

12-2002

# What is Method and Why Does it Matter?

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## Repository Citation

Elliott, M. A., & Stokes, C. (2002). What is Method and Why Does it Matter? In M.A. Elliott & C. Stokes (Eds.), *American Literary Studies: A Methodological Reader* (pp. 1-15). New York: New York Press.

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## Introduction

### *What Is Method and Why Does It Matter?*

*Michael A. Elliott and Claudia Stokes*

The recent emphasis on interdisciplinary scholarship—manifest in the resurgence of institutional programs like American studies and publications in cultural studies—has relocated both the literary critic and the literary text to unfamiliar territory. This new interest in broaching disciplinary limits has proved to be exciting and invigorating. Literary critics have turned their attention to media other than the written text, and nonliterary specialists, such as historians and sociologists, have used literary texts to support their own research. This book is a response to American literary interdisciplinarity and attempts to raise, and address, the inevitable questions that emerge when disciplines collaborate: What can texts tell us about American culture or history? How can literary interpretive methods be adapted to other fields? What do literary texts evidence?

This volume responds to these questions by focusing attention on problems of *method*, specifically methods of integrating the study of American literature with other disciplines that study American culture. What does “method” mean in the world of literary studies? In reply to a query about research methods, a biochemist might respond by pointing to the materials used in the laboratory, the design and equipment of experiments, and the tools used to interpret raw data. When pollsters—a kind of social scientist—discuss their methods, they regularly refer to the number of people they poll, the type of questions they ask, and the manner in which they select their participants. In these instances, questions of methodology are anchored in underlying theories about how to gather and interpret information properly, and they entail tools such as

statistical models, margins of error, and laboratory conditions that are tailored to suit these theories. We expect methods to be transferable from one setting to another; for this reason, we presume that they can be described in clear and exact terms. The word itself comes from the Greek roots “meta” (after) and “hodos” (a way). Method literally means the path that one takes as a scholar; it encompasses those things necessary for producing knowledge, the tools one uses to proceed on “the way after” scholarship.

Thinking about method forces scholars to consider the goals of their work and to ask how they should judge the best manner for proceeding toward them. These are the challenges that this volume poses to literary scholars currently working in the field of American literary studies. This book in no way intends to serve as an exhaustive primer of literary interpretative methods, a service ably performed by more than a few collections. Instead, we have sought to collect diverse examples of scholarship that address a shared set of methodological problems. These essays share a common denominator: They are committed to the integration of literary study with fields of knowledge and critical practices not typically associated with literary exegesis.

We have invited experienced scholars whose own work depends upon this integration to consider the implications, requirements, and choices related to methodology. Each of these scholars has selected and introduced a previously published essay that pairs textual analysis with an extraliterary source—for example, the conditions of popular dramatic performance, legal testimony, and Enlightenment philosophy—to illuminate a literary concern, whether a text, writer, or period. The obverse of this critical endeavor is the application of literary interpretive practices like close reading to the analysis of cultural spheres other than the literary one. For instance, this interdisciplinary practice, which generally goes under the appellation “cultural studies,” is at work in Ann duCille’s essay “The Occult of True Black Womanhood,” reprinted here, which examines the conditions surrounding the labors of African American feminist scholars. In the essay, duCille, in effect, “reads” the literary academy itself and applies literary interpretive skills to the profession in which she works.

For many literary scholars in the United States, cultural studies has reinvigorated literary criticism by importing to it methods and texts from outside the discipline, as well as enabling literary critics to engage in new ways the world beyond the written page. For others, cultural studies has

threatened English as a profession by altering the disciplinary limits that define this field and distinguish it from the work performed in other departments, such as history, communications, or philosophy. In his recent “autopsy” of literary criticism, for example, Mark Bauerlein names several of the components of cultural studies that its proponents have found attractive, only to contend that these very things render it an incoherent enterprise. “By studying culture in heterogeneous ways, by clumping texts, events, persons, objects, and ideologies into a cultural whole (which cultural critics say, is reality) and bringing a melange of which, logical argument, speculative propositions, empirical data, and political outlooks to bear upon it, cultural critics invent a new kind of investigation immune to methodological attack” (34–35). Bauerlein’s point is that this interdisciplinarity risks making it impossible for literary studies to articulate the internal standards of judgment necessary for a discipline to evaluate the scholarship produced in its name. In other words, this practice is on the verge of turning English into everything and nothing at the same time.

We admit to being more sympathetic to the impact of cultural studies upon American literary criticism, but we also feel that the concerns Bauerlein articulates (and he is not alone) merit attention. This volume is an attempt to respond to that challenge by fostering a conversation within one field of literary criticism—American literature—about its methods and methodological judgments. Talking about method in this way will allow for the generation of standards of evaluation and will also serve the purpose of introducing beginning scholars to the disciplinary practices of their new peers. We begin by proposing that a method—any method—of criticism is comprised of three primary parts:

- the primary information subject to the critical enterprise, traditionally a written text or texts
- the engagement with one or more of the various professional categories used to group and classify literary texts; these organizational divisions include period, aesthetic movement, genre, geographical region, and social affiliation, whether in the writer’s own membership in a social group or in the text’s representation of a social group
- the strategies and assumptions that allow the critic to handle and interpret that information

This last point will serve as the primary focus of this volume, though the essays in this collection certainly challenge and reevaluate the two other components of criticism. Indeed, the interdisciplinary practices highlighted often call into question the first component of literary method—the centrality of a literary text—either by applying literary interpretive skills to nonliterary material, by omitting altogether the literary text *per se* from this critical enterprise, or by rendering the literary text secondary to a larger social critique.

*Literature and Culture: A Brief History of  
Literary Methods*

Our description of method is itself the product of a long-standing dialogue concerning the nature and function of literary study, a discussion produced by the institutionalization of literary scholarship over the last hundred years. As English-language literature—and, for the purposes of this study, American literature in particular—became a field of scholarly expertise and a pedagogical enterprise, literary interpretation became formalized and therefore acquired a shifting set of critical goals. Each of these goals, in turn, has led to a different set of interpretive assumptions and strategies. The result is a diverse and varied interpretive toolbox, one organized chiefly around the enduring critical discussion of the relation between the literary text and the culture(s) in which it is composed and, as some critics might venture, read.

One of the reasons we feel this volume to be necessary is the vast diversity of opinion in the history of American literary studies about this very relationship. This debate about the connection between literary studies and cultural analysis has a long and complex past—and making sense of it can be daunting to a beginning scholar. This volume does not aim to isolate particular interdisciplinary strategies and offer them as definitive answers for the questions that animate American literary studies. Instead, we hope to sharpen debates about the goals and practice of interdisciplinary literary studies by bringing into the foreground the methods by which such scholarship is produced. We see this volume as participating within a lengthy discussion about the relation of the literary text to the culture that surrounds it. Therefore, we offer a brief outline of past contributions to this discussion as a way of showing how current

methods of American literary scholarship depart from and draw upon former models of criticism.

We begin our survey of literary criticism at the turn of the century, the very moment when American literature became a subject of scholarly analysis. In fact, the current interest in reading the literary text alongside other kinds of language and knowledge bears some resemblance to the “expressive realist” method common in literary criticism from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War (Belsey 7). In this method, broadly defined, “literariness” emerged as a special category of language, one distinguished by its direct correspondence with culture. As the product of the European and American literary realist movements, the category of literariness straddled the gulf between the elite and the common, a negotiation made possible by assigning special status to texts generally believed to chronicle accurately some essential truth about life. In effect, the documentation of the common caused the literary text both to be elevated above other linguistic forms and to be valorized for its ethical and aesthetic qualities, among them beauty and honesty. Operating within this idiom, the critic sought in the text evidence of verisimilitude and used the correlation between the literary text and the surrounding culture as evidence of a text’s artistic achievement. Moreover, the expressive-realist method of literary criticism imparted special standing to the writer, who both reflected and stood apart from his or her historical surroundings. As such, literary interpretation often involved engagement in authorial biography in an effort to ascertain the correspondences between the literary text and aspects of the writer’s own life.

During and after the Second World War, expressive-realist criticism was countered by an influential body of critics—including Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren—who sought both to standardize literary interpretive methods for their students and, simultaneously, dispel the belief that other kinds of knowledge were necessary for a full understanding of the literary text. Born out of pedagogical needs and the professionalization of literary scholarship, the New Criticism touted the singularity of literary language and thereby formally dislocated it from other kinds of writing and fields of knowledge. Whereas the expressive-realist critics ascertained literariness precisely by a text’s correspondence with culture, the New Critics famously offered a mode of interpretation predicated on the removal of the literary text from culture and designated as “fallacious” the interpretive reliance on authorial biography.

New Criticism argued that the text alone was all a scholar required for its interpretation. Any other information—biography, social context, speculation about the writer’s intent, or the use of the reader’s emotional response—figured in the New Criticism as unnecessary and even seriously misleading impediments to interpretation. In the place of these expressive-realist interpretive mainstays, the literary apparatus of the “close reading” emerged, which paid careful attention to language, structure, and form and appointed the unities and disunities of these qualities as repositories of meaning. Because of the New Critical insistence that the critic attend to the text alone, the literary text emerged after the postwar era as a haven from, and even elevated above, culture. Like the famous “well wrought urn” coined by Brooks in his interpretation of Donne’s “The Canonization,” the literary text in New Critical parlance is perfect in its formal qualities, the subject of awe, and untouched by the stains of time and space.

In the United States, New Criticism coincided with the development of American literary studies as an increasingly (though never completely) distinct enterprise, as literary critics sought to identify a national tradition commensurate with the mantle that the United States had assumed as the global defender of freedom and democracy. Within the academy, these efforts found support in the growth of “American studies” departments that benefited from the broader endorsement of “area studies” as a Cold War strategy for studying the world, as well as the more particular urgency of defining the nation. The confluence of New Criticism with these interdisciplinary programs produced what is now referred to as the “myth-and-symbol” school of American criticism, a label applied to works such as Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* (1951), R. W. B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* (1955), and Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). On the one hand, these works of American studies differed from the more traditional New Criticism in that they placed literary texts within narratives of American history; they even relied upon nonliterary texts (dime novels, sermons, political speeches) as evidence. Yet these works treated history and culture much as New Criticism treated its texts: as an organic, unified whole.

Each of the books named in the paragraph above argues for a central myth, symbol, or pattern it considers to be at the center of American history—and then claims that the presence of this central element makes America an exceptional nation. This brand of scholarship concerned itself not with documenting literary histories of influence and biography,

but with describing a coherent tradition. (Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* [1957] is a well-known example.) Unfailingly, these works found that tradition in the nineteenth-century writers whom we even now take for granted as the canonical figures of the "American Renaissance," the title of F. O. Matthiessen's 1941 study that influenced so many of these scholars writing in the 1950s and early 1960s. During this period, American literary studies came to be dominated by a method divorced from the empiricism that had characterized the earlier expressive-idealist literary scholarship. This endeavor aimed not to explain the history of literature, but to use literature to distill the character of American history itself. "No longer an object of historical investigation," one recent commentator has observed, "American literature was now an ideal order of eternal objects reflecting the mind of a whole people" (Shumway 337).

With the social and intellectual upheaval of the late 1960s, both New Criticism and the myth-and-symbol school came to be associated with a kind of political and academic conservatism. The intellectual underpinnings and origins of poststructuralism have been well documented elsewhere, though for our purposes the position of this diverse intellectual movement on the relation of literature to culture warrants some consideration. Whereas New Criticism distinguishes literary language from other forms of language and fields of culture, poststructuralist thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva reconsidered language, and literary language in particular, as the carrier, enforcer, and product of a necessarily conservative, self-perpetuating, and often oppressive culture. The expansiveness and diversity of poststructuralism—which encompasses individual strains such as deconstruction, discourse theory, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and French feminism—render it difficult to address in this broad discussion. However, what is especially vital for our methodological concerns is the effort of poststructuralist literary critics to examine the literary text as an agent and envoy of social values so entrenched as to be practically invisible, a cultural function often denoted by the term "ideology."

Poststructuralist literary criticism directed much of its attention in particular to the texts that gave rise to the expressive-realist literary method: namely, literary texts that presumed a direct representational correspondence with an external social reality. Anchored in the apprehension of language and its subdivision, the discursive formation, as broadcaster of ideology, critics such as Roland Barthes and Jacques

Derrida attempted both to unravel the ideology at the center of these texts and consequently to demonstrate the constructedness of the text and of the reality presented there. At the same time, the poststructuralist belief in the entanglement of culture and language made it possible for literary scholars such as Roland Barthes to analyze nonliterary aspects of culture—popular entertainment, advertising, food—using literary interpretive methods, an analytical practice that collapsed the boundaries that distinguished the literary text from other fields of knowledge and culture and that paved the way for the current academic practice of cultural studies.

In spite of its attention to the involvement of the literary text in the workings of culture, poststructuralism drew criticism because of what some detractors believed was its inadequate attention to the precise conditions of both culture and the texts that it produces. Though it questioned the distinctiveness of the literary text and placed it in the larger context of cultural ideology, poststructuralism was found by some to be “hair raisingly unhistorical. There was no question of relating the work [of literature] to the realities of which it treated, or to the conditions which produced it, or to the actual readers who studied it” (Eagleton 109).

This characterization of poststructuralism as heedless of the social and political contexts of literature triggered the New Historicist interpretive method, which mixes the goals and tools of poststructuralism with historical materialism in order to be more specific about the ideological insights possible through literary analysis. New Historicism complicated the placement of the literary text among other fields of knowledge and cultural products with a sophisticated double move: in reading literary texts in the context of history, the New Historicist method applied literary interpretive skills to both fields of knowledge and in so doing muddied the boundaries between them. At the same time, New Historicism maintained the primacy and distinctiveness of the literary document, which communicates knowledge not simply about the ideology of the cultural moment that produced that text but most specifically about how this particular literary text responded to the conditions of its own production. The literary text in the New Historicist method is acutely social and cultural, and the determination of the precise nature of this engagement is what occupies the New Historicist critic, an endeavor deeply indebted to the goals of poststructuralism.

The basic claim that underwrites both poststructuralism and its de-

scendant, New Historicism, is the belief that language both produces and maintains culture, a tenet that has allowed poststructuralist critics to analyze, or “read,” nonliterary aspects of culture and New Historicist critics to designate history as a site of interpretation. The fundamental belief in the entanglement of language with the workings of culture has empowered literary critics to apply their skill of textual interpretation to culture not just as it appears in literature but in many of its products. In this intellectual arena, an ever-increasing multiplicity of cultural sites has become available to the critic: communications, social history, media studies, social science, popular entertainment, architecture, and urban planning (among many others) have become subject to methods of interpretation and analysis born out of literary interpretation. In turn, these fields have informed the analysis of literary texts.

These developments have also contributed to the redrawing of the institutional boundaries that have long distinguished literary study from other intellectual endeavors. The most obvious example of this phenomenon has been the reinvigoration of interdisciplinary programs such as American studies, cultural studies, and ethnic studies departments, which, in constructing curricula around shared methodological and intellectual goals rather than around literary texts, erode the boundaries that distinguish fields of knowledge at the broadest level. In short, the interdisciplinarity that has animated literary study in recent years has also caused a reconstruction of the academy itself.

At the same time, the integration of extraliterary sources into textual analysis has spawned discussion about the role of the literary critic. Whereas the New Critical method set clear goals for the project of textual interpretation and evaluation, the poststructuralist and New Historicist methods use the text to investigate the wider social order, whether in a text’s capitulation to dominant ideology or in its engagement of the conditions of its own production. The literary critic using interdisciplinary methods often serves in the capacity of the social critic, using the literary text to launch an analysis of the social order reproduced or contested in its literary product. For example, is a critic like Sau-ling C. Wong, who interprets a literary text like Hualing Nieh’s *Mulberry and Peach* within the context of Chinese diasporic identity, operating solely as a literary critic, or is her literary analysis in the service of a broader social critique? Indeed, as the incorporation of extraliterary sources into literary analysis has prompted the redrawing of disciplinary boundaries, it also causes us to reconsider the role that literary interpre-

tation may play in the social realm. To integrate the literary text with another field of knowledge presumes some kind of belief in the social function of the critical act, a belief that literary interpretation has some use or meaning beyond the limits of the written page.

Such judgments proceed from an assumption, famously articulated by Edward Said, that “texts are worldly.” Said stated in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983) that “texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly” (35). Of course, what precisely it means for a text, as well as a literary critic, to be “worldly” remains a complicated matter. Insofar as critics are enjoined to consider how a text is “enmeshed in circumstance,” both in the text’s production and the moment of criticism, they are able and even obligated to speak to “worldly” problems. This premise, or some variation of it, underlies much contemporary scholarship of American literature, which attends to a now familiar litany of issues (race, gender, class, sexuality) emanating from questions of power our contemporary society has yet to address adequately. While the discipline continues to debate whether these issues dominate American literary studies to a fault, or whether they have yet to receive adequate attention, no one can deny that a relationship between literary interpretation and social commentary has become a received truth of this field. The goal of this inquiry, on the other hand, remains subject to dispute. Can, as some believe, the investigation into the “worldiness” of literary texts offer a means of staging some kind of political intervention in the very social dynamic it discerns in the literary text?

Explaining his selection of Lora Romero’s essay for this volume, Ramón Saldívar argues that Romero does that very thing in her “attempts to understand the links between one’s professional and political commitments” and that doing so requires her to think about “the relation between a scholar’s community of origin and the community of learning she inhabits.” In other words, Saldívar lauds Romero for taking account of a public that is situated beyond the academy, even if she does not address that public directly through the publication of that scholarship. Moreover, Saldívar implies that Romero has made methodological decisions based upon her vision of that public, a “utopian streak” that leads to her “courageous stand of refusing to see ethnic, gendered, and racialized writings as uniquely separate from the broader context of

American cultural patterns.” In the essay reprinted here, Romero pursues this agenda by contending that Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* is “enmeshed”—to use Said’s term—in nineteenth-century judgments about the relationship of racial identity to gender, judgments that Romero believes continue to divide a public that she hopes to see united. As such, her literary inquiry attempts to constitute at once a social and professional intervention. Moreover, we have been struck by the number of scholars who have used the word “utopian” in introducing the essays reprinted here, a pattern that surely suggests a widespread belief in the power of textual study to effect social and political change.

Focusing on the methodology of a piece of literary scholarship like Romero’s is not necessarily a matter of judging that scholarship to be right or wrong—though it may facilitate such judgments. Rather, it creates the opportunity to discuss the principles and decisions required of any work of criticism that are often left unarticulated. Scholars of American literature currently draw upon a continuously proliferating number of critical methods, including a variety of theoretical models and bodies of evidence, and combine them in new and challenging ways within a single article or book. Such changes invigorate the field and enable it to participate in interdisciplinary dialogues about questions crucial to the academy, but it makes it necessary that we begin a concrete and careful discussion of the methods that we employ. To fail to do so endangers our ability to communicate, among ourselves and to other disciplines, the skills and training that make American literary scholarship possible.

### *Using This Volume*

Our volume departs from the standard essay collection format in that it pairs critical analysis with examples of interdisciplinary methods. Rather than ask scholars to submit an essay in which they plumb the depths of contemporary critical methods—a decision more characteristic of the academic essay collection—we asked these scholars to select an essay, whether from a journal or a book, that they felt employs a thoughtful and instructive method of interdisciplinary American literary study. In addition, each scholar has written a preface highlighting both the methodological insights offered by that essay and the intellectual decisions

that underlie such strategies. It is our hope that this combination of examples of literary criticism with analysis will serve both as a pedagogical tool and as a critical resource.

Our task has been a delicate one: offering critical blueprints while preserving the methodological diversity that has made this kind of work both vastly appealing and vulnerable to attack. Of course, this volume is by no means complete in its inclusion of the many critical methods, intellectual practices, and kinds of texts available to the literary critic. The formal constraints of this collection (constraints we placed upon ourselves) compelled us to sacrifice thoroughness to honor the choices of our contributors. In so doing, we have not been able to dictate the final shape of this volume, though we attempted to manage this inevitable difficulty by asking a broad cross-section of scholars to contribute to this project in the belief that their own methodological affiliations and research interests would find their way into this volume. In most instances, this has proved true; at the same time, this volume includes some striking surprises: for example, the selection by Frances Smith Foster, a scholar widely known for her work on nineteenth-century African American literature, of Roy Harvey Pearce's 1962 essay on the pedagogy of popular culture.

The volume is divided into three sections that bring together essays with divergent approaches to similar methodological problems. Those essays included in the first section, "History and Literature in America," take up a challenge long familiar to students of American literature: How can one attend at once to the aesthetic object and to its historical context? In spite of the tradition of combining history and literature within American Studies, the methods of reading literature have never been fully congruent with those of historians. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's essay, "Domesticating Virtue: Coquettes and Revolutionaries in Young America" approaches this methodological problem from a different angle, for Smith-Rosenberg is a historian by training who asks about the value of literature and literary ways of reading to historical inquiry. Lora Romero's "Vanishing Americans: Gender, Empire, and New Historicism" shows the operation of New Historicist criticism and its limits through a reading of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. The section then closes with a pair of essays, one by Laura Wexler and the other by Lauren Berlant, that examine the historical conjunction between racial and gender politics. In the case of Wexler, this project entails closely "reading" photographs as aesthetic objects in order to

illuminate a historical moment. Berlant, on the other hand, brings nineteenth-century texts into the fractious late-twentieth-century debate over the nature of sexual harassment.

Scholarship such as Wexler's and Berlant's argues the necessity of applying literary forms of analysis to "culture," as well as the difficulty of defining the boundaries of that very thing. The essays that comprise the second section, "Reading 'Culture,'" address this problem. Roy Harvey Pearce's essay, "Mass Culture/Popular Culture: Notes for a Humanist's Primer," sounds an optimistic note about the possibility of literary scholars venturing beyond textual studies, even as it prefigures many of the conundrums that face those who do so. The three selections that follow Pearce's offer more specific examples of what such scholarship—proceeding from a convergence of American literary and cultural studies—might offer. W. T. Lhamon, Jr., carefully attempts to recover and decode the performances of black men "Dancing for Eels at Catherine Market" during the antebellum period. Paula A. Treichler insists that such methods can perform a crucial role in confronting the AIDS epidemic. And Ann duCille's "The Occult of True Black Womanhood" shows us that an inquiry into literary methods may yield insights into the culture of literary criticism within the academy itself.

For at least the last century, nationhood has played a central role in the organization of literary study. The rise of globalization both as a historical process and as a theoretical framework has forced scholars of U.S. literature to embark upon what one recent anthology calls "post-nationalist American studies" (Rowe). "Nationalism Reconsidered," the final section of this volume, includes four essays that help to clarify the methodological challenges that this "post-nationalism" raises. Michael Warner's "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject" addresses both eighteenth-century texts and recent productions of popular culture to form an argument about the difficulty of thinking about the national "public" in any easy way. Elaine A. Jahner's scholarship on traditional Lakota narrative demonstrates how an understanding of Lakota nationalism at once complicates the designation of this literature as "American" and shows why concepts of national sovereignty may still matter a great deal in the criticism of Native American literary production. Sau-ling C. Wong, meanwhile, turns to a novel written in the Chinese language, but within the geographical borders of the United States, to show how the nation is no longer an adequate category for understanding literary production, even though it plays a necessary part in understanding liter-

ary *reception*. Finally, the discussion of “Americanization” written by the Dutch Americanist Rob Kroes forces us to reconsider the global implications of American literature, as he uses the study of literature to understand the relationship of American culture to the larger world.

Throughout, our goal has been to make this volume useful to scholars regardless of their familiarity with the field, from upper-level undergraduates learning for the first time the idiom of literary critics to more advanced scholars teaching in colleges and universities. The format of this text lends it to a variety of pedagogical uses. Teachers can use this volume in seminars for literature majors; in helping their students prepare to research and write undergraduate theses; in literary theory courses for both undergraduate and graduate students; and as supplements to American Studies courses with a literary orientation. Despite the Americanist focus of the essays included here, this collection can offer instruction to scholars of different fields who are interested in the practices and decisions involved in an interdisciplinary interpretive method, which has by no means been restricted solely to the scrutiny of American literary texts. Because the interest in aligning literary texts with nonliterary material has suffused literary study writ large—across disciplines demarcated by language, period, and nation—this volume may be of use to scholars interested less in the debates occupying nineteenth-century American literary exegesis than in the various methodological decisions made and examined here, which are doubtless applicable and transferable to other literary texts, fields, and projects. For example, Laura Wexler’s study of antebellum representations of domestic labor may provide a useful interpretive model to the scholar working on nineteenth-century book illustration or 1980s photojournalism, to just name a few examples.

Most importantly, we hope that this book will encourage its readers to continue the dialogue that it has created among scholars of American literature about the choices that they make in producing literary criticism. Such a conversation can play a vital role in articulating the standards by which our scholarship should be judged, as well as the boundaries of our disciplinary reach. These questions matter not only for our own internal organization of the field, but also so that Americanist critics, as well as literary studies as a whole, can speak to those outside the discipline about the contribution that literary studies can make to an increasingly interdisciplinary academy. While such a conversation will

no doubt bring us to moments of cacophony, the din of debate is preferable to the silence of a field ill-prepared to explain its own methods.

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