The text of a novel is formally linear, and it is read or performed sequentially. The first section of this study attempts to read sequentially the first volume of *Jane Eyre*, and in doing so encounters and entertains the practical and theoretical issues engendered by such a reading.¹

One of the earliest issues that arises in reading the text of a novel linearly but critically is segmentation: what constitutes the narrative unit, the hunk of the novel that can be temporarily excised and submitted to critical attention? The text is formally segmented by chapter and volume endings, which serve as marks of punctuation and indications of intentional structure. Indeed, it is here that Bakhtin sees most clearly the hand of the author: “We meet him (that is, we sense his activity) most of all in the composition of the work: it is he who segments the work into parts (songs and chapters and so on)” (*Dialogic* 254; see also Stevick). There are also scenes or suites of scenes, sometimes coinciding with chapters and sometimes not, that seem to constitute narrative units. Chapters and volumes, despite Stanley Fish—“formal units are always a function of the interpretive model one brings to bear (they are not ‘in the text’)”—are formal units marked “in the text,” the activity of the author, as Bakhtin would have it, not of the interpreter, as Fish would. Scenic units, however, though to the critical reader they appear discrete, definable, and intentional units, may not be marked by the author’s hand. Perhaps they “do not lie innocently in the world;
rather, they are themselves constituted by an interpretive act . . . that has called them into being” (Fish, *Class* 13). Perhaps we need a critical quantum theory that dialogizes the formalist attribution of authority—indeed “reality”—to the text and the postmodern, reader-response attribution of authority only to the interpreter or, rather, his or her community. Whether part of the text or part of the interpretive act, the scene will here be considered a fundamental narrative unit of, if not the text, at least the performed literary work that is *Jane Eyre*.

If the novel is formally linear it is also, in the Bakhtinian sense, an “utterance.” It is unique and occasion-specific, part of an ongoing dialogue. It speaks into the novel discourse of its time, engaging in dialogue with that body of fiction, making its statements in terms of what has already been or is being said and staking its claims within that dialogue for its new vision or response: “Something created is always created out of something given . . . What is given is completely transformed in what is created” (Bakhtin, *Speech* 120).

A first novel by an unknown writer, like “Currer Bell’s” *Jane Eyre*, is even more dependent on the context of contemporary novels, on “what is given,” than are novels by an established author. It enters fictional discourse without the context of the author’s previous work. One of the signals that orients the reader to an authorial context, the known author’s name, is missing. The new work does not therefore stand alone, however. It takes—or must make—its place in the dialogue of the novels of the day or among the species of contemporary or traditional novels. Contemporary readers—and reviewers—are therefore likely to be unusually attentive to early signals of kinship claims, curious about just what this new work is, what dialogue it is entering, where it fits, and what it has to offer. Though later readers, like ourselves, will know who “Currer Bell” is, what she will write, and how *Jane Eyre* relates to her canon and her life and to the subsequent history of the novel, that novel will still have about it the benchmark of its origins.

The contemporary reader will find himself confronted with familiar conventions in an unfamiliar light, and, indeed, this is the situation that causes him to become involved in the process of building up the meaning of the
work. However, readers from a later epoch will also be involved in this
process, and so, clearly, a historical gap between text and reader does not
necessarily lead to the text losing its innovative character; the difference
will only lie in the nature of the innovation. For the contemporary reader,
the reassessment of norms contained in the repertoire will make him de­
tach these norms from their social and cultural context and so recognize
the limitations of their effectiveness. For the later reader, the reassessed
norms help to re-create that very social and cultural context that brought
about the problems which the text itself is concerned with. (Iser 78)

It is, then, more important than with subsequent novels by known
novelists for the critic, contemporary or modern, to situate first novels
like Jane Eyre in the context of the novel as it existed at the time. It is
even more important in reading such novels sequentially to attend to
the new novel's very earliest signals, even those before the very first
words—the title and subtitle, for example. Therefore I begin with the
title page of Jane Eyre and proceed sequentially through the early por­
tions of the text. Paradoxically, however, instead of focusing narrowly
and intensely on the text and its one-dimensional linearity, in order to
comprehend the text the sequential reading is at the very beginning
derailed from the linear and taken outside the text to the fictional con­
text, the dialogue to which the text is responding and within which it
seeks to make its way and its world.

The first chapter in this section focuses initially on the subtitle of
Jane Eyre. An Autobiography, exploring the kinds of plot and epistemo­
logical expectations which that generic signal engendered, expecta­
tions soon strategically complicated by other generic signals—of the
foundling novel and the Gothic, for example. There are other conven­
tional signals, scenic rather than generic, in these first chapters of Jane
Eyre. In the very first chapter Jane strikes her cousin John, who is
mistreating her, and she is taken away to be locked in the red-room.
The scene of a child who fights (or lies) and is punished by being
confined is common in early nineteenth-century fiction and is not lim­
it ed to a single genre: it can be found in Byronic novels, sentimental
novels, foundling novels, governess novels. Rather than pinned down
or identified, the Brontë scene is refracted (to use the Bakhtinian term
by all the contexts in which a similar scene occurred, the scenic topos complicating expectations of plot and theme. Latter-day critics can recognize such topoi only by reading widely in the novels, and particularly the minor or forgotten novels of the period. Though such recognition does not insure a "definitive" interpretation of the meaning of the text, it does enrich the reading affectively, generating and informing multiple expectations at given moments in the reading and enhancing the reader's appreciation of the strategies of the text. Awareness of the conventions or topoi may also prevent facile literary-historical conclusions that a resemblance between this in Jane Eyre and that in Novel X must indicate that X was a "source" of or an "influence" on Brontë's novel.

Intertextuality itself may be somewhat problematized in chapters 5 through 9 of Jane Eyre, which are set in Lowood Institution and are the subject of the second chapter of this study. If any portion of Brontë's novel may be said to be literally autobiographical it is in these chapters. The "originals" of Lowood (Cowan Bridge School) and of Brocklehurst (the Reverend William Carus Wilson) and the similarity of the situation at the fictional and the real school are well known and were even attested to by Charlotte Brontë. Both her older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, came home from that school to die. She believed the school was responsible for their deaths and that the picture she presents of the conditions at Lowood were essentially true of Cowan Bridge School (Clarendon, Appendix II 615–21). Yet even though many reviewers found much in Jane Eyre that was highly original, ironically more than one saw in Lowood only a female version of Dickens's Dotheboys Hall in Nicholas Nickleby.

Though this is the most dramatic and documented instance of art imitating both life and, apparently, art, there are others in Jane Eyre. The Clarendon notes quote Mrs. Gaskell's version of "the probable origin of the idea of giving Mr. Rochester a mad wife" as "an event [that] happened in the neighbourhood of Leeds," and cites as a second possible source "a tradition associated with Norton Conyers, which seems to have served as a partial model for Thornfield Hall. . . . A low room in the third story used to be called 'the mad-woman's room'" (600–601). Yet, as later chapters here will bear out, this "deserted wing" motif,
often the place of a mad woman’s or wife’s confinement, was already not so much a convention as a cliché in Gothic fiction. So prevalent is the device, indeed, that Brontë seems to be borrowing (without parody) from Jane Austen’s parody of the device in Northanger Abbey, a novel which, indeed an author whom, she had never read (see below, ch. 3, n. 5).

These coincidental resemblances of Brontë’s text to those of others suggest the exercise of the utmost caution in attributing “influence” of one author or text on another. The coincidence of “reality” and fiction as “sources” not only problematizes the search for “origins” but, I would venture, suggests a solution to the apparent paradox of the most real being the most conventional, and that is the principle of “narratability.” Why are we tempted to put an experience—first-, second-, or third-hand experience—into a novel we are writing or are about to write? Because it is “a good story”; that is, though we may not be conscious of a novel with such a story, it sounds like the kind of thing that novel stories are made of.

Such are the concerns of my first two chapters; the third chapter of part 1 traces the alternating foregrounding of two popular contemporary genres—the governess novel and the Gothic—that engender bewildering plot expectations and problematize the nature of the fictional world of Jane Eyre. The governess novel is identified in subject and tone with the feminine, the domestic, the middle class, the religious, the everyday, and—though its plots, situations, and views may, within limits, vary—it seems to have a distinct ideological voice that will resonate within the bourgeois, early capitalist, realist Victorian novel. Popular and “low,” it thus nonetheless seems “capable of penetrating into the social laboratory where . . . ideologemes [(‘developments in philosophy and ethics’)]² are shaped and formed. The artist has a keen sense for ideological problems in the process of birth and generation” (Medvedev/Bakhtin 17).

The Gothic novel is perhaps even more varied than the governess novel, though its variety does not extend to the domestic or everyday, and generally it is ideologically “aristocratic” rather than middle class, romantic rather than realistic. Though seemingly retrograde, the genre continues through the century and is even revived
dramatically toward the end of the century, just as the British aristocracy and its values continue to have what seems an inordinate residual power within the capitalist expansion. These two disparate fictional kinds—and others that are also interpolated here—are so insistently, if intermittently, evoked by *Jane Eyre* they constitute alternative voices to that of the narrator, mystifying for the reader the course the novel is to take and the world as it is constituted in this novel. These voices are truly dialogic. That is, though they alternate they are not alternatives, one of which will prove "correct"; nor do they represent a thesis and antithesis that are to be resolved in some final synthesis. While maintaining their ground and ontological grounding, they influence and interact with, "speak with," each other—and with the voice of the narrator. They also reflect and contribute to the definition of the ideological moment of the novel's utterance, when aristocratic and middle-class, patriarchal and feminist, heroic and domestic, hierarchical and democratic assumptions and values simultaneously struggle for hegemony and dialogically coexist. The ideological ferment outside the novel and its narrative counterparts within the novel make the "meaning" of *Jane Eyre* problematic, the texture rough and deep, and the emotional impact intense and powerful.

The final chapter of this first section treats the emergence of the Jane-Rochester love story. A love story is not so much a genre or species of fiction as it is a transgeneric topic. Like the scenic topos, it can fit modularly into a fictional kind such as the governess novel or the Gothic novel, or almost any other kind of novel. It is polysemic, not exclusive to or even necessarily constitutive of any particular genre. Chapter 4, then, serves as a transition between the contextual and the textual sections of this study. Here the self-reflexive or recapitulatory ("spatializing") element of the novel structure begins to assert itself (the early portions of the text serving as the context of the later), while the generic, contextual element still strongly influences expectation and interpretation. This chapter begins also to concern itself with intratextual devices or strategies such as the ignis fatuus (or false lead), permanent and temporary gaps, implication (true or false) by juxtaposition, the function of volume endings, and double-voicedness and
hybridization. It also is driven to consider such issues as second read­ings, the relation of plot to ontology, and the role of “wrong guesses.”

Throughout this study, as in all criticism that entertains notions of reader response, the question of who, precisely, “the reader” is hangs over the discussion. Indeed, why imagine a reader at all, when the reader is, as Father Ong puts it, always a fiction? If this is so, why not shift our focus from inference to implication, from reader to text (as any pre-postformalist would)? Such a shift—or retreat—would first of all bring back with it a good deal of baggage that, while not necessarily inherent, historically accompanies such a perspective. Focusing on the text suggests a model of communication—encoding-decoding—that implicitly shifts the focus to the author and reintroduces almost inevitably rather simplistic notions of intention and influence and, perhaps most important, a conception of the literary text as monologic and monovalent. Defining the reader as dynamic performer rather than as passive recipient and the text as an utterance within a dialogue rather than as a message does not erase the text or the author. They remain significant but not the only factors determining the intellectual and af­fective meaning of the text. Notions of neither intention, strategy, nor influence are dispensed with. Their role is merely narrowed and de­limited within a wider conception of the total communication.

The text as encoded message is frozen in its historical moment; it can only mean what the author meant at the moment of composition, a position analogous to that of the strict constructionist view of the Constitution. To avoid such a restrictive view, formalists have tradition­ally turned to the notions of transhistorical meaning or potential meaning, but especially the former. The issue of historicity and mean­ing is complicated here by “the reader” sometimes being referred to as “the Victorian novel-reader” but at other times as “we” or even “you.” Who are these readers, “the Victorian novel-reader,” “we”? Occasionally I cite a Victorian critic or reviewer who recognized a scene, character, or plot element of Jane Eyre as having a novelistic precedent, but generally I use the term “Victorian novel-reader” not to suggest that there were readers in the late 1840s who had read, re­membered, and recognized the relevance of each and every one of the
novels I cite as in some way related to *Jane Eyre*: s/he (like this neologistic pronoun) is a composite, a fictional creation based on many "originals." I do not even assume that Charlotte Brontë knew and consciously referred to these novels. The novels here cited, therefore, are not necessarily "sources" but are representative of elements of contemporary fictional conventions that would be consciously or unconsciously familiar to Victorian readers (including Brontë), conventions that defined the genre as it existed or was deemed to be at the time. Because I am dealing with conventions and not particular sources, allusions, or parodies, I often cite four or five precedents to demonstrate the ubiquity and commonplace nature of the element, scene, or concept that is common to *Jane Eyre* and its predecessors.

If the Victorian novel-reader is a composite, so, paradoxically, are "we." This is not the royal "we," for though it always includes "I," it is not restricted to that single "original," and that, not modesty or rhetoric, is the reason for the use of the plural. "We" sometimes embraces Fish's "informed reader," Culler's "competent reader," Iser's "implied reader," Booth's "made" or created reader, or Rabinowitz's "authorial audience." The "we" is not subsumed by these, however; the singular "I" still remains to some degree outside the author's or the text's created reader (and the "thou" exists outside the plural, generalized "you" that I sometimes alternate with "we"). Without going too deeply into the matter here, let me say that I believe "the reader" is, as Iser says of the work, "virtual." Just as I do not believe Brontë deliberately encoded all the references to all the novels that I cite in my study but that those cited are representative of the genre of the novel as it was in 1847, so I do not believe any one reader recognized each and every one of those novels. The only one who did, up until the moment you read my text, is me (or, as English professors say, "I"). But a reader in 1847 would share to a greater or lesser extent the ideology of the novel of the day, would recognize both its mimetic and synthetic elements (and I must here add to Phelan's distinction the mimesis-of-the-synthetic or the "novelistic" elements). We cannot now become a reader of 1847, who more or less unconsciously holds that particular occasion-specific "ideology of the novel." We may, however, recover a representative portion of the repertoire by working backward through the text and through delib-
erate or unconscious allusions in *Jane Eyre* and gather a sense of what "the novel" must have been and therefore what, in Bronte’s hands, it now becomes. In doing so, however, we do not erase (though we may try to bracket out) the century and a half since *Jane Eyre*. We are not 1847 readers but reconstructers of 1847 readers, historians, those who, as Collingwood says, merely try "to think past thoughts."

Reading, or, as I suggest, "misreading," *Jane Eyre* may dramatize the role of the critical "I," the reader who is not limited to the role Bronte assigns to or expects from her reader. As Rabinowitz says, "Were I teaching . . . Bronte, I would be disappointed in a student who could produce an authorial reading but who could not in Terry Eagleton’s phrase, 'show the text as it cannot know itself' [Criticism 43]" (32). Rabinowitz’s reader, after all, stands apart from the “authorial audience,” but this does not invalidate the attempt, indeed the necessity, first to identify with that audience: “Authorial reading—in the sense of understanding the values of the authorial audience—has its own kind of validity, even if, in the end, actual readers share neither the experiences nor the values presented by the author” (36). Indeed, even understanding, or "comprehension," is response, just as agreement is as much dialogue as is debate, for understanding and agreement "translate" in subsuming the text within the reader’s frame of reference.