When Jane enters Lowood Institution it is an environment strange to her but familiar to the Victorian novel-reader. The school as setting and teachers as characters were common in nineteenth-century fiction (see R. Colby 15-16), and no other portion of *Jane Eyre* has been so specifically and frequently identified with literary precedent as has the Lowood section. Yet, ironically, nothing in the novel is taken more directly from Brontë’s own experience. Cowan Bridge School, the Reverend Carus Wilson, and the death of her own sister Maria supplied Charlotte Brontë with all the material she needed for the creation of Lowood Institution, the Reverend Mr. Brocklehurst, and the poignant presentation of the last days of Helen Burns (“Lowood School, and the Rev. Mr. Brocklehurst,” Clarendon 615-21). Brontë’s narrative, however, was already heteroglossically occupied—by other school novels, the scandal surrounding Yorkshire schools, and, in particular, *Nicholas Nickleby*. These scenes are made to seem familiar and “highlighted” while at the same time their originality and personal force are “dimmed” by a fictional precedent, by the contemporary social and fictional context, by what Bakhtin calls a prior “alien word” (*Dialogic* 277). This prior “occupation” is most obvious in the relation of Lowood to Dickens’s Dotheboys Hall. G. H. Lewes in the *Westminster Review* (48 [January 1848]: 297) was not the only one to call Lowood Institution “in some respects a second edition
of Dotheboys Hall” and more than one reviewer compared Brocklehurst to Squeers.²

We meet Brocklehurst before his Institution and Squeers before the Hall. Wackford Squeers is not, like Brocklehurst—and Carus Wilson—a man of the cloth, though he seems to want to appear so: he is “clad in sombre garments, and long black gaiters, and bear[s] in his countenance an expression of much mortification and sanctity” (Nickleby 2:34). He behaves in a kindly fashion to the boys when a prospective client is present, cruelly when no one is watching; he spouts morality and piety, and denies the flesh—of others—to fatten his own wallet. When, in the first scene in which Squeers figures, a Mr. Snawley approaches to dispose of his stepsons, the two men seem to understand each other immediately. Squeers stresses the beautiful morality that Mrs. Squeers instills in the students, and Snawley says he is particularly interested in having the boys’ morality attended to—though morality prevents neither man from haggling over money. Squeers understands perfectly when Snawley says that he fears their mother might squander money on them and spoil them if they were to remain at home:

“And this,” resumed Snawley, “has made me anxious to put them to some school a good distance off, where there are no holidays—none of those ill-judged comings home twice a year that unsettle children’s minds so—and where they may rough it a little—you comprehend?”

“The payments regular, and no questions asked,” said Squeers, nodding his head.

“That’s it, exactly,” rejoined the other. “Morals strictly attended to, though.”

“Strictly,” said Squeers. (2:35)

Mrs. Reed also wants her charge’s morals strictly attended to:

“Mr. Brocklehurst, . . . this little girl has not quite the character and disposition I could wish: should you admit her into Lowood school, I should be glad if the superintendent and teachers were all requested to keep a strict eye on her, and, above all, to guard against her worst fault, a tendency to deceit.” (35)
She, too, makes it clear that she does not wish to be encumbered by Jane during holidays: "I should wish her . . . to be made useful, to be kept humble: as for vacations, she will, with your permission, spend them always at Lowood" (36). He finds her decision and desires "perfectly judicious." Brocklehurst brags of having "mortified the worldly sentiment of pride" in the Lowood girls and teaching them humility by dressing them as if they were "poor people's children," while his wife and daughter wear silk gowns. Squeers, breakfasting on coffee, hot toast, and a round of cold beef, serves five boys two pennies' worth of milk, watered, and divides bread and butter for three among them: "'Conquer your passions, boys, and don't be eager after vittles,' he says. As he uttered this moral precept, Mr. Squeers took a large bite out of the cold beef" (2:45).

Very good advice this, morality aside, for those who are to live at Dotheboys Hall, where, if not burnt as it is at Lowood, the ubiquitous and universally reviled porridge is scarcely more appetizing or sustaining: "Into these bowls, Mrs. Squeers, assisted by the hungry servant, poured a brown composition which looked like diluted pin-cushions without the covers, and was called porridge" (2:89). Porridge, even when neither burnt nor diluted, seems to have been the bane of school or nursery diet, at least in novels; Mrs. Sherwood's Caroline Mordaunt describes porridge as "a sort of mess which is generally loathed by English palates, and which I presently perceived that nothing but excessive hunger could have compelled these young people to swallow" (Caroline 285). At Dotheboys Hall, when the boys finished their porridge and "a minute wedge of brown bread, . . . Mr. Squeers said, in a solemn voice, 'For what we have received, may the Lord make us truly thankful'—and went away to his own" (2:89-90). The burnt porridge at Lowood is also followed by thanksgiving: "Thanks being returned for what we had not got, and a second hymn chanted, the refectory was evacuated for the school-room" (51). Jane's irony in the context of prayer, though justifiable, further dialogizes the religious discourse of *Jane Eyre*; given Jane's rebelliousness and skepticism and our sympathy for Jane, the irony directed toward religious hypocrisy spills over onto religion itself, ambiguating the moral nature of
the novel's universe, particularly since the irony is that of the mature, narrating Jane and so seems to have full authorization.

Though there is no such ambiguity in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the school portions of the two novels are remarkably parallel. Florence Dry finds not only the food but the entire institutional regimen in Lowood and Dotheboys similar:

Morning comes too soon for Nicholas and Jane; each dresses in bitter cold by candlelight. Morning prayers and Bible study at Lowood School take the place of brimstone and treacle at Dotheboys Hall, after which both schools breakfast on porridge which is equally distasteful. When Mr. Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby* calls up the first class, "half-a-dozen scarecrows out at knees and elbows" range themselves in front of his desk. When Miss Miller in *Jane Eyre* does likewise, "eighty girls sat motionless and erect: a quaint assemblage they appeared. . . . [Their] costume suited them ill, and gave an air of oddity even to the prettiest." This suggests the "singular dress" of Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Similar are the dinners at both establishment, the one of "stir-about and potatoes and hard salt beef" the other of "indifferent potatoes and strange shreds of rusty meat, mixed and cooked together." Frozen water, unpleasant lessons, and distasteful and insufficient food are the order of the day at Dotheboys Hall and Lowood School. (12-13)

Dry also sees a significant similarity between the friend Jane makes at Lowood, Helen Burns, and the abused and somewhat retarded grown-up pupil Nicholas Nickleby befriends, Smike: they both die of consumption; their dying words are not dissimilar; they both welcome death and die quietly in their sleep (15).

Though the context of the Yorkshire schools does juxtapose Smike and Helen, there is heteroglossic refraction or static around Helen Burns from other directions. There is in the contemporary fictional context, for example, a similar pairing of the rebellious young heroine with a pious young friend or sister, occasioning a scene of moral or religious debate. In Rachel McCrindell's *The English Governess* (1844), a new edition of which was advertised in the *Athenaeum* of 17 April 1847 (1016:412) just six months before *Jane Eyre* was published, there are two sisters (like Charlotte and Maria) who more than somewhat resemble
Helen and Jane in their physical and moral conditions: pride and passion dominate the features of Maria Neville, the elder sister, while the eighteen-year-old Clara has "a complexion, delicate almost to transparency, [that] announced a weak and precarious state of health"; sunshine both confirms "the idea of early death . . . [and] . . . surrounds her with a kind of celestial radiance, prophetic of angelic glory" (9). When the delicate, celestial Clara tells Maria to endure mistreatment from the man their widowed mother wants to marry and to be guided by Scripture, Maria retorts,

"Clara, you are a dear good little girl, but you know I cannot think as you do on the subject of religion. You may have a great deal of scripture, and even reason on your side; but I cannot believe that it is my duty to sacrifice my feelings, my interest, my happiness, and everything that is dear to me, merely because my mother [wants to remarry]. Your principles of passive obedience and non-resistance may lead you to bear it patiently; [but I will not]." (10-11)

When Helen instructs Jane to eschew violence and revenge and to love her enemies as the New Testament tells us to do, Jane is no more moved to such behavior than is Maria:

"If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way. . . . When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back . . . so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again." (65)

Despite appearances, Clara lives, becomes the English Governess, and leads a happy (though not unperilous) life; Helen Burns dies while still a schoolgirl. For the reader of McCrindell, then, Helen's early death, so clearly foreshadowed in the text of Jane Eyre, is not inevitable. The fate of the proud and passionate Maria does not bode well for Jane; sick and abandoned, Maria comes to Christ only on her deathbed. The eponymous heroine of Ellen the Teacher, on the other hand, who was, like Jane, proud and passionate as a child (though not so passionate as her friend Betsy Burns), does not die an early death but grows into a paragon of patience and control. Jane's future as well as the moral register of Brontë's novel is thus problematized by the fictional context, by the heteroglossically occupied scenic topoi.
Helen's early death at Lowood, we know, was based on the death of Charlotte's sister Maria at Cowan Bridge School, but the death of a child was all too familiar in the Victorian reader's experience. In 1828 Brocklehurst's original—though he may be exaggerating just a little to make his moral point—the Reverend William Carus Wilson, claims that "the greatest part of the human race die in infancy" (Clarendon 621). Brocklehurst's story of the good child who died at five years of age and his Child's Guide with its story of the sudden death of a "child addicted to falsehood and deceit" (37) are faithful to the tone and content of Carus Wilson's *The Children's Friend* (Clarendon 621). Though Brontë's source was no doubt Wilson, Wilson himself was only using a common subject for tracts, sermons, and religious exempla. The *Methodist Magazine*, for example, a complete run of which graced Haworth Parsonage (Gérin, Brontë 35; Leyland 105), was full of deathbed scenes, including those of children. The 1803 volume, for example, lists some twenty-three entries in the index under "Experience and happy Death of." One scene of "happy Death" is that of "A Boy belonging to the Sunday-Schools in London." This presumably factual account of the death of Isaac Eke, who had been suffering for long months from fever, could have come from one of any number of novels of the early Victorian period, for the child deaths in Victorian novels are as common as explicit sex in modern novels.

The most famous child-death scenes, of course, are those in Dickens, who establishes the scenic topos. Helen's death in *Jane Eyre* most resembles not that of the childlike Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* but of the child Dick in *Oliver Twist*, a novel reissued not long before *Jane Eyre* was published and already conjured up in the reader's memory by earlier episodes. If Smike is, like Helen, part of the Yorkshire school scene, Oliver is closer to Jane than is Nicholas, his plight closer to hers than to that of Nicholas, and his relationship to Dick more like Jane's to Helen than Nicholas's to Smike.

As suggested in the first chapter of this study, many episodes in *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist* are similar, though the sequence varies. Jane fights, is locked in the red-room, and is later sent to Lowood Institution; Oliver was raised in parish institutions, and his fight and punishment take place afterward. So it is with the episodes surrounding the
deaths of the young friends of Oliver and Jane. Fleeing from Sowerberry’s, Oliver passes the workhouse where he grew up and sees in the garden his pale-faced friend: “They had been beaten and starved, and shut up together, many and many a time” (96). Oliver tells Dick he is running away, then expresses some anxiety about his friend’s pallor:

“I heard the doctor tell them I was dying,” replied the child with a faint smile. . . . I know the doctor must be right, Oliver, because I dream so much of Heaven, and Angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake. Kiss me,” said the child, climbing up the low gate, and flinging his little arms round Oliver’s neck. “Good-b’ye, dear! God bless you!” (96-97)

Toward the end of the novel, when Oliver returns, Dick is dead. What Dick sees as dreams peculiar to the dying—heaven, angels, kind faces—Helen believes surrounds everyone, everywhere:

“Besides this earth, and besides the race of men, there is an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits: that world is round us, for it is everywhere; and those spirits watch us, for they are commissioned to guard us; and if we were dying in pain and shame, if scorn smote us on all sides, and hatred crushed us, angels see our torture, recognise our innocence . . . , and God waits only the separation of spirit from flesh to crown us with a full reward.” (81)

She believes that “by dying young I shall escape great sufferings. I had not qualities or talents to make my way very well in the world: I should have been continually at fault” (96). Dick, too, is glad to die young, so that he and his sister can be children together in heaven (173).

The third-person narrator of Oliver Twist had already leaped forward in time to describe the effect of Dick’s dying blessing: “Through the struggles and sufferings, and troubles and changes, of his [Oliver’s] after life, he never once forgot it” (97). Jane also takes a rare leap forward in narrative time from Helen’s death-scene: “Her grave is in Brocklebridge churchyard; for fifteen years after her death it was only covered by a grassy mound; but now a grey marble tablet marks the spot, inscribed with her name, and the word ‘Resurgam’” (97).

The brief scene of Dick’s death in Oliver Twist is followed in Dickens’s canon by a similar scene involving an equally minor character, Harry West, in Old Curiosity Shop, and later in that novel by the
famous death of the heroine, Little Nell. In February 1847 (perhaps in
time to trigger Charlotte Brontë's memories of her sister Maria while
she was writing the Lowood chapters of her novel), Paul Dombey dies.
Just as Helen Burns dies in her sleep in Jane's arms, so Paul Dombey
lies dying in the arms of his sister. At the last, Paul lets her go only
long enough to clasp his hands in prayer.

Helen Burns believes that the invisible world of spirits surrounds
us here on earth, but that other world is never made visible to her in
the novel, nor does Jane as narrator specifically confirm Helen's belief
at this point. The real child Isaac Eke whose death was recounted in the
*Methodist Magazine* sees pretty things with white wings; Dickens's Paul
Dombey sees the light around the head of Christ shining upon him.
Not so reticent as Brontë's, Dickens's narrator tells us flatly that Paul
has become one of the host of "angels of little children" (*Dombey* 298).

Dickens's were not the only fictional children dying in the 1830s
and 1840s. In 1835 the eponymous heroine of Mrs. Sherwood's gover­
ness novel *Caroline Mordaunt* "is brought back into religion by a pious
little pupil who, like Jane Eyre's Helen Burns, dies in her arms" (V.
Colby 165). Like Helen Burns—and like Maria Brontë—Emily Selburn
dies of consumption. Like Helen Burns, Emily Selburn seems to be
preternaturally informed on religious matters. Mrs. Sherwood main­
tains that such knowledge can be attained at a very early age only
"in cases resembling that of this most lovely one, where the time is
short, and that which is to be done must be done quickly" (280). What
young Emily preaches is not Helen's Arminianism, and not merely
her mother's Evangelical doctrine of faith over works, but predesti­
narianism.

Rachel McCrindell's *The English Governess*, published just three
years before *Jane Eyre* and the death of Paul Dombey, also offers us
consolation out of the mouth of a dying child (but of a less exclusive
kind than Mrs. Sherwood's). Clara Neville first attends the deathbed
of her sister Maria, who comes to Christ during her lingering illness
and consoles her children with the thought that death is the "bright
herald of everlasting blessedness" (256). Not long thereafter, Clara has
the sad duty of attending her four-year-old nephew Charles, who is
fatally ill with measles, but he too knows he is going to Christ and
that Clara and his sister Emma will eventually join him there. He is
dying as he says this, but he does not expire before a minister appears
and reads over him the latter part of I Corinthians and Hebrews 5–6,
promising resurrection and finding in suffering a sign of God’s favor.

In the same year, in another governess novel, Elizabeth Sewell’s
Amy Herbert, little Rose Harrington lay dying attended by her mother
and governess:

A momentary strength had been granted her, and with a clear though
feeble voice, she followed the [Lord’s] prayer to the end; and then, stretch­ing
out her little hand, she said, “Mamma, it is bright now. They are come
to take me.” And with a faint smile, as she half repeated Emily’s [the
governess’s] name, her head once more sank upon the pillow, and the
innocent spirit was at rest. (309)

Mrs. Harrington seeks consolation in believing, like Helen Burns, in an
ambient world of invisible spirits and finds “inexpressible comfort” in
the possibility—neither confirmed nor denied by the Bible, she says—
“that those whom I have loved might still be near, though I could not
see them” (321–22). The night before Rose’s death, Emily Morton, the
governess, was sitting by Rose’s bed praying when Rose awakened
and assured her that “God is near, and the angels, though you can­
not see them” (309). Emily was resigned to the death of her charge,
for she recognized that death “for Rose . . . would be an escape from
all the dangers of the world to the enjoyment of rest and peace for­
ever” (307). Long before Rose’s fatal accident, a cottager had observed
that she “had an angel’s face, and that it was fitter for heaven than for
earth” (299).

Thus to multiply instances of child-death scenes may seem the
purposeless piling on of pious Pelions merely to demonstrate what
might be accepted with fewer lengthy examples: that is, the ubiquity of
such scenes in early nineteenth-century fiction. But the multiplicity of
instances also demonstrates that no matter how closely the character
of Helen and the nature of her death are related to Maria Brontë and
her early death, and no matter how important they were to Charlotte
Brontë personally, they are “novel-worthy” for author and reader not
necessarily because of their “truth to experience” but rather because

. . . . . . .

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of their conventional nature in the novel of the period. And in considering literary history and the interrelation of texts, it is important to recognize that the source, the authorization of "narratability," is the convention, not necessarily the particular scene or situation in some other single work or author. Attribution of "influence" or accusation of "borrowing" rather than recognition of a convention is particularly tempting when precedent is found in a major writer like Dickens. It would indeed be convenient for us if major writers wrote within conventions embodied only by the other Lowells and Cabots of literature, but such is not the case. Elements, scenes that we find common to Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, are more often than not discoverable as well in more than one minor novel of the time: they are scenic topoi or commonplaces, conventions of the period and novel genre, or of the genre as it manifests itself in that period. To recognize this is of some significance not merely in terms of historical accuracy but in understanding the dynamics of literature, of literary creativity, and of the nature of the novel as a constantly developing period-specific genre.

What also should emerge more clearly from these multiple examples is that despite the commonplace nature of the scenes, and what may seem to us their identical nature, the topos of the dying child is heteroglossic, with varying signification—from Helen Burns's Arminianism to Caroline Mordaunt's Calvinism; from the textual verification of angels and spirits in Dickens and Sherwood to Helen's convincing but narratively unauthorized belief and Jane's shaken and puzzled skepticism; from the melodramatic and sentimental in Dickens and McCrindell to the cool, understated, realistic, almost secular presentation in Jane Eyre. Placing Jane Eyre in the context of the novels of the time thus does not define its monologic "meaning" but instead opens up the text dialogically to other voices, complicating expectation of event and meaning and intensifying by rendering more active the anticipatory, participating experience of reading it.

Schooled in expectations conditioned by the novels of the time, and reading with rigorous sequentiality that brackets out certain knowledge of what is to come gained from previous readings of Jane Eyre, we may be able to comprehend the relationship of Helen and Jane, their religious discussions and Jane's doubts, and Helen's early death
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as dialogic: the indeterminacy—the heroine’s religious doubt in the face of the most pious of scenes—forces the reader to entertain multiple possibilities of what the novel is up to, what it is “saying” about death and dying, the soul and the afterlife, and consequently about human conduct. There are different voices, whispers of other novels, novels of various species or kinds, that speak of different worlds in different languages, a heteroglossic echo chamber surrounding the reader with a labyrinth of sounds and senses. There is, moreover, a kind of cosmological gap, creating, for the alert and informed reader, a thematic as well as narrative suspense.

Knowledge of the contemporary genres and conventions is a key to perceiving the strategy of and the diverse responses to a novel like Jane Eyre, and therefore is a key to the fullest possible experience of reading such a work. The signifiers are on the page, but there is a great deal of affective significance in what is off the page, in the medium or context in which Jane Eyre made its way. Because of the plethora of diverse generic signals and conventions, the scenes and “words” of Jane Eyre refract and recombine the conventional in such a way as to be simultaneously hailed as the most original of works and brilliantly traditional. While the “Opinions of the Press” excerpted by the publisher for inclusion in the third edition naturally include only those reviews that stressed the novel’s originality—such as the comments in the Atlas, Economist, Jerrold’s Newspaper, Jerrold’s Magazine, Morning Advertiser, Scotsman, Liverpool Standard, and Westminster Review (Clarendon 631-35)—there were those that recognized its conventional materials, including favorable reviews like that in the Athenaeum, which speaks of its “exciting strong interest of [an] old-fashioned kind” (1043:1100-1101). Brontë subsumes disparate Romantic traditions and transforms them, creating a new species, the Victorian novel, but the overdetermination of the scenic topoi even within a familiar frame makes that new original-traditional novel apparently univocal but ultimately dialogic.

The ninth chapter of Jane Eyre ends with the death of Helen Burns and with a momentary leap forward in narrational time to what is to happen fifteen years later, when a tablet is put in place to mark Helen’s grave. The last word of the chapter is “Resurgam.” It is clearly a
punctuation mark in the novel, a heavy pause less than one-fifth of the way through a three-volume novel. The pause invites the reader to conjecture about the direction that the novel is to take. Is Jane to be a victim until near the end—as the first few scenes may suggest—an object of our sympathy and pity, recipient of our loyalties and cheers? Or is she to ride heroically over the oppressions of petty tyrants, leaving them disdainfully in the dust? Or is she to lose heroically and romantically, secure in her moral superiority? Is she the moral measure of the world of the novel, or is she a fallible creature who must suffer in order to grow into moral maturity? Knowledge of a number of contemporary novels—such as Oliver Twist, Henry, Earl of Moreland, Contarini Fleming, Ellen the Teacher, Caroline Mordaunt, Amy Herbert—and their scenic topoi and varying outcomes and worldviews raises these questions, and, on their own or reinforced by subgenres or kinds of novels, these novels offer alternative possibilities or expectations. Each of them or their generic counterparts when foregrounded projects a whole scenario of Jane's future, and even when backgrounded or almost forgotten that scenario does not entirely fade: it can be brought forward again with the slightest of allusions or suggestions.

At this point in Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist and the foundling novel, modified and reinforced by the school scenes in Nickleby, give strong indications of the direction in which Brontë's novel will develop. But there are forks in the road to Jane's future: will she stay on at Lowood? Will other children die? Will Jane be subjected to more indignities, more suffering? Though the children's deathbed scenes are for modern readers strongly linked to Dickens, in the novels of the second quarter of the nineteenth century such scenes often indicated a didactic, moralistic, religious novel, perhaps even more particularly, a governess novel. Will Jane grow up to be a teacher, like Ellen Delville, or a governess, like Emily Morton and Caroline (or even Clara) Mordaunt? These possible futures are part of the dialogue of the novel not explicitly in the text, but implicitly in the context to which Jane Eyre is responding. There are many voices clamoring for our attention.

At this point, expectations associated with the foundling and governess novels, and domestic novels in general, are foregrounded, but there remain faint traces of other expectations that have been aroused
earlier. Too often we think of expectations in binary terms, as rather simple either/or alternatives, but if we note the workings of our own minds carefully as we read, we will find whole batteries of expectations, some strong, some faint, some still fainter, with their relative intensity modified as each new detail or event crosses the line of our vision as we read. Everything put in our minds by the text is part of the work, in a sense is the work. Once in the work none of the potential eventualities ever entirely disappears, though it may fade or be overtaken by later fictional events. Too often when we speak of expectations—narrative or thematic—we treat them as temporary gaps which, once filled, cease to be part of our experience of the novel. All possibilities but one, the “right” one, are eliminated; that one alone remains in the reader’s mind and is an actual part of the novel. But even the overtaken expectations are in the text, linger in its shadows, and are a permanent part of our reading experience and of our configurations of the future in the work we are reading. Indeed, this final, gap-closing “making of sense” not only leaves one or more of these alternative voices as “part of the ‘meaning experience,’” but at times is itself drowned out by the primacy and power of one or more of the other voices, opening the way for one kind of “misreading” of the text, a reading of the text “as it cannot know itself” (Eagleton, Criticism 43). Such, as we shall see, is the fortunate dialogic fate of Jane Eyre.