readers as a rule pause for a moment in anticipation as they open a new novel and glance at the title page, and even before they read the first word of the text they know, within limits, what kind of fiction to expect and what questions to raise. Many of these early signals are generic, alerting the reader to social and literary conventions that precede the text, and, indeed, "some preliminary generic judgment is always required even before we begin the process of reading. . . . 'reading'—even the reading of a first paragraph is always 'reading as'" (Rabinowitz 176). Recognizing this "reliance of reading on conventions that precede the text," Rabinowitz insists, "has enormous consequences for the processes of interpretation and evaluation" (29). Some of the signals that precede reading are embodied in format. The three-decker, the single-volume novel, the monthly part, and the serial installment all have more or less specific and loosely generic implications, not only, as Rabinowitz would have it, to help readers "recover the meanings of texts" but, perhaps more important, to channel their expectations. The title page, though it does not literally precede reading, does precede the text, and there the title, subtitle, author's name, publishing house or periodical, all map areas or limits of reader expectation even before the first word of the text itself is read.

The first readers of Jane Eyre. An Autobiography were informed on the title page that it was edited by Currer Bell. The term edited by was familiar in 1847 but polysemic, its descriptiveness refracted by the variety of uses to which it had recently been put.¹ It had been
used in the previous three years for comic novels and rogue or Newgate novels as well as fashionable, domestic, and historical novels, for example. Among the novels of 1844 were Martin Chuzzlewit, "edited by Boz," and Memoirs of a Muscovite, "edited by Lady Bulwer Lytton," while The Luck of Barry Lyndon. A Romance of the Last Century, "edited by Fitz-Boodle" (i.e., William Makepeace Thackeray), was appearing monthly in Fraser's Magazine; among those of 1846, Lionel Deerhurst; Or, Fashionable Life Under the Regency, "edited by the Countess Blessington," one of the leading writers of fashionable or "silver-fork" novels; and in the same year as Jane Eyre, 1847, Bellah, a tale of La Vendée. From the French, "edited by the Author of 'Two old men's tales,' etc.," that is, by the popular and respected "domestic" novelist Anne Marsh.

Thus, though "edited by" would not necessarily have indicated the kind of novel being presented, what it might have been expected to indicate was a work by a well-known novelist, acknowledged by name, pseudonym, or the titles of that novelist's other works. In 1847, however, "Currer Bell" was virtually unknown: Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, published the previous year, had sold but two copies (Gérin, Brontë 335). There was another "edited" autobiography by an unidentifiable author in 1847, The Autobiography of Rose Allen, "edited by a Lady"—published at about the same time as Jane Eyre— but there the purpose of the device seemed clear: the lower-class fictional narrator might be expected in the name of realism to require a more educated pen to help tell her story. Jane, who is reading when we first meet her and later teaches school and serves as a governess, does not need such help.

In the novel itself there is no trace of an editor—no preface, footnotes, afterword, or interpolation of any kind, no single word that is not "Jane's." The fiction of an editor nonetheless puts the entire text in boldface quotation marks, makes the first-person autobiographer into a "third person" to the first person of the "invisible" editor, and raises the question of how we are to take these words by this person called Jane Eyre. That the editor was an unknown, that there was no trace of editing, no likelihood of parody, and no necessity to provide a more educated narrator than Jane Eyre, made the tone even more problematic than if it were a novel by such familiar names as "Boz,"
“Fitz-Boodle,” or the Countess Blessington. Such uncertainty may have contributed to the immediate speculation—for example, in the *Jerrold’s* for October 1847 (6:474)—that this first-person narrative was not a fictional but a thinly disguised, actual autobiography.

Whatever the effect, the fiction of an editor, which was, indeed, irrelevant in a text without signs of "editing," was dropped from the second (January 1848) and all subsequent editions. The device had, in any case, been the publisher’s, not the author’s, idea (Pollard 100), perhaps intended to capitalize on the association of the device with such authors as Dickens, Thackeray, Anne Marsh, and the Countess Blessington. If so, the immediate success of *Jane Eyre* made such identification no longer necessary.

The publisher's other contribution to the title page, the subtitle *An Autobiography*, clearly more appropriate to Brontë's narrative strategy, was retained. The suggestion of that subtitle and the emotional intensity of the narration have led readers, reviewers, and critics ever since to conjecture about the literally autobiographical dimension of the text. Brontë, unaware that Thackeray’s wife, though no Bertha Rochester, was in an asylum, dedicated the second edition of the novel to him. Elizabeth Rigby, in her infamous review in the *Quarterly*, while protesting that she has "no great interest in the question at all," repeats the "rumor" that the author is the original of Becky Sharp, is Thackeray’s discarded mistress, and is now seeking her revenge (174–75). Modern readers, though they know the identity of Currer Bell and know the differences between Brontë’s life and Jane’s, still find it difficult not to think the novel autobiographical, a disguised version of Charlotte’s strong attachment to her married Belgian employer-teacher, Heger, perhaps. Even modern readers who have never heard of Heger frequently identify Brontë with her creation, and especially with the young, passionate, and rebellious Jane. Fictional or actual, it is as an autobiography that *Jane Eyre* was first read and reviewed and has been read and discussed ever since.

In 1847 the term *autobiography* was a relatively new one, having first appeared in the language, according to the second (1989) edition of the OED only in 1797, yet it already had a variety of meanings and associations clinging to it. Though one survey of 119 autobiographies
finds only five published before 1850 and suggests that "the term was not firmly established until the 1860's" (Rinehart 177), fictional autobiography seems to have had a somewhat earlier start. In 1829 the first pages of Bulwer Lytton's *Devereux. A Tale* were designated "The Auto-Biographer's Introduction." At his publisher's insistence, Disraeli allowed the first edition of *Contarini Fleming* (1832) to be subtitled *A Psychological Auto-biography.* References inside the novels of the period suggest that in public discourse, if not yet in published life stories, the term was so common as to be a sign of the times. As early as the 1830s Carlyle was referring to "these Autobiographical times of ours" in his own embedded fictional autobiography, *Sartor Resartus* (bk. 2, ch. 2), and the Countess Blessington's fictional elderly gentleman in *Confessions of an Elderly Gentleman* (1836) observes, "This is an autobiographical age" (1). The word *autobiography* itself, however, seldom appeared in the titles of books until midcentury. Though the subtitle *A Psychological Auto-biography* appeared in the first, 1832, edition of *Contarini Fleming,* it was abandoned in 1834 in favor of *A Psychological Romance* and was restored only in the 1846 edition. In 1846, too, *Margaret Russell: An Autobiography* was published anonymously. Soon thereafter, nonfictional self-told life stories also began to be called autobiographies: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is the title of the 1850 edition; earlier editions were called "Memoirs" or "Life of...." So when *Jane Eyre* appeared, *autobiography* was relatively rare on the title page but was already polysemic.

It is difficult to draw a firm line between fictional autobiographies and fictional memoirs, confessionals, or stories "told by himself" or "herself." Memoirs, perhaps, more often deal with outward, even historical events; confessionals with overt acts, often stressing reform. Autobiography tended toward the internal and analytical or psychological. This may help explain its growing popularity, for internality, self-analysis and introspection had become a keynote—some said a sour note—of the times: "Introspection as a 'note' of the thirties and forties has never been duly recognized; yet contemporaries regarded the 'diseased habit of analysis,' 'the ingenious invention of labyrinth meandering into the mazes of the mind,' or in nobler phrase, 'the dialogue of the mind with itself' as characteristic of the times" (Tillotson
These phrases, from Fraser's in March 1848, Blackwood's in April 1846, and Arnold's preface to his Poems, 1853, are all, in varying degrees, depreciative, a critical judgment typical of the period despite the increasing internality of fiction and poetry. The Blackwood's critic, John Eagles, specifically referring to a fictional autobiography, Anne Marsh's Mount Sorel, states emphatically that this internal meandering is not the way to write a proper novel: "Such was not the mode adopted heretofore by more vigorous writers, who preferred exhibiting the passions by action, and a few simple touches, which come at once to the heart, without the necessity of unravelling the mismazes of their course" (413). "Vigorous" is a code word suggesting "masculine," and internality is often associated with the feminine or effeminate, the "weak."

Private introspection in diaries and journals has a long history in England, especially in Dissenting or Low Church circles. These, which we proleptically call "spiritual autobiographies," contributed markedly to the emergence of the modern novel, beginning in the eighteenth century, and it is difficult for us to imagine the novel without such internality. What is being testified to here, however, is that even in the middle of the nineteenth century the "public display" of introspection was not yet an expected or accepted element of "real novels," though there was a generic mutation taking place about the time of the publication of Jane Eyre to accommodate such meanderings into the mismazes of mind and feelings.

A cool early review of Jane Eyre—in the Spectator for 6 November 1847—depreciatively identifies it with "that school where minute anatomy of the mind predominates over incident; the last being made subordinate to description or the display of character" (Allott 74). Even a favorable reviewer—A. W. Fonblanque in the Examiner for 27 November 1847—insists that Jane Eyre is not really a novel at all, and that it would be a disservice to it to judge it as one: "Taken as a novel or history of events, the book is obviously defective; but as an analysis of a single mind, as an elucidation of its progress from childhood to full age, it may claim comparison with any work of the same species" (Allott 77).

The novel in the late 1840s as defined by reviewers, then, is a his-

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tory of events in which incident predominates and the passions are exhibited by action. There is another "species" of fiction, reviewers acknowledge, but it is not to be identified with the novel and is of an inferior kind. The "note" of introspection, Tillotson points out, had been sounded in the novel well before the 1830s and 1840s, but it was muted by the louder chorus of novels of action and of society: "Despite the precedent of Caleb Williams, it was slower to establish itself in the novel, partly because it was obstructed in different ways by the dominance of Scott, of the 'silver-fork' novels, and of Dickens" (132). And, she might have added, by the general expectations as to the proper subject and mode of the novel. The precedent of Godwin that Tillotson cites is acknowledged by contemporary reviewers, either as an exception to the general inferiority of the type, or as the keynote of another, if slightly inferior genre of long fiction. John Eagles can remember "but one tale in which this style of descriptive searchings into the feelings is altogether justifiable—Godwin's Caleb Williams" (414). Fonblanque cites the same novel as the model of the type. Jane Eyre, he says, "is not a book to be examined page by page, with the fiction of Sir Walter Scott or Sir Edward Lytton or Mr. Dickens, from which . . . it differs altogether. It should rather be placed by the side of the autobiographies of Godwin and his successors, and its comparative value may be then reckoned up, without fear or favour" (Allott 77).

Though Things as They Are, or the Adventures of Caleb Williams, as it was first called, was published in 1794, more than fifty years before Jane Eyre and before the word autobiography was introduced into the language, and Godwin's fictional "autobiographies" St. Leon (1799) and Fleetwood (1805) were published only a few years later, Godwin's work was still very much part of the literary scene in the 1840s. His last novel, Deloraine, had appeared as recently as 1833—after the death of Sir Walter Scott—and Caleb Williams (no. 2), St. Leon (no. 5), and Fleetwood (no. 22), all reissued in the long-lived Bentley's Standard Novels series in the 1830s, were not only in print but were still being advertised in the late 1840s (see, e.g., the 17 July 1847 Athenaeum [no. 1029:776]). Author of the radical political treatise Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793), husband of the radical feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, father-in-law of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and grandfather,
as it were, of *Frankenstein*, Godwin was identified with revolutionary Romanticism, the Gothic, and feminism. In his fictional autobiographies, he characteristically pits the individual against society; in *Caleb Williams* the repressive power and injustice of privilege is so great it achieves almost supernatural or Gothic dimensions. Thus Godwin and his daughter preempt that high Romantic, aristocratic Gothic form for political radicalism and feminism. Fonblanque, editor of the radical *Examiner*, no doubt knew what he was doing when he tried to co-opt the startling new novel of the year 1847 for his cause. *Autobiography*, too, had somewhat radical connotations, not only in its scientific sound but in its suggestion of the autonomy of the individual, the celebration of self. Many contemporary readers thus may have expected *Jane Eyre* to conform to the Godwinian pattern and the radical implication of autobiography, especially when the term has the power of primacy in its place as subtitle and when the opening episode treats rebellion so memorably and sympathetically.

Fictional autobiography was not the sole property of the Godwin "school," however; other influential novelists had tried their hand at the form. It is unlikely to occur to us immediately to associate Bulwer Lytton with William Godwin either in politics or in literature. Though no Radical, Bulwer had been a reasonably active Liberal early in his parliamentary career, and his candidacy had been approved by Godwin. Though by 1847 his last dozen or so novels had been in the third person, and many, like *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), were quite literally histories of events and thus "real" novels, Lytton’s early novels had been in the first person: *Falkland* (1827), an epistolary novel; the others—*Pelham* (1828), *The Disowned* (1829), and *Devereux* (1829)—fictional autobiographies. The last of these began with "The Autobiographer's Introduction" that has already been cited. Though these novels do not markedly resemble Godwin’s except in first-person narration, Lytton’s character names echo Godwin’s and suggest a generic continuity: Falkland is the name of Caleb Williams’s persecutor; Lytton’s Falkland seduces a Lady Emily Mandeville, and Mandeville is the eponymous hero of another of Godwin’s fictional autobiographies; a Tyrrel appears both in *Caleb Williams* and *Pelham*. But by 1830 Lytton had apparently abandoned first-person narration for fashionable and
historical fiction, and he did so for reasons that anticipate the judgments of Eagles and Fonblanque. In the dedicatory epistle prefacing the 1836 edition of Devereux, he says of that novel and The Disowned, "The external and dramatic colourings which belong to fiction are too often forsaken for the inward and subtle analysis of motives, characters, and actions" (vi). Nonetheless, Devereux had appeared in a new edition in 1841, that novel and Pelham both being in Colburn's Modern Standard Novelists series, and the Cheap Edition of his novels and tales was being advertised in the 21 August 1847 Athenaeum (1034:875), less than two months before the publication of Jane Eyre. Lytton's fictional autobiographies and his prefatory comments on the genre were thus part of the literary dialogue within which a new first-person novel in 1847 would take its place.

The author of Margaret Russell in 1846 defended fictional autobiography for its internality, which paradoxically led outward to authentic universality: "One life, however varied in its scenes and outward acts, is, in its more essential and internal character, but the reflex of all" (Russell 4). Reviewers in the 1840s were still depreciative, however: aside from "meandering into the mazes of the mind," and lacking (masculine) vigor, fictional autobiographies were radical, antisocial, and displayed "an unhealthy egotism; a Byronism of personal feeling" (Eagles 413). It is, indeed, the radical dandy Byron, not the radical feminist Godwin, who is Lytton's chief master, as he was Disraeli's (Stone 197). It is not difficult to find the egotism, Byronic or otherwise, in Lytton; it is impossible to miss it in Disraeli—at the very beginning of Contarini Fleming, for example:

When I turn over the pages of the metaphysician, I perceive a science that deals in words instead of facts. Arbitrary axioms lead to results that violate reason; imaginary principles establish systems that contradict the common sense of mankind. All is dogma, no part demonstration. Wearied, perplexed, doubtful, I throw down the volume in disgust.

When I search into my own breast, and trace the development of my own intellect, and the formation of my own character, all is light and order. The luminous succeeds to the obscure, the certain to the doubtful, the intelligent to the illogical, the practical to the impossible, and I experi-
ence all that refined and ennobling satisfaction that we derive from the
discovery of truth and contemplation of nature.

I have resolved, therefore, to write the history of my own life, be­
because it is the subject of which I have the truest knowledge. (4)

In the preface to the 1846 edition of Contarini, Disraeli anticipates
Eagles's objections to the genre and justifies his use of the autobiog­
ographical form as Eagles a few months later would justify that of
Caleb Williams: "When the author meditated over the entireness of the
subject," Disraeli says, "it appeared to him that the autobiographical
form was a necessary condition of a successful fulfillment. It seemed
the only instrument that could penetrate the innermost secrets of the
brain and heart" (ix-x). After writing the Byronic Contarini Fleming in
1832, however, Disraeli had abandoned fictional autobiography and by
the mid-forties had in Coningsby (1844), Sybil (1845), and Tancred (1847)
transmuted the fashionable and the Byronic into the political novel.
The new edition of Contarini thus appeared amid the publication and
acclaim of the three political works.

In 1847, then, though the novel was still for many readers and
reviewers "a history of events," the autobiographical genre was de­
fended for the very reason it had been criticized—its internality, intro­
spection, and subjectively authenticated "truth." And though some of
the "autobiographies" were by women and of a domestic kind, there
were others that were swashbuckling or Byronic, by authors more as­
associated with the fashionable, the historical, or the political. The term
autobiography was thus both familiar and strange: rare enough still in
fiction to call up particular contexts and expectations yet not confined
to a genre or gender. It was a term, then, that from its novelty and
varied appearances was dialogically refracted.

Victorian readers or reviewers like Fonblanque or Eagles seeking
to anticipate or comprehend the relevance of the subtitle of Jane Eyre.
An Autobiography might understandably look past Lytton and Disraeli
and back to Godwin and his radical (and feminist) circle, especially
after they had read the first sentences of the new novel. Disraeli's
name in particular would seem strange linked to that of Currer Bell,
as would, in the same way and for similar reasons, the linking of the
CHAPTER 1

names of the two fictional autobiographers: Contarini Fleming, the eldest son of "Baron Fleming, a Saxon nobleman of ancient family [and the] daughter of the noble [Venetian] house of Contarini" (4); and Jane Eyre, the plain, small, poor, orphaned daughter of a clerical father and disinherited mother. Nothing could be more different from the exotic cosmopolitanism of Disraeli's setting than the mundane provincialism of Brontë's. Nothing could be more different from the Byronic self-aggrandizement of Childe Contarini in a world that responds to his emotions and imagination than the shivering but resilient self of little Jane in her hostile and unresponsive world. Nothing could be more different from the situations and settings of the two autobiographies unless it is the prose in which they are realized.

Ten-year-old Jane, an alien and unwelcome presence in the mundane household of her deceased uncle's wife, having been banished from the fireside and the company of her aunt and three cousins, is curled up in the curtained window seat in another room looking at a book with pictures, the scene prefaced by prose as raw and somber as the weather on that northern English November day:

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. . . . I was glad of it; I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons; dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart . . . humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed. (3)

Contarini Fleming, on the other hand, opens with the young narrator "wandering in those deserts of Africa that border the Erythraean Sea" (1), arriving at the "halls of the Pharoahs," and musing on the vanished past. Then, the

wind arose, the bosom of the desert heaved, pillars of sand sprang from the earth and whirled across the plain; sounds more awful than thunder came rushing from the south; . . . I knelt down and hid my face in the moveable and burning soil, and as the wind of the desert passed over me, methought it whispered, "Child of Nature, learn to unlearn!" (2)

Despite their differences, however, both Contarini Fleming and Jane Eyre belong to the then rare genre of fictional autobiography, and their opening incidents, despite their radically different prose styles, are so
similar as to suggest that Brontë’s novel may be a response to Disraeli’s or that its scenic and situational “utterance” must force its way through the narrative territory already occupied by the opening of Contarini Fleming if it is to make its own statement. The ostracized orphan Jane, we all remember, is discovered by her bullying cousin John, who strikes her, insults her, and throws a book at her. She has been mistreated by him before, but now, for the first time, she fights back, furiously, and it is this act that destabilizes the situation and sets in motion the action of the novel. Resisting all the way, she is carried off by the servants and locked in the red-room. When, in the second chapter, Contarini’s autobiography begins, he is a motherless and “melancholy child” (4) in a household he hates. His father had remarried, moved north, and sired two blond and wholly Saxon sons. The dark, southern child feels alienated from his new family in the “rigid clime whither I had been brought to live” (5). In the first dramatized incident, which takes place when Contarini is about eight years old, nearly the same age as Jane, one of his half brothers calls him stupid, and Contarini strikes him. As a consequence, “[I] was conducted to my room, and my door was locked on the outside” (6). Defiantly he bolts it on the inside and all day long refuses to open the door. The servants finally break it down, but he gnashes his teeth and growls at them. His stepmother summons his father, whom he allows to enter: “I burst into a wild cry; I rushed to his arms. He pressed me to his bosom. He tried to kiss away the flooding tears that each embrace called forth more plenteously. For the first time in my life, I felt loved” (7).

The sense of dialogue between these very different novels is intensified when the initial commonplace and realistic opening scene is immediately followed in both novels by the unexpected appearance of what seems to be a ghost. While confined in the red-room, as it begins to grow dark Jane begins to think of death and ghosts:

I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room: at this moment a light gleamed on the wall. Was it, I asked myself, a ray from the moon penetrating some aperture in the blind? No; moonlight was still and this stirred: while I gazed, it glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head. . . . I thought the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew
hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort. (15)

In *Contarini Fleming*, the young culprit has already been released from confinement, and the apparition is a separate, yet immediately sequential incident. Still a child, Contarini falls in love with a young lady eight years or more older than he, his cousin Christiana. Despite the expression of love he won from his father in the first episode, Contarini tells his cousin that no one loves him. She assures him that everyone does, that she herself does, "and she kissed me with a thousand kisses" (11). At a children's ball, however, she seems to be wholly absorbed by another partner, a boy two years older than Contarini. The despondent Contarini steals away to his dark bedroom and throws himself on his bed:

> My forehead was burning hot, my feet were icy cold. My heart seemed in my throat. I felt quite sick. I could not speak; I could not weep; I could not think. Everything seemed blended in one terrible sensation of desolate and desolating wretchedness.

> ... there was a sound in the room, light and gentle. I looked around; I thought that a shadowy form passed between me and the window. A feeling of terror crossed me. I nearly cried out. (14)

The voice of the older Jane, the narrating Jane, rarely interrupts the action in the early scenes of the novel, but it does so at the critical juncture in the red-room scene to explain away the ghost: "I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern, carried by someone across the lawn" (15). Contarini's visitant too is no ghost; it is Christiana come to fetch him back to the ball and to reassure him of her love. It is her visit rather than his father's expression of love that the autobiographer calls "the first great incident of my life" (12). Once again, Contarini gains love, Jane only more hostility.

Though the opening scenes of childhood fights and the forcible confining of the prideful autobiographers suggest a homologous relationship between these two internalized narratives, and the prior presence of *Contarini* dialogizes the opening of *Jane Eyre*, the similarity
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of scenes helps define *Jane Eyre’s* difference. Though both children feel marginalized in their household, the privileged Contarini, unlike the dependent Jane, is the older child, strikes the first blow, and, though locked in a room initially against his will, the room he is locked in is his own room and it is he who prolongs the incarceration. Most important, his rebellion succeeds: for the first time he is assured of love, parental love. Jane’s violent rebellion does not succeed. She tries to escape the room in which she is imprisoned, begging her aunt to release her. But her aunt pushes her back into the room, and Jane faints. Love-starved like Contarini—"You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so," she later tells her aunt—pride and rebellion earn her not assurance of love but further banishment; she loses even this poor substitute for a family and a home.

The coincident opening suite of scenes in *Jane Eyre* and *Contarini Fleming* makes Brontë’s scene polysemic. Though the novels thereafter go almost diametrically different ways, and for Brontë’s reader Disraeli’s novel is backgrounded, because of the primacy effect it is not entirely lost. The aura of Byronism is now part of the world of the novel. *Contarini Fleming* in its fashion prepares the way for *Jane Eyre’s* own Byronic hero, Rochester. More important, the narrative outcome and moral vision of Brontë’s fictional autobiography is problematized: Godwin’s rebellious hero Caleb Williams is victimized, Disraeli’s Contarini triumphs. Whither Jane?

The dialogue of *Jane Eyre* with its contemporary fictional context through its opening incidents is not limited to *Contarini Fleming*. Scenes like those in Brontë’s and Disraeli’s fictional autobiographies also appear in a number of other novels that, though not precisely autobiographies or even analyses of a single mind, are at least fictional biographies or "histories." Such scenes are so frequent as to be narrative commonplaces, or what I shall call "scenic topoi."

One novel with a strikingly similar incident, or scenic topos, like *Contarini* appeared in a new edition in 1846. It is a novel few readers were (or are) likely to have missed: *Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy’s Progress*. Neither an autobiography nor Byronic, this “history” of a foundling seems, in its sympathy for the underdog and antipathy for entrenched authority, Godwinian, if not particularly radical. Though
crime is treated in a totally different fashion, even the Newgate aspects of Oliver Twist may recall Caleb Williams. In its faith in human innocence, its foundling theme, and its stereotypes—such as "the outcast waif and benevolent gentleman" (R. Colby 120)—Oliver Twist seems in the sentimental or "low" (as opposed to the Byronic or "high") Romantic mode. In its Bunyanesque subtitle and tendency toward moral as well as social allegory (Lankford 20–31), it is related to a still "lower" tradition, the religious, didactic, and domestic novel, which will figure significantly in the grounding of Jane Eyre and as a major element in the new species of novel Charlotte Brontë is evolving.

Its early situation and scenes further refine and refract the opening of Jane Eyre. Oliver, like Jane but not like Contarini, is poor and "diminutive"; he is not only an orphan like Jane but, worse, a foundling. He is locked up not once but twice in the early (though not the first) chapters of his "history." The first time, on his ninth birthday, he is confined with two other boys; the second time, like Contarini and Jane, he is confined alone, for fighting. The second occasion is introduced by Dickens as the true beginning of Oliver's "progress," just as the similar incidents were the true beginnings—the destabilizing events—of Jane's and Contarini's life stories: "And now I come to a very important passage in Oliver's history; for I have to record an act slight and unimportant perhaps in appearance: but which indirectly produced a most material change in all his future prospects and proceedings" (35).

The ten-year-old Oliver (Jane is ten when we first meet her, Contarini eight) has been apprenticed to an undertaker and, like Jane, is the unwelcome intruder in the household. A fellow worker, Noah Claypole, taunts the younger and smaller Oliver and pulls his hair and ears. Like Jane on earlier occasions, Oliver endures the mistreatment. When Noah insults the memory of Oliver's mother, however, Oliver "[grabbed] Noah by the throat; shook him, in the violence of his rage, till his teeth chattered in his head; and, collecting his whole force into one heavy blow, felled him to the ground" (32).

The undertaker's daughter and wife come to Noah's rescue, dragging "Oliver, struggling and shouting, but nothing daunted, into the dust-cellar, and there locked him up" (32). Jane found that "four
hands were immediately laid upon me, and I was borne upstairs,” and she too “resisted all the way” (8–9). Jane screams violently in panic; Oliver kicks violently in anger. The beadle is summoned; he suggests that part of Oliver’s conduct must come from his bad family. At this point, Oliver, believing his mother is being insulted again, recommences kicking. When Sowerberry returns, he releases Oliver, scolds him, shakes him, and boxes his ears, as Aunt Reed does to Jane when the child challenges her (28). Oliver protests that Noah has brought his punishment on himself by insulting Oliver’s mother, but Mrs. Sowerby says his mother deserved Noah’s insults. Oliver says Mrs. Sowerby is lying; she bursts into tears (41–42). Jane, too, brings her guardian to the verge of tears by accusing her Aunt Reed of deceit: “‘People think you a good woman, but you are bad; hard-hearted. You are deceitful! . . .’ Mrs. Reed looked frightened; . . . twisting her face as if she would cry” (39–40).

There are other significantly similar episodes in Jane Eyre and Oliver Twist in the earlier portions of each novel, though the sequences of the events are different. It is as a consequence of her behavior leading to and during her incarceration that Jane is sent to Lowood Institution, a charity school. Oliver has already been confined in a “charitable” institution, a workhouse, indeed was born there. After his punishment—he has been beaten by the undertaker and Bumble as well as having been locked away—he escapes Sowerberry and begins his odyssey. Jane is frightened by what she believes may be a ghost while confined in the red-room, where her uncle died nine years before; Oliver has been confronted by the ghostlike earlier, on the first night he spent in the undertaker’s workshop:

An unfinished coffin on black tresses, which stood in the middle of the shop, looked so gloomy and deathlike that a cold tremble came over him, every time his eyes wandered in the direction of the dismal object: from which he almost expected to see some frightful form slowly rear its head, to drive him mad with terror. Against the wall, were ranged, in regular array, a long row of elm boards cut into the same shape: looking, in the dim light, like high-shouldered ghosts with their hands in their breeches-pockets. (25)
Oliver is too depressed by the loneliness, gloominess, and strangeness to be terrified; he falls asleep.

Oliver, like a Godwinian hero, is persecuted because he is a victim—an orphan, poor—as Jane is. Though Jane is not a foundling, she might be better off with fewer Reed relatives, and like Oliver, she searches throughout her story for a home, a hearth like the one from which she was banished on the first page of the novel. Neither Contarini nor Oliver, different as they are, need to change or grow morally, though Contarini must learn a good deal more about the world, and Oliver about evil and about his own heritage. Both are blameless but besieged by a hostile world. The text of Jane Eyre, in a rare allusion to literature, reinforces the contextual assumption of innocence by referring to two other fictional innocents: Pamela and Henry, Earl of Moreland (5). The reference to Pamela is not immediately relevant, but it is now part of the text’s and the reader’s repertoire—and indeed it will be foregrounded later and discussed at some length at that time. But here it is Henry Moreland, John Wesley’s 1781 abridgment of Henry Brooke’s The Fool of Quality (1766-70)—a version frequently reprinted early in the nineteenth century—that is immediately relevant, for its opening chapter too involves a childhood fight and punishment by separation (though not physical confinement). The young hero, Henry, bloodies the nose of his older brother, Richard, who has insulted their foster mother, and Henry’s own mother banishes him. He is raised by simple foster parents and has a healthful, vigorous, unspoiled childhood, much unlike that of his pampered brother. He is a “fool” in that he is innocent. This is a sentimental tale in which man is naturally good, goodness is innocence, and the world is not so much hostile as corrupt and corrupting. Jane may well have seemed to the contemporary reader early in the novel an innocent in a hostile and corrupt world; many readers then and now continue to see her so. The power of contemporary fictional precedents seems to reinforce such a monologic view.

So, too, does the power of primacy. The opening scenes of a novel are crucial. They establish the tone, genre, and something of the development of the narrative, its outcome, and the nature of the fictional world. Meir Sternberg, attempting to define the signifying power of
the early portions of a novel, cites a psychological experiment in which blocks of character description of identical length but opposite meaning were presented to subjects in their entirety but in different order. As a rule not only did that which was presented first determine the interpretation but, despite explicit instructions to respond in terms of the passage as a whole, "the overwhelming majority of subjects did not even notice the glaring incompatibility of the information contained in the two successive segments":

Due to the successive order of presentation, the first block was read with an open mind, while the interpretation of the second—in itself as weighty—was decisively conditioned and colored by the anterior, homogeneous primacy effect; the leading block established a perceptual set, serving as a frame of reference to which the subsequent information was subordinated as far as possible. (94)

Sternberg finds this central in the analysis of the temporal ordering of fiction, and it does explain a good deal about the effect and interpretation of Jane Eyre, including the reading of the opening scenes.

Though ego and innocence are valorized by all the novels mentioned so far, encouraging a degree of monologic comprehension and projection, they vary enough to refract the narrative utterance of the opening chapter of Brontë’s novel into a polysemy that problematizes its outcome. Contarini is a successful “superior” rebel; Jane, so far, is not. Oliver finds home and family but is a child still when his narrative closes; Jane is no “fool,” not the sentimental innocent of Henry Moreland, but a witty, skeptical, and challenging child.

Disraeli and Dickens are canonical novelists, and even Henry Brooke has a place in standard histories of the novel. There are novelists, however, immensely popular in their day, now all but forgotten, who also served as a refracting context for the reading—and perhaps the writing—of Jane Eyre. Many of these popular novelists, often women, were identified with a particular fictional genre that would—in part through the power of Jane Eyre—come to dominate Victorian and early twentieth-century fiction. Generically we have been moving, from Contarini and Caleb Williams through Oliver Twist to Henry, Earl of Moreland, down from the high Romantic toward that kind of low Romantic novel known in the early nineteenth century as “the domes-
tic novel.” This is not a tag we would readily attach to *Jane Eyre*, but that is how Brontë’s novel was characterized at the time. The *Atlas* on 23 October 1847 calls it a “powerful domestic romance” (Allott 67), and the *People’s Journal* for November 1847 deems it “[a] notable domestic novel” (Allott 80). Eugène Fourçade, in his highly favorable review in *Revue des deux mondes* for 31 October 1848—a review approved of by Brontë herself—identifies *Jane Eyre* in a similar, if almost ludicrously Pari-centric fashion, as “a novel of country life” (Allott 102). “Domestic” seems to have meant British, familiar, of the present or very recent past, of private life as opposed to the public, social or “fashionable,” and “realistic” in the sense of the everyday.

Here we encounter something of an historical paradox: the domestic novels of the period before *Jane Eyre* (except for those of the anomalous and Inimitable Dickens) are largely unremembered, but “domestic realism” triumphs in the novel from about 1850 and brings with it the sentimentality, interiority, bourgeois morality, and, often, religiosity of the earlier domestic novels. From our vantage point the language and moral vision of young Jane, the romantic rebel, is centrifugal, carnivalistic, and modern (i.e., good); that of the mature Jane, the domestic realist and moralist, represents monologic narrative language and ideology, the “Victorian,” the official, the centripetal. In fact, it was domestic realism that challenged the hegemony of the patriarchy and the aristocracy, the centrality and autonomy of the ego common in romantic literature, and the very concept of the novel as “a history of events” with its accompanying elevated style. These novels (and the mature Jane’s narrative) certainly do not seem “carnivalistic” in the Rabelesian or Bakhtinian sense, but they are in their quiet way subversive.

In domestic novels, too, we find topoi familiar to us from the early chapters of *Jane Eyre*. One eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century tributary flowing into the main stream of the domestic novel was the moral didactic tale, often intended for children. Such a tale is Barbara Hofland’s long-popular *Ellen, the Teacher. A Tale for Youth* (1814)—a new edition is advertised in the 6 March 1847 *Athenaeum* (1010:251)—which further dialogizes the opening scenes of *Jane Eyre*. This “story . . . about a poor orphan girl who suffers miserably in boarding school, eventually makes good as a governess and ultimately marries her cousin,”

28
Inga-Stina Ewbank suggests, “may have been one of the germs from which *Jane Eyre* grew” (21). There are striking resemblances between the early chapters of the two novels. Though the scene does not open the novel, and though the occasion is not fighting, but a false accusation of lying at school (Jane, too, will be falsely accused of lying at Lowood), young Ellen Delville is, like Jane, Contarini, Oliver, and Henry Moreland, punished by being locked away in a room. Though no “ghost” appears or seems to appear while she is confined, she does faint during her punishment and does fall ill afterwards, just as Jane does. The physician called in to treat Ellen’s badly infected finger befriends her, and, like the apothecary Mr. Lloyd who comes to treat Jane, he seems to be the only sympathetic soul in the poor girl’s hostile environment.

When Mrs. Reed decides to send Jane to Lowood Institution, a charity school, the director, the Reverend Mr. Brocklehurst, arrives to interview his new charge. He seems to the young Jane Eyre “a black pillar” (33). His imposing size, his harsh, prim appearance and bullying manner, intensify our sympathy for the beleaguered Jane. Most of us are delighted by her frank, honest, unintimidated answers to his uncritical, pietistic questions. When Brocklehurst asks her what she must do to avoid hell, she says, “I must keep in good health, and not die” (34). When he asks whether she reads the Bible with pleasure, she says that though she likes some parts, she does not find the Psalms “interesting.” Even in our more secular age, Jane’s responses may make us fear for her future. More than a few Victorian readers may have been not only made fearful for her future but also less certain of her moral probity. It is one thing to parry the thrusts of the Pharisee, another to be flippant about religion or critically selective about Scripture. With the “supernatural” scene in the red-room and the hint of blasphemy here, the place of religion, of orthodoxy, is at least problematized.

Jane is not naive. Is she innocent? It was not an assumption of Calvinists or evangelicals. Though childhood in *Oliver Twist* and *Henry, Earl of Moreland* is pure, childhood in Hofland’s novel is not a period of prelapsarian innocence protected for a time from a world that inevitably corrupts. Young Ellen Delville, though she has our sympathy, is a fiery little girl. She protests that she is “not passionate—I mean
not very passionate; I never go into a rage, like Betsy Burns” (Hofland 4). Her mother (who will soon die, leaving Ellen, like so many of the young heroes and heroines of the period, an orphan) accuses her of often getting excessively angry with too little cause. She warns her that shame always follows passion. In Brontë’s novel it is not Jane’s friend Helen Burns who is the passionate child, but the protagonist herself: “You are passionate, Jane, that you must allow,” her aunt tells her (40). Most readers find Jane’s fiery anger justified, but Jane discovers that passion is akin to madness and its aftermath often unpleasant:

A child cannot quarrel with its elders, as I had done; cannot give its furious feelings uncontrolled play, as I had given mine; without experiencing afterwards the pang of remorse and the chill of reaction. . . . half an hour’s silence and reflection had shewn me the madness of my conduct, and the dreariness of my hated and hating position. . . . Willingly would I now have gone and asked Mrs. Reed’s pardon. (40-41)

The “rhetoric of anticipatory caution”—in which “the primacy effect itself—and hence our attitude to the protagonist, whose information or view largely gives rise to it—is perceptibly qualified from the beginning” (Sternberg 129)—in this passage serves to warn us that Jane’s rebellious independence, delightful and satisfying as it is at the moment, may lead her into moral difficulties. The reader of contemporary novels like Ellen is doubly warned. But other contemporary novels, such as Oliver Twist, that valorize the child and his or her innocence, as does the primacy effect of Jane’s justified rebellion in the text, create considerable polysemic static around such scenes and problematize the informed reader’s expectations and projected configurations.

The “sad Effects” of a child’s “Rage and Anger” are shown in another influential moral didactic tale. Sarah Fielding’s The Governess; or, Little Female Academy was first published in the mid-eighteenth century but was still so popular in the nineteenth that the best-selling writer of moral tales for children of the time, Mrs. Sherwood herself, rather ruthlessly redacted it for her own audience and purposes. Though it is not nearly so close to Jane Eyre on the whole as Ellen, its first narrative incident is familiar: “An Account of a Fray, begun and carried on for the sake of an Apple. In which are shewn the sad Effects of Rage and Anger.” And it immediately thereafter sets up autobiog-
raphy as a moral mode, as example, or, at least, as a means of introspection. After the "fray," one of the students recommends love, not fighting, and friendship, not revenge; then she promises to tell something morally instructive about her own life.

"And after I have given you the Particulars of my Life, I must beg that every one of you will some Day or other, when you have reflected upon it, declare all that you can remember of your own; for, should you not be able to relate anything worth remembering as an Example, yet there is nothing more likely to amend the future Part of any one's Life, than the recollecting and confessing the Faults of the past." (Fielding 121)

Introspection and example are the traditional functions of what we now call the spiritual autobiography, common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That tradition wends its way into fiction through Bunyan and Defoe and into fictional autobiographies such as Mrs. Sherwood's *Caroline Mordaunt; or, The Governess* (1835)—didactic, religious, domestic, written by a female for a female audience. Like the traditional spiritual autobiography, it is an apologia, the story of growing awareness of God's Providence and of deliverance. Its nature and narrative mode suggest an alternative autobiographical tradition to that of Godwin and his successors, not to mention that of the Byronic Disraeli and Lytton, and therefore would necessarily complicate the contemporary readers' expectations, and would thus dialogize *Jane Eyre*.

A significant portion of *Jane Eyre's* audience must have read or known of most of the novels we have been discussing, and it is likely that a substantial number would have read more than one. From the very beginning of *Jane Eyre*, then, such readers would have felt the world of that novel familiar and would have been alerted to a range of expectations generated by the conventional scenic topoi with which *Jane Eyre* opens. But some of the most eclectic readers may have been puzzled, for the expectations were overdetermined. The opening episodes, while commonplaces in contemporary narrative, had been put to such a variety of uses by such different fictional kinds they were generically polysemic.

The function of such conventions, however, is not to assure "right" guesses about what will happen next, nor, just yet, to define exactly what kind of moral and consequential universe is being embodied,
but, through the refractive or dialogic interaction of the novels and their generic kinds, to generate a number of narrative, moral, and epistemological expectations, to enrich the reading by offering alternative possibilities that are sometimes alternative visions of reality, and to keep the reader’s mind actively engaged in creating the work by projecting its “future” and therefore its shape and meaning. \textit{Jane Eyre} is not merely what it “says” when the final temporary gap of indeterminacy is closed; it is also all that it projects and rejects along the way.

For modern readers in particular, it is important to take the anticipatory cautions seriously and to recover at least some of the relevant representative novels of the period in order to experience the dialogic nature, the ambiguous signals, and thus the suspense with regard to outcome and ontology of \textit{Jane Eyre}. Not only is the primacy effect of Jane’s isolation and John Reed’s cruel treatment of her very strong, and not only have the literary conventions to which Brontë appeals been forgotten, but the religious and behavioral values that underlay them have faded as well. “Our” Jane, the rebellious one, is undeniably in the text, but her shadowy domestic and religious sister is there too, and in \textit{Jane Eyre} shadows have substance just as voices calling across vast spaces have valid messages.