom is boring?”¹²

From my archaeology, Balzac and Stendhal will emerge as literary producers among other producers, seeking a niche in a generic market promising both economic and cultural return. We will see that realist novels were not unequivocally celebrated masterpieces in their own time nor was the realist aesthetic the inevitable teleology of the modern novel when it first appeared. Rather, Balzac and Stendhal made bids for their market shares in a hostile takeover of the dominant practice of the novel when both started writing: sentimental works by women writers. And they competed with writers who challenged the prestige of sentimentality using other codes that contemporaries found equally if not more compelling.

Modeling literature as conflictual social production, my study takes shape in a burgeoning field at the intersection of materialist—in particular feminist—literary history, the history of the book, and a sociology of cultural institutions. These methodologies are completely revising how we understand the historicity of the literary artifact, although their transdisciplinary coherence has yet to be articulated in sustained theoretical form. To conceptualize the literary struggles shaping textual codes, I make use, notably, of Pierre Bourdieu’s theorization of literature in the spirit of Balzac, even if Bourdieu does not acknowledge how much he learned from *Illusions perdues*.¹³

¹² Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, 150.

¹³ Bourdieu’s *The Rules of Art* is so useful for this study, I am suggesting, because its theoretical model is in fact a historical description of the literary moment under consideration here. It remains an open question how Bourdieu’s model applies to the institution of literature as it is configured in other places and times. Would there be, for example, the same

GENRE IS A SOCIAL RELATION

Sentimentality's powerful role in shaping the subsequent history of the French novel bears out a celebrated insight of Marx foundational for Bourdieu. While authors make poetics, they do not make them just as they please. Rather, they make them in relation to the established discourses in which they seek to intervene—in the case of the struggles described here, the significant positions defining the novel. During the first half of the nineteenth century, these positions were differentiated in generic terms. My project to excavate the forgotten poetic struggles shaping the emergence of realism thus engages the paradigm, or rather, the problem, of genre.

The notion of genre is, as Jameson observes, “thoroughly discredited by modern literary theory” because it has historically been delineated with a complete lack of critical rigor.³⁹ Genre would, moreover, seem to have been dealt the coup de grâce by the deconstructive strain of poststructuralism, with its negative notion of textuality. From the deconstructive perspective, to align the novels of Balzac, Stendhal, or Flaubert with the codes of realism is to miss what is most interesting about them, which is how they undermine convention, how they question and subvert the realist representations they simultaneously offer. Deconstructive theory has also

La Harpe, Barbier and Desessarts put the novel at the bottom of the generic hierarchy, but they agree on little else. Notably, they assign women writers a prominent role in the history of the form, including thirty-nine female novelists and only nineteen male novelists in roughly the same page ratio. The female novelists they single out are la Roche-Guilhem, Villedieu, Lafayette, d'Aulnoy, Gomez, La Force, Bernard, Murat, l'Héritier, Durand, Fontaines, le Marchand, Lussan, Tencin, Graffigny, Villeneuve, Lintot, Madame le Prince de Beaumont, Robert, d'Arconville, Elie de Beaumont, Riccoboni, Puisieux, Fagnan, Fauques, Saint-Phalier, Belot, Benoist, Saint-Aubin, la Guesnerie, Saint-Chamond, Brohon, Sommerey, Beauharnais, Genlis, Cottin, Souza, and Montolieu. Their list of male novelists consists of Le Vayer de Boutigny, Boursault, Prévost, Le Sage, Hamilton, Marivaux, Crébillon fils, Duclos, Saint-Foix, Diderot, Voltaire, J.-J. Rousseau, Restif de la Bretonne, de la Clos, D'Arnaud, Montjoie, Pigault-le-Brun, Ducray-Duminil, and Fiévée.

Pierre Augustin Eusèbe Girault de Saint-Fargeau's *Revue des romans*, subtitled *Recueil d'analyses raisonnées des productions remarquables des plus célèbres romanciers français et étrangers contenant 1100 analyses raisonnées, faisant connaître avec assez d'étendue pour en donner une idée exacte, le sujet, les personnages, l'intrigue et le dénouement de chaque roman* [Collection of critical analyses of remarkable productions of the most famous French and foreign novelists containing eleven hundred critical analyses, which explain the subject, characters, plot, and denouement of each novel in enough detail to give an exact idea of it], suggests that the worldly anthology was alive and well as late as 1839. Offering to guide an adult public reading for self-improvement and pleasure, the *Revue des romans* also continues the worldly tradition in valuing highly women's contribution to the novel.

³⁹ Jean-Marie Schaeffer offers a detailed critique of traditional genre theory in *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?*

usefully dismantled the project of classification underwriting traditional articulations of genre.⁴⁰

It would nonetheless be a great loss to throw out genre because traditional literary history has failed to do it justice. The concept may reveal nothing about textuality, but it reveals much about literature as a social practice, for genre is a social relation, or, as Jameson puts it, a social contract.⁴¹ The poetic record of the writer's and reader's expectations shaping a text, generic conventions convey crucial information about a text's position within the literary exchanges of its time and illuminate how it engages its audience. Attention to genre thus counteracts a vulgar sociology of literature that identifies a text's social dimension on the level of content as well as complicating the Foucauldian equation of a text's social significance with its participation in nonliterary discourses. As Jameson observes, the problem of genre "has in fact always entertained a privileged relationship with historical materialism," mediating between individual works and "the evolution of social life."⁴²

In approaching genre as a social relation, moreover, we escape from the opposition between individual text and class that has troubled genre theory from its classical inception.⁴³ To use Bourdieu's terms, genre is a position. Genre designates the fact that writers share a common set of codes when they respond to a space of possibles, a horizon formed by the literary conventions and constraints binding any writer at a particular state of the field. Or better, when they resolve the space of possibles, for this space of possibles is dynamic, taking the form of "problems to resolve, stylistic or thematic possibilities to exploit, contradictions to overcome, even revolutionary ruptures to effect"; it constitutes a literary problematic that interacts with factors on the level of the whole social formation to shape textual poetics.⁴⁴ When recast as a position, genre, or, in the case of the positions at issue in this study, subgenre, becomes constitutively intertextual as well as intergeneric: a systemic, synchronic relation.⁴⁵ The

⁴⁰ See, for example, the essays collected in *Glyph* no. 7 (1980), notably Jacques Derrida's "La Loi du genre."

⁴¹ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 106.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴³ On the problems with this opposition, see Derrida's "La Loi du genre," as well as Schaeffer's *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?*

⁴⁴ Bourdieu, *Rules*, 235. Bourdieu writes, "the interplay of homologies between the literary field and the field of power or the social field in its entirety means that most literary strategies are overdetermined and a number of 'choices' hit two targets at once, aesthetic and political, internal and external" (205). Bourdieu employs the term "choice" in structuralist fashion: to describe a member of a community's selection of one possibility from among a set of possibilities.

⁴⁵ When Jonathan Arac elaborates the project of literary history in the wake of poststructuralism, he suggests taking "as the fundamental unit of intelligibility not the author but

codes that make up a subgenre not only have an internal coherence as the resolution of a problematic but also take on their identity relationally, against other important resolutions of the problematic.

Once genre is viewed as a position, differences among individual examples of the genre become important when a text transgresses its dominant (in the structuralist sense) generic horizon. In violating the codes that are its point of departure, it engages in what Bourdieu calls position-taking, as its author solicits the reader against rather than with an established practice imbued with symbolic prestige and/or market appeal. As Bourdieu points out, individual position-takings cohere into positions when they become recognized by their contemporaries; when the very use of them becomes symbolically and/or economically freighted. Evidence for a position is primarily textual and established through analysis: proof of its existence is that the critic finds a number of texts sharing a set of codes. The opinions of contemporary writers and readers help illuminate the relevant distinctions among practices, the practices' social and aesthetic significance, and their literary and cultural status.⁴⁶ These opinions are, however, not scientific descriptions but rather themselves part of the evidence to be interpreted.

The Sentimental Education of the Novel thus uses realism, that loose baggy monster, in local fashion: to identify the position-taking of several writers around 1830 quickly cohering into a position, a symbolically charged set of codes responding to a problematic that defines a particular moment in the novel. As I have mentioned, this problematic involves the demise of the sentimental subgenre dominating the novel in the first part of the century as a result of specifically literary, as well as extraliterary, transformations surrounding the July Revolution. Realist codes are one powerful way writers seek to renew the French novel starting in 1830. The sentimental social novel is the primary alternative solution writers employ throughout the 1830s and 1840s.

the generic system." See Arac, "What is the History of Literature?" 26. Genre is, however, only relevant to the extent that it orients writers' practices in their own present, as it does in the literary historical moments I am describing. In a field where genre is an important literary institution, it can, moreover, orient practices which do not define themselves in generic terms. Thus, no position makes the importance of genre in the first decades of the nineteenth century more evident than Romanticism, for if genre were not so powerful, the Romantics would not find it so definitional to wage a full-scale war on the concept.

⁴⁶ When Bourdieu addresses the question of intentionality, he states, "It suffices to read literary memoirs, correspondence, personal diaries and perhaps especially the explicit position-takings on the literary world as such . . . in order to be convinced that . . . self-awareness, always partial, is yet again a matter of position and trajectory within the field, and that it thus varies according to agents and historical periods" Bourdieu, *Rules*, 272.

If Bourdieu situates a position at the intersection of intra- as well as extraliterary problems and contradictions, he leaves the dynamics of its problem-solving vague. In the case of a position that is a subgenre, we can clarify the extraliterary dimension to these dynamics with the help of materialist critics redeeming genre from its traditional abuse. In such powerful accounts as Jameson on romance, Moretti on the bildungsroman, and Nancy Armstrong on the domestic novel, generic codes give us crucial information about a text's ideological appeal. In Jameson's Althusserian formulation, romance originates as "an imaginary 'solution' to" a "real contradiction" fissuring the values of the feudal nobility.⁴⁷ For Moretti, the classical bildungsroman resolves a basic tension in modern liberal-democratic society between the primacy of individuality and the processes of normalization essential for society to function smoothly.⁴⁸ In related fashion, Armstrong sees domestic fiction as offering an ideal of middle-class love and gender difference that "creates personal fulfillment where there had been internal conflict and social unity where there had been competing class interests."⁴⁹ If we fuse the materialist model with Bourdieu, a subgenre becomes a set of poetic strategies that offer a persuasive fictional solution to urgent contemporary social contradiction even as they resolve a problematic specific to the literary field.

When Jameson, Moretti, and Armstrong define genre, they are interested in the development of their respective forms. The diachronic dimension to the concept is preserved when it is identified as a position within a synchronic system. If a position is sufficiently compelling, it can survive and mutate across different states of the literary field, as the nineteenth-century history of realism well illustrates.

Bourdieu points out that there are two kinds of practices most important for writers as they craft their works: the dominant position(s) defining the problematic when they first start writing, and the other responses to this position that are a writer's greatest contemporary competition. *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* describes both kinds of positions in its excavation of forgotten generic forms. The first chapter traces the poetic and ideological coherence of early-nineteenth-century sentimentality, the most valued practice of the novel when Balzac and Stendhal entered the literary field. The next chapter reconfigures the emergence of realism as a displacement of sentimental codes. The book then excavates the sentimental social novel, which was the other important set of codes novelists elaborated to renew the novel contemporary with the

⁴⁷ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 118.

⁴⁸ See Moretti, *The Way of the World*.

⁴⁹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* 51.

emergence of realism. Each generic description is broken down into sections that generally correspond to the subgenre's defining codes.

My study concludes by addressing the remarkable intersection of generic position and subject position in the case of women renewing the French novel around 1830. Literary history offers few cases where gender and genre line up so neatly: why should Balzac and Stendhal's consoeurs have overwhelmingly steered clear of realism when it first emerged? In speculating on this question, I complicate the book's previously rather abstract approach to the writer as producer. Following Bourdieu, I suggest that writers use poetics which both befit and benefit the social determinants of their subject positions, in particular those determinants that affect their situation within the dynamics of literary production.⁵⁰

The final section sets itself a more speculative task than the preceding generic descriptions, for it seeks to explain what was not rather than excavating what was. I have accordingly framed it in more open-ended fashion, as a suggestive case study. To foreground the factors that may have made realism a compromised position for Balzac and Stendhal's consoeurs, I resurrect the literary career of a writer who used this term to diagnose the situation of the contemporary *femme auteur* more generally. Caroline Marbouty was initially a friend of Balzac, but her relations with him became strained after she published a sentimental social novel that he attacked in *La Muse du département*. Marbouty then riposted with the sentimental social novel, *Une Fausse Position*, which rewrote Balzac's account of the literary field in *Illusions perdues* from the perspective of the woman writer.

HORS D'USAGE

In excavating the imbricated battles around gender and genre that we now call the emergence of the modern French novel, this book works with literature that is out of circulation, *hors d'usage*, as the French national library puts it in giving one of the many reasons why a reader might be having difficulty obtaining the book she requested. Books *hors d'usage* are not really lost for a contemporary readership, at least they were not lost in the Bibliothèque Nationale, rue Richelieu, of the early 1990s. There, they simply required additional levels of scholarly justification be-

⁵⁰ As Bourdieu observes, "the strategies of agents and institutions engaged in literary or artistic struggles are not defined by a pure confrontation with pure possibles. Rather, they depend on the position these agents occupy in the structure of the field" (*Rules*, 206). As we will see, gender plays a defining role in how the woman writer at the time of Balzac negotiates the formal and informal institutions of the literary field.

cause their grimy yellow and blue paper covers disintegrated to the touch; books of such minimal interest over the years that no one had thought to keep them up, let alone read them.

But physical access is not the last nor certainly the least of the difficulties in working with literature *hors d'usage*. Defining an archive is, of course, no self-evident matter and demands the usual unquantifiable interaction of serendipity and sleuthing through which the critic stumbles across an unsolved scholarly question. Once one sits down to read the books, however, the problems have just begun. If my generic resurrections take the form of abstracted descriptions, these descriptions convey little of how illegible I initially found both sentimental and sentimental social novels when I approached them with realist expectations. Literature *hors d'usage* exposes the illusion that a close reader can generate the aesthetic logic of any text. Close reading, as it is generally practiced, depends on a naturalized set of aesthetic expectations derived precisely from a history of reading the works that have not fallen out of circulation.

The great challenge confronting any excavation is to denaturalize these expectations and take forgotten literature on its own terms. What are a work's distinctive poetics; what are these poetics' aesthetic logic and ideological force? Without understanding that forgotten works are shaped by a coherent, if now lost, aesthetic, one simply dismisses them as uninteresting or inferior in terms of the aesthetics that have won out. This mistake has been made, for example, by critics who have previously noticed early-nineteenth-century sentimentality, which was either denigrated because it was not realist or redeemed as realism despite itself.⁵¹

The key to a particular work's integrity is the contemporary problematic in which its poetics take shape. As Bourdieu observes, "any cultural producer is irremediably placed and dated in so far as he or she participates in the same *problematic* as the ensemble of his or her contemporaries."⁵² Defining the problematic unlocks a text's aesthetic and ideological stakes. Once we relate a text to a problematic, we can perceive its distinctive codes as solutions rather than as aberrations from our current aesthetic criteria.

To reconstruct the problematic from an exhaustive survey of everything being published at the time would, of course, be a hopeless task, even if the problematic covered only a small area of the literary field, as it does in this study concerned with transformations in the novel. But we can,

⁵¹ Maurice Bardèche's *Balzac romancier* exemplifies how critics have denigrated sentimentality for not being realist, although it also performs the invaluable work of keeping some memory of the subgenre alive. Joan Stewart's *Gynographs*, meanwhile, reads sentimentality as realism cramped by a stilted, artificial poetics.

⁵² Bourdieu, *Rules*, 236.

nonetheless, gain a purchase on it by resurrecting several of its key aspects. It is crucial to establish what other texts a forgotten text resembles. Does it belong to a position which was, as in the case of my study, a subgenre? If not, how does it diverge from the important positions of the time? Often, the position shaping the forgotten text will also have been forgotten, and it becomes necessary to read around in the archive, looking for other texts in the position starting from such untheorized resemblances as similar titles and shared thematic concerns.⁵³ Such reading is not yet close reading, for close reading depends on a sense of when and how a text both reproduces contemporary poetic norms and diverges from them. Rather, it is what Sharon Marcus describes as reading for patterns; it entails looking for repetition on the level of textual structures and developing a checklist of salient codes.⁵⁴

To isolate the coherence of a forgotten text, it is also useful to identify remembered positions and position-takings responding to the same problematic, even if the forgotten text differs from them substantially. The absence of description in sentimental social novels is striking, if initially puzzling, when contrasted with the extensive descriptions in the foundational realist works that are their contemporaries. Similarly, the repetitive sentimental social plot appears all the more distinct when contrasted with the suspenseful hermeneutics of the realist read. Because the remembered positions and position-takings have been theorized, they are useful in identifying not only the specificity of the forgotten practice but also its aesthetic and ideological stakes. As we will see, materialist analyses of the social contradictions shaping realism offer a shortcut to the extraliterary contradictions shaping sentimental social poetics.

One more important step in defining a problematic is to understand the dominant practices from the immediately prior literary historical moment that help set its terms. Because these practices were once dominant, they may, in addition, have the advantage of being remembered and analyzed today. Since I first excavated the sentimental social novel when I began my research, I needed to return back through two previous moments in the French novel to come upon such a practice. When I realized that early-nineteenth-century sentimentality set the terms of July Monarchy struggles to dominate the novel, I only got deeper into the archive, for it, too, had been completely forgotten. Once I started to conceptualize early-nine-

⁵³ Traditional literary histories can be useful at this stage of the process, for they sometimes mention forgotten works which they describe largely on the level of thematics. Surveys of literary production from the time can also serve as guides to the make-up of forgotten positions. In reconstructing the contours of early-nineteenth-century sentimentality, for example, I found booksellers' catalogs from the Restoration useful because they organized works in generic categories, even if these categories were completely unscientific.

⁵⁴ Sharon Marcus, "Disciplining Cultural Studies."

teenth-century sentimentality in relation to pre-Revolutionary sentimentality, however, I gained access to a rich critical bibliography which illuminated the coherence of later sentimental literature *hors d'usage*.

Another type of text useful for establishing the coherence of forgotten literature came from outside the problematic I was reconstructing. Both the literary and social issues at stake in forgotten works are sometimes preserved in contemporary aesthetic theory, even if this theory does not seem to address them directly. Hegel's account of classical tragedy, notably, will prove helpful in reconstructing the logic of sentimentality, since it describes a poetics responding to the same political impasses as sentimental texts. Like *Antigone* according to Hegel, sentimentality turns out to offer a tragic resolution to the problem of freedom in the wake of the French Revolution.

As should be clear from these numerous moves, reconstructing the coherence of even one forgotten aesthetic is a lengthy project. I return to the already mentioned problem of charting a course through the vast number of books out there once one ventures into literature *hors d'usage*. With each book requiring so much labor to be rendered legible, the literary archaeologist has to give up any ambition to a thorough reconstruction of the past. Delimiting the field of inquiry is as important as recovering forgotten material; indeed, without such delimitation, there would be no recovery.

It is thus imperative to pare questions in the archive down to the bare minimum. How this occurs will depend, of course, on the story being told. Since I have no axioms to offer about narrowing the field of inquiry, I will simply describe how I approached my own, in particular since the description will allow me to raise questions at the edges of my project that I was forced to bracket in order to start making sense of even a little segment of the great unread. When I first began this study, I focused all my reading on the two questions leading me into the archive: were there alternatives to realism when it emerged, and were there novelistic codes making sense of the Revolution before realism? I subsequently limited the first question to an excavation of realism's primary competition throughout the July Monarchy, once I saw that the sentimental social novel had the potential to clarify the hitherto unexplained problem of women's absence from the great nineteenth-century realist lineage.

In limiting my field of inquiry, however, I did not enumerate all the transformations in the novel we now remember as the emergence of realism in France. To do full justice to this literary historical paradigm shift, it would be important to embed realism in a generic mix including not only the sentimental position, which was the most respected form of the early-nineteenth-century novel, but also the comic novel (*le roman gai*) and an indigenous French Gothic (*le roman noir*), two early-nineteenth-

century positions with great popular appeal. The subgeneric system began to shift when Scott was imported around 1820. His novels, initially popular successes, then received critical acclaim, and the favorable reception of Manzoni's *The Betrothed* increased the historical novel's prestige. The importance of the foreign historical novel in turn sparked a short-lived French historical novel in the late 1820s informed by Manzoni and Scott as well as Cooper, who was considered Scott's American imitator, along with the other two early-nineteenth-century positions coexisting with sentimentality, the *roman noir* and the *roman gai*.⁵⁵ This indigenous historical novel inaugurated French writers' serious challenges to the domination of the sentimental form. It is indicative of the struggles I described that Balzac used historical codes when he first sought to leave his mark on the novel with *Les Chouans* (1829).

Following 1830, realism and the sentimental social novel quickly supplanted the historical novel as the most persuasive ways to renew the genre, although realist poetics certainly absorbed key historical codes, as critics have noted from Lukács on.⁵⁶ The historical novel also made its own brief appearance in the competition for how the novel should assert its new public authority in the wake of July 1830, but declined in prestige after reaching its apogee with Hugo's 1831 *Notre-Dame de Paris*.⁵⁷

With the historical novel relegated to a subordinate status, realism and the sentimental social novel reigned as the most valued practices of the novel during the remainder of the July Monarchy. A full account of their reign would discuss contemporary challenges to both practices, notably the art for art's sake position exemplified by Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. It would, in addition, describe how this reign was complicated when the subgeneric system started to shift once more in the 1840s. Now the destabilizing impetus came from below. It took the form of that tremendously popular subgenre somewhat imprecisely called the *roman feuilleton* (many kinds of novels were published in *feuilleton* format, not just the *roman feuilleton*), exemplified by Sue's *Mystères de Paris* and the novels of Dumas.

No discussion of the difficulties in working on literature *hors d'usage* would be complete without a question I have frequently heard in the

⁵⁵ The historical novel's role in early-nineteenth-century struggles around the novel was complicated by the fact that the concept predated Scott in France. Sentimental and Gothic novels with historical subject matter were sometimes identified as historical novels by booksellers and critics of the Empire and early Restoration, and sentimental novels with historical subject matter continued to be written throughout the life of the historical novel.

⁵⁶ See, of course, Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*.

⁵⁷ On the historical novel's decline in prestige during the remainder of the 1830s, see Iknayan. One reason the historical novel declined in importance after 1830 was, I suspect, its indirect approach to social conflict. When censorship is relaxed, political issues can be confronted in the present rather than distanced in a historical past.

course of writing this book. Isn't it boring reading sentimental novels, both friendly and hostile critics of the project have asked—in other words, wouldn't you really rather be reading Balzac—as if we all agreed that these works were intrinsically uninteresting, even if I could dress them up with critical arguments. The question foregrounds one great problem working on literature *hors d'usage*, which is the continued skepticism concerning its literary value. Attention to forgotten literature is too often treated as antiquarian fussing over texts that deserve to be forgotten. Another version of this skepticism is the charge that critics working in noncanonical literature reveal nothing about the literary dimension to literary texts, reducing literature to history.

There was nothing like the process of mastering a forgotten aesthetic, however, to unsettle my confidence that literary value is a self-evident attribute of a text. When I first started reading literature *hors d'usage*, I found it mystifying. After I reconstructed the problematic shaping forgotten works, I started to appreciate the diversity and elegance of their solutions. Once having gotten my aesthetic bearings, that is to say, literature *hors d'usage* was no longer an undifferentiated night of aesthetic relativism in which all texts were gray. For literature out of circulation (as for literature in circulation, moreover), a good work, a work that deserves to be studied for literary reasons, provides a forceful response to the contemporary problematic, whether the work takes shape within a position, honing its codes with maximum clarity (the Aristotelian view of literary excellence), or whether the work breaks with the dominant practices in significant and inventive ways (the preferred modernist text).

Literary evaluation, is, as Barbara Herrnstein-Smith suggests, “one of the most venerable, central, theoretically significant, and pragmatically inescapable set of problems relating to literature,” although the canon wars have thrown traditional ways of appreciating literary excellence into irremediable disarray.⁵⁸ In recent years, the difficulty making arguments about literary value has led some critics who were at first supportive of dismantling the canon to turn away from noncanonical literature in the name of literary pleasure, which is to say canonical works legible in our time. Working in literature *hors d'usage*, it becomes clear, however, that current obstacles to literary evaluation derive not from the noncanonical but rather from the fact that so little about it is known. Too often, noncanonical texts are fragments of lost solutions or answers to questions we no longer hear. If we could reawaken the struggles among conflicting aesthetics reified in the tradition's procession of cultural treasures, we would have a deeply historical way to renew the project of literary evaluation.

⁵⁸ Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 17.