

How To Read: Regionalism and the *Ladies' Home Journal* [a](#)

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Abstract and Keywords

This article examines regionalism in nineteenth-century American literature, focusing on the *Ladies' Home Journal*. It analyzes the journal's commentary on literature and literary culture during a period corresponding to regionalism's prominence, from the periodical's founding in 1883 through the turn of the century. The article explores what authors and readers think about the impact of reading on the formation of social bonds.

Keywords: regionalism, American literature, *Ladies' Home Journal*, literary culture, reading, social bonds

THIS chapter reads the regionalist sketch by reading the *Ladies' Home Journal* (hereafter, the *Journal*). It examines the *Journal's* commentary on literature and literary culture during a period corresponding to regionalism's prominence, from the periodical's founding in 1883 through the turn of the century. It looks at reviews, recommendation lists, bits of advice, editorial comments, and informal criticism in order to renarrate the literary history of the regionalist sketch. It wagers, ultimately, that archives documenting reading and reception have as much to tell us about literature as do literary texts themselves. Exemplary in this regard, the *Journal* provided its subscribers with a carefully nuanced set of lessons in how to read literature, instructing them to turn engagement with fiction into a practice that would improve their social lives and interpersonal intimacies. As an archive, the *Journal* thus allows us not only to access contemporary critical response, but also to understand the reading of regionalism as a practice within the history and politics of friendship.

Largely ignored by literary critics, the *Ladies' Home Journal*—née the *Ladies' Home Journal and Practical Housekeeper*—shaped late nineteenth-century mass culture and became the world's first periodical to surpass a million in paid subscribers.¹ Inaugurating a genre of women's advice magazines, the *Journal* played a foundational role in the intimate public sphere Lauren Berlant has labeled “women's culture.” It provided “a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers” and (p. 292) promised its subscribers “a better experience of social belonging” (viii). It taught readers how to fashion and recognize themselves as white American women, and it cathected that subject position with meaning and social cohesiveness. Proclaimed by its title as a group possession, the *Ladies' Home Journal* thus nurtured subscribers' “attachment to being generic, to being a member of a population that has been marked out as having collective qualities” (x). Magazines like the *Journal* encouraged subscribers to read themselves into the print and visual signifiers of women's culture; within their mediated mode of attachment, individual existence and social convention circled one another with centripetal force. But the *Journal* also did something more. Distinguishing literary from nonliterary reading, it instructed subscribers how to develop specialized skills for reading and evaluating literature and, moreover, how to apply those skills not only when engaging texts but also when engaging each other.

From the 1880s through the early twentieth century, the *Journal* explicitly and extensively advocated literature as an alternative to even its own fantasies of generic belonging. Alongside advice about caring for ferns over the winter, keeping infants content during hot summer months, instilling morality in teenage boys, and re-creating the latest dress fashions, the *Journal* provided specific recommendations about what to read, why to read, and how to read. More specifically, the *Journal* advised women that reading imaginative literature, particularly regionalist literature, would provide them and their children with the best possible apprenticeship for navigating the improvisations, experimentations, emotional sensitivities, and interpersonal contingencies of those rare relationships that rise to the name “friendship.” The *Journal* thus engaged two tasks central to the discipline of “literary studies”: the broad work of generic differentiation (separating the literary from the nonliterary, elaborating and specifying groups of aesthetic conventions, and assigning value) and the development of reading into a specialized skill (call it “critical reading” or “close reading”) with a use value that extends far beyond immediate engagement with the printed page. Yet if today’s English departments advertise these skills as quasi-utilitarian tools for critically engaging text-driven culture, the *Ladies’ Home Journal* of the late 1800s associated them more narrowly with readers’ ability to forge nongeneric modes of intimacy and interpersonal connection. Reading, subscribers were told, teaches us to construct accomplished and meaningful social lives. As a mass media genre that engaged both women’s culture and literary culture, the *Journal* invited readers to navigate two parallel dialogues: between general reading and close reading, on the one hand, and generic social belonging and intimate friendship, on the other.

Already, I hope, this brief outline suggests a departure from prevalent literary historical narratives about the regionalist sketch, which associate the genre almost exclusively with a metro-centric literary elite. Looking to the regions from locations of urban prestige and condescension, we are told, readers in the 1880s and ‘90s turned regionalism into a vehicle for cultural homogenization and an auxiliary of the nation-state. This chapter’s first task, then, is to suggest how the history of reading regionalism alters these scripts. If reading practices constitute the scene (p. 293) of impact through which literature transitions from text to meaning, then how we think men and women read regionalist sketches in the past changes not only how we might read and interpret the genre today, but also what kind of social, political, and aesthetic functions we assign to its history. A second section begins such reevaluation by tracing the *Ladies’ Home Journal*’s reading pedagogy. Over two decades, the *Journal* articulated a program for what I call “closer reading,” a literary practice coupling specialized reading skills with the supple work of friendship, and it presented this program as a marked improvement over reading practices advocated by elite publications such as the *Atlantic Monthly*. Applying this evidence to the regionalist sketch, the next section argues that regionalism aligned itself generically and formally with the *Journal*’s reading program, modeling both the substantive intimacies and meticulous attentions prescribed by closer reading practices. No reading practice is inherent to a particular genre or text, but the evidence of regionalism’s generic and formal conventions dramatizes the strategies by which it facilitated and rewarded closer reading practices. A final section examines the historical and methodological implications of this approach to literary history, which merges the history of reading and genre criticism in order to make a new case about regionalism’s socio-symbolic influence. Might the *Journal*’s regionalism comprise a genre distinct from that we find in journals such as the *Atlantic Monthly*? If so, then how can we begin to account for the substantive effects of this distinction?

The History of Reading Regionalism

Toward the end of his 1871 *Democratic Vistas*, Walt Whitman poses the reader as a problem for literary historiography. If, as he claims, “[n]ot the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does,” and if it is therefore the reader who “must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history,” then how do literary historians, looking back across the decades, account for something so ephemeral as the productions and experiences of readers? (1017, 1016). Since New

Criticism, scholars, including reader-response critics, have responded to this question by privileging meaning over function. We treat reading as an abstract process governed by immersion in textuality while simultaneously turning our own immersions in the text into a disciplinary *sine qua non*. We pay more attention to what we read than how we read or why we read—or to how and why texts have been read in the past. Analyzing how texts manifest what New Critic Cleanth Brooks calls “claims to be made upon the reader,” critics delimit reading to how readers respond to textual features (154). The result is the remarkable durability of New Critical methods into the twenty-first century. As Thomas Augst puts it, even as we have rejected New Critics’ esteem for the autonomy of the literary text, we “have nevertheless accomplished an analogous alienation of reading from the spaces and practices of everyday life” (3). In analyzing the *Journal*’s preferred (p. 294) reading formation, this chapter aims to re-embed the reading of regionalism into white women’s socio-literary culture in the late nineteenth-century United States. It reads the genre through those institutions and strategies that integrate literary texts into social practices and readers into collective patterns.

An ideal archive for this kind of literary history, the *Ladies’ Home Journal* documents a set of values underlying reading for an entire generation of white, middle-class women. While the *Journal* fails to tell us how individual women read regionalist fiction (a failure it shares, to varying degrees, with all archives of reading), it succeeds in organizing a theoretically consistent program of reading that aspired toward—and perhaps even attained—normative status. In so doing, the *Journal* intervenes in the questions that have dominated regionalist fiction’s critical history since its feminist revival during the 1970s: questions about how the genre negotiates between the subnational settings and unhurried temporalities of its rural subjects and the transnational fury of U.S. imperialism.

Attention to reading shifts the ground upon which critical histories are built and alters the assumptions we implicitly make about how literary texts act upon their worlds. To align a historical genre with a new history of reading is to invest it with new narratives, new social possibilities, new meanings. Within regionalism’s critical history, the monolithic shadow of one single reader—William Dean Howells—has privileged a series of compelling yet also singular interpretations depicting the genre’s political effects as reactionary and nationalist. Howells famously advocates for regionalist fiction not because it acquaints readers with rural existence or refines readers’ skills of interpersonal relation, but because the genre reaffirms and archives ethnographic knowledge through the reliable depiction of rural types. Yet Howells’s admiration of Mary Wilkins Freeman—that her sketches depict “just the expression of that vast average of Americans who do the hard work of the country, and live narrowly on their small earnings and savings” (156)—contrasts sharply with the kind of praise we’re likely to find in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. There, for instance, Freeman is celebrated precisely because she avoids typography and enables a reading experience that cannot fall back on previously held knowledge: “She leaves us to meet her people very much as we should, if we went to visit … a friend who could give us the history and ancestry of her neighbors, but is forced to allow us to follow their lives, to find out their minds and characters for ourselves” (Ramsey, “New Books” 13). For most of regionalism’s critics, past and present, Howells’s ethnographic reading style synecdochically stands in for all of regionalism’s readers, while the *Journal*’s closer engagement with rural lives remains largely neglected. Thus in a foundational essay, “The Aesthetics of Regionalism,” John Crowe Ransom reproduces both Howells’s elite demographic and reading style when he derides regionalist fiction for disarming and flattening cultural difference: “The region is now ‘made’ in the vulgar sense … that the curious and eclectic populations of far-away capitals will mark it on their maps, collect its exhibits for their museums, and discuss it in their literary essays” (50). Wittingly or not, the critique turns all readers of regionalist fiction into Howellsian curators of rural idiosyncrasies.

(p. 295) Ransom’s argument perfectly predicts a set of late twentieth-century theses claiming that regionalism aided in the cultures of white nationalist reunion. By dehistoricizing the recent past, so the narrative goes, regionalist fiction transformed regions into a series of timeless images that allowed white readers, alienated by an emergent modern industrial society, to reimagine their nation as a fraternity hailing from shared agrarian origins. In “Nation, Region, and Empire,” Amy Kaplan argues

that regionalist sketches share with tourists and anthropologists the perspective of a modern urban outsider who projects onto the native a pristine authentic space immune to historical changes shaping their own lives. Similarly, in *Cultures of Letters*, Richard Brodhead argues that regionalism is the product of a Howellsian literary establishment, more eager to tame regional difference than to consider it. Brodhead describes the reader of regionalism as a “sophisticate-vacationer” who grew fond of the genre because text and reader held so much in common: “[R]egional fiction … rehearsed a habit of mental acquisitiveness strongly allied with genteel reading” (133). These critics assume a reader who bypasses the complexity of regional characters’ social relations in order to infuse the local with what Raymond Williams calls a “fly-in-amber quality” (61). This reader recognizes distinctive regional features, but he or she simultaneously consigns regions to a pettiness that removes them from the forces of history. In such hands, regionalist fiction serves to advance a compensatory ideological agenda that both incorporates and tames local strangeness; the reader of regionalist fiction isolates those aspects of regional idiosyncrasy that can provide usefully nostalgic fantasies of the national past and then folds these newly timeless regions facilely into an American national identity. In this sense, critics like Kaplan and Brodhead critique regionalist fiction not so much on the basis of its distinct formal or thematic aspects, but on the basis of its association with a reading practice that cultivated a certain type of centric, chauvinist person.

Two unexamined warrants support this critical narrative: that contemporary readers did indeed maintain a condescending detachment from regional subjects and characters, and that regionalist texts were exclusively read by bourgeois urban audiences. While this chapter will primarily analyze the former assumption about the interpretive and experiential practices that late nineteenth-century readers brought to regionalist fiction, let me first dwell briefly on the demographics of regionalism’s audience. In his research on late nineteenth-century print culture, Charles Johanningsmeier documents a pattern wherein Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Charles Chesnutt, and other writers sold their regionalist sketches to independent syndicates, which then dispersed the fiction to newspaper markets that transcended the boundaries of class and geography. Johanningsmeier’s research severs regionalist fiction from any presumed monopolistic grasp of the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Century*, or *Harper’s Monthly*. Syndication, he suggests, worked to undo the boundaries between rural subjects and urban readers, thereby enabling rural residents “to become consumers, and thus proprietors, of their own fictional currency” (“Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins [Freeman]” 72).²

Johanningsmeier’s evidence suggests that many regionalist sketches would have counted more nonurban readers than urban ones. The syndicated stories appeared, (p. 296) on average, in forty to fifty daily newspapers, which by the 1880s were selling throughout entire regions, and many may have additionally appeared in hundreds of weekly newspapers targeted specifically to rural audiences.³ Moreover, Jewett, Wilkins, and other regionalist writers published frequently in magazines with less cultural capital but larger and more dispersed circulations than the *Atlantic*-style magazines, including the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, as well as magazines like *Woman’s Home Companion*, *Everybody’s*, *Romance*, and *Pictorial Review*. Thus even though Jewett published over a dozen stories in the *Atlantic Monthly* between 1890 and 1900 (including the serialization of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in 1896), the *Ladies’ Home Journal*’s publication of around just eight of her stories (depending on how you count them) reached hundreds of thousands more readers. Likewise, the *Atlantic* published none of Freeman’s fiction during the century’s last decade, while the *Journal* published over ten of her stories, including the serialization of *The Jamesons* between 1898 and 1899. We can make many generalizations about the demographics of regionalism’s audience based upon this publication history—that it was largely white, female, middle class, and native born, for instance—but we cannot say that the dominant reading demographic was elite, urban, and geographically homogenous. More important for our purposes, we cannot say that regionalism had a dominant reading demographic at all.

For that matter, nor did the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which I now offer as an alternative archive to Howellsian reading practices and demographic assumptions, remain entirely consistent in its approach to reading regionalism. On some notable occasions, its contributors replicate the reading style Richard Brodhead names *acquisitive*. In a 1902 column, for instance, Hamilton W. Mabie praises Freeman and Jewett for their “sharply defined types of American character” (“Literary Talks” 17). Assimilating the plural to the singular (types to character), Mabie values regionalism in precisely the fashion that recent critics denounce and implicitly prescribes a reading practice that petrifies regionalist content. So doing, Mabie replicates an approach to the genre first introduced to *Journal* readers by Conan Doyle seven years earlier. In an interview with Mabie, Doyle generously and unexpectedly calls Mary Wilkins Freeman's *Pembroke* (1894) the “greatest American novel since ‘The Scarlet Letter,’” but he then singles out as his sole item of praise Freeman's depiction of “very strongly marked New England types” (“Literary Aspects of America” 6). Perhaps most strikingly, the *Journal* lent this taxonomic understanding of regionalist fiction its own institutional imprimatur when, between 1895 and 1896, it printed a series of six Freeman sketches under the heading, “Neighborhood Types.” In distinguishing regionalism's characters as realistic, rural “types,” Mabie, Doyle, and the *Journal*'s mid-1890s editors follow Howells in presuming that regionalism requires (p. 297) a cognitively and epistemologically distinct practice of reading, one simultaneously distant and self-congratulatory. The genre becomes a way of getting to know the world through observation rather than participation and a way of knowing the world as always already fixed and familiar—always already the way one knew it before.

Yet the vast majority of the *Journal*'s meta-discourse about literature offers itself as a distinct alternative to typological reading patterns. The evidence for this alternative is, to be sure, less explicit and systematic than it would be for a periodical like the *Atlantic Monthly*, which included regular, extensive, self-identified literary criticism. The first thing a literary scholar notices when reading multiple issues of the *Journal* is that it rarely packaged its ideas about literature in the form one contributor derides as “a studied essay of professional criticism and dictation” (Whitney, “Friendly Letter I” 14). Indeed, even its few attempts to feature a recurring column of new book reviews quickly dissipated. At the same time, recurrent emphasis on literature and literary culture emerges just as strikingly. The *Journal* returned systematically, regularly, and in multiple forms to the triumvirate of questions that govern any reading practice: What to read? Why read? And how to read? Over the course of the 1880s and '90s it developed a consistent set of responses to these questions—a coherent program of reading that it repeatedly suggested to its own readers. Through series of columns, lists of book recommendations, and open letters from reader to reader, the *Journal* suggested that its subscribers read widely, though avoiding overly photographic realism; read meticulously, developing a refined sense of irony and a philological appreciation for the subtlety of language; read passionately, emotionally engaging, befriending, and developing intense curiosity toward literary characters; and read with a social purpose in mind—to become better, more conscientious friends.⁴

I call this reading formation *closer reading*, a name I intend to call forth its close kinship to the professionalized critical reading that, as Mary Poovey writes, has become “the signature methodology” of literary studies, “its characteristic—and, thus, its characterizing—disciplinary feature” (337). Yet by distinguishing closer reading from close reading, I also intend to mark two key differences: first, the *Journal* unabashedly endorsed strong identification between reader and character, prescribing an affective investment that current disciplinary norms position against close reading along a critical-uncritical axis; and, second, the *Journal* hoped that closer reading would produce exceptional friendships, rather than critical perspective.⁵

The *Journal*'s program of closer reading demanded a specific type of imaginative literature. More to the point, it precluded what one anonymous reviewer names “realism carried to the extreme” (“Mr. Howells's Latest Novel” 13).⁶ As the *Journal* developed a more consistent approach to literature, it refined a system of generic differentiation and evaluation that derided overly literal realism for leaving readers stifled—cramped among too many details and too little characterization, denied entry points through which to develop experiential knowledge about fictional characters and worlds. An 1890 book review, comparing the latest

novels by William (p. 298) Dean Howells and Charles Dudley Warner, allows the *Journal* to articulate its aesthetic criteria while simultaneously positioning itself and its approach to literature as a distinct alternative to Howells and, by extension, the *Atlantic Monthly*. In it, Annie R. Ramsey contrasts Warner's imaginative realism to Howells's technical realism: "Mr. Howells photographs those who pass before his camera, and makes a study of their inconsistencies, being just as much interested in any one point, as in any other." Warner, on the other hand, brings to the same "studied details ... a sentiment, a poetic feeling which Mr. Howells does not, will not, allow himself to believe in" ("An Hour with New Books" 11). Howells's camera fixes its representations into still images; he leaves the reader no possibility to interact with his subject because he presents her with an empirical and undistinguished "study" of reality rather than an aesthetic engagement with contemporary experience. The "sentiment" and "poetic feeling" Ramsey identifies in Warner's fiction, what our contemporary parlance might refer to as "style," enables a more fluidly interactive reading experience. Where we observe the way Howells's types "put on their hats," take note of their "certain trick of speech," and nod in recognition at their "habit of shrugging the shoulders," we join in with Warner's characters: "[W]e go with them through every phase and detail" of their daily lives (11). For Ramsey, Warner's fiction is not merely valuable for itself, for its expression of "poetic feeling," but also as a medium that enables reading to become a playful, engaged social experience. Howells's fiction, on the other hand, in offering itself as a positivist, photojournalistic record of the details that comprise contemporary existence, traps readers in a tautology that stifles their ability to interact with characters or fictional worlds. Ramsey's ambitions thus exceed any simple evaluation of Howells's fiction. She works to construct an alternative program for evaluating literature and reading, one that positions the *Ladies' Home Journal* against Howells, Howells's criteria for realist fiction, and the entire genre of *Atlantic*-style magazines through which Howells and his peers sought to influence American literary history.⁷

When the *Journal* turns to the question of why its subscribers should read literature, it reveals the stakes of Ramsey's generic distinctions. If, as the *Journal* suggests, we read in order to become more adept at producing and maintaining intimate social relationships, then literature needs to offer us more than an occasion to observe how characters "put on their hats." Consider the title to a series of open letters written by popular novelist Adeline D. T. Whitney. In November 1892, the *Journal*'s editor excitedly announced "The World of Reading" as "the general title" for a series of letters that will explore "the most interesting and entertaining authors and books" ("What Should Girls Read?" 22). Yet in December 1893, when the first letter finally appeared, "The World of Reading" had been replaced by "A Friendly Letter to Girl Friends" (Whitney, "Friendly Letter I" 14). This substitution of titles, left entirely unremarked, together with the doubled friendliness of the chosen title (friendship as both a quality and a subject position), signal a guiding principle held by a majority of the *Journal*'s contributors and, likely, editors: the distance between reading and friendship is at most negligible; the two entail practices of discernment and engagement that work synergistically and develop complementary proficiencies. (p. 299) Through our reading, the *Journal* suggests, we develop skills required to relate and understand across interpersonal difference. Engaging with fictional worlds ushers us into the best possible affective apprenticeship for constructing meaningful—and, hence, also laborious—social intimacies.

Taken together, Whitney's letters constitute the *Journal*'s most systematic articulation of closer reading. Expanding on Ramsey's generic differentiation, Whitney encourages her readers to put aside realist fiction that remains interested in "mere technicalities" and instead to seek out texts that "lift up our realism" ("Friendly Letter I" 14; "Friendly Letter VI" 8). Defending literary style and imaginative storytelling, she calls for fiction that is "an imaging of the true," sufficiently removed from its immediate, empirical context to open a deeper hermeneutic space in which the reader can interpret and engage ("Friendly Letter II" 10). For Whitney, texts that simultaneously refract and represent reality enable an ideal reading practice that, paradoxically, expands and regulates the self by "either confirming and developing, or checking and denying ... proclivities," thereby exposing readers to the full range of "human possibilities" ("Friendly Letter I" 14). Fiction mediates between private and social life. It "fits" readers for interpersonal relationships, for, indeed, Whitney insists, "most of us do have to be fitted, in taking ourselves—if there is anything of us—out of our separate life into the world" ("Friendly Letter VI" 8). To be thus "fitted" is to cultivate the

skills necessary to enter “genuine friendship,” a relationship form she contrasts to the “little, frittering, life-exhausting etiquettes,” the “show and pretense,” and the fraternalism (“women nowadays are clubbing themselves to death”) that characterize “artificial society” (“Friendly Letter VI” 8).

For Whitney and the *Journal*, closer reading therefore offers the best available solution to an ethical problem that has demanded substantial space in the pages of Western philosophy from Aristotle to Jacques Derrida: How do we maintain friendships marked by both constancy and renewal, while avoiding those marred by stasis and misrecognition? How do we, as Maurice Blanchot writes, maintain a relationship that “is brought into play and lost at each moment, a relation without relation or without relation other than the incommensurable?” (25). Put differently, how do we build friendships apart from the stability of a fraternal sameness into which friendship always threatens to lapse? It will not surprise readers of this volume that Ralph Waldo Emerson answers these questions by citing what, for him, remains ideal friendship's near impossibility. “We are armed all over with subtle antagonisms,” he writes, “which, as soon as we meet, begin to play, and translate all poetry into stale prose. Almost all people descend to meet” (351). Where Emerson sees a phantom ideal that remains, except in the most utterly rare of occasions, too far-fetched to ever be realized, others see a laborious practice worth cultivating. Despite his insistence that friendship requires an underlying equality and, thus, political sameness, for instance, Aristotle maintains that sameness alone is insufficient to construct the type of “genuine friendship” Whitney values. To enter such a relationship, for Aristotle, friends must “live together and share conversation and thought,” creating over time a fully realized consideration of incommensurable others “for their virtue and themselves” (261, 263). In *Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida (p. 300) elaborates on Aristotle's claim that virtue, rather than nature, gives friendship its signature quality. At the same time, he picks up on Whitney's insistence that friendship not default into predetermined scripts: “[F]riendship does not—and above all must not—have the reliability of a natural thing or a machine; … its stability is not given by nature but is won, like constancy and ‘fidence,’ through the endurance of a virtue” (23). Closer reading, for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, names the practice best suited to developing such endurance.

But, of course, not just any old reading would do. Meticulous reading of interpersonal difference requires an equally meticulous reading of literature's thick textures. Books, Whitney insists, “are for far more than amusement. They are for vital sympathies and understandings; human thought to human thought, hope to hope, motive to motive” (“Friendly Letter III” 15). Bridging these gaps between human thoughts, hopes, and motives requires a set of skills that correspond neatly to those required, in the words of another *Journal* contributor, to “enjoy books and gain their friendship” (Mabie, “World's Greatest University” 28). When the *Journal* details more precisely how one ought to read, it anticipates *avant la lettre* the practice we now associate not with popular readers, but with scholars and professional practice. Closer reading demands the close reading that, in New Critic F. R. Leavis's famous description, requires us to attend “sensitively and with precise discrimination to the words on the page” (228). A practice that allows scholars to achieve greater understanding of the work as an aesthetic production—or, more recently, of the text as the cause and effect of history—allows closer readers to achieve increasingly intricate familiarity with fictional characters and social spheres, while simultaneously acquiring the skills of friendship that Aristotle and Derrida associate with virtue. “Dear girl friends,” Whitney writes as an opening for her second letter, “Do you know I dearly love a bit of philology—of word tracing?” (“Friendly Letter II” 10). In her open letters, she encourages her readers to share in this love. She models for them the archival work of etymology, needling at multiple meanings through the consideration of one word's past and present resonance. She asks them to consider the materiality of the signifier, heeding the shape their tongues require in order to pronounce certain sounds. She tells readers to observe the text on multiple levels, considering possible allegories, symbols, metaphors, and ironies. It is up to the readers of literature, she claims, “to unroll the details ‘hidden in their foundation’” (“Friendly Letter I” 14). Though such punctilious practice, readers become closer readers (and slower readers), forging what Hamilton Mabie calls a “habit of mind” that turns them into more astute participants in both fictional and social spheres (“World's Greatest University” 28).

To put this argument anachronistically, Whitney combines Leavis's and Derrida's separate modes of close reading. While she adheres more closely to Leavis's search for hidden meaning than to the subtle pressure Derrida applies in his development of multichronic and mobile readings, she also divorces close reading from structural or autonomous meaning when she values it as a process more than a tool. Like Derrida, who insists that the virtuous work of friendship constitutes the antithesis (p. 301) of "essence" and falls always in the realm of the "perhaps," Whitney values the skills of close reading precisely because they help friends negotiate the always unfinished work of friendship and the ceaselessly shifting contingencies of relationships that refuse to collapse difference (Derrida 30).

In formulating its stringent program of reading, the *Journal* participated in a significant late-century trend. The 1870s and '80s witnessed a host of voices on both sides of the Atlantic calling upon readers to refine mere literacy into systematic practice. Prescribing, often explicitly, an Arnoldian project of self-improvement, texts like *Books and Reading: What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them*, *The Choice of Books*, and *Hints for Home Reading* asked their audiences to cultivate an "art of reading" (Richardson 5).⁸ In language reminiscent of many an Introduction-to-the-Study-of-Literature syllabus, they advised readers to keep a sheet of paper handy for taking notes; to read a few books intensively and slowly rather than many books cursorily; to reflect and converse on what they've read; to keep a reading journal; to reread; to read from a range of genres, both fictional and not; and to persevere through difficult reading, for, their authors insist, worthwhile knowledge works in tandem with vigor and effort.⁹ Alongside these advice books, we can see how the *Journal*'s program of reading may very well have merged public into private and work into leisure in order to give literature a function within the emergent middle-class "culture of professionalism" (Bledstein). Reading, in this schema, becomes just another technocratic effect of capitalist industrialization. In particular, closer reading becomes an exhaustive program for systematizing and assigning use value to all those effects of reading (emotional investment, distraction, sentimentality, and the like) that cannot be assimilated into programs of reading as self-help.

Yet even as it assigned usefulness to "critical" and "uncritical" modes of reading alike, the *Journal* simultaneously shifted the value of such reading to an affective realm that fit at best uneasily with bureaucratic calculation and predictability. Where reading advice books saw their project as an extension of the self-improving and self-regulating work Benjamin Franklin describes in his autobiography (a text one author references directly), the *Journal* at least partially disengaged reading from strict instrumentality (Porter 42). While it certainly exhorted a gendered audience of women and girls to expand their roles as consumers and become more efficient household managers, it also carved out the reading of literature as a coeval sphere that, ideally, enabled women to construct intimate relationships apart from capitalist efficiency. In short, the *Journal* channeled the benefits of reading from self-improvement to "genuine friendship." It shifted its emphases from products to processes. It suggested that reading creates opportunities to construct new forms of intimacy precisely insofar as that intimacy refuses to become a known quantity. The *Journal* aimed to refashion reading as a dynamic and experimental practice field for the nonce work of intimacy: through the critical hermeneutics and "uncritical" emotional identifications of reading, we acquire a way of being uniquely suited to negotiate shifting social, personal, and affective relationships.

(p. 302) Reading Regionalism

The *Ladies' Home Journal* did not limit closer reading to regionalist fiction. In addition to Wilkins, Jewett, and other regionalist authors, Whitney's open letters recommend writers who span period, language, and genre—from Oliver Goldsmith to Fredrika Bremer to Susan Warner. Similarly broad in its scope, though limited almost exclusively to U.S. literature, Thomas Wentworth Higginson's suggestions for "A Young Girl's Library" include Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington

Irving, Edward Bellamy, Henry David Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson, in addition to a bevy of regionalist fiction, such as Freeman's *A Humble Romance* (1887), M. N. Murfree's *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1884), Celia Thaxter's *Among the Isles of Shoals* (1873), Hamlin Garland's *Main-Traveled Roads* (1891), and Grace King's *Tales of a Time and Place* (1892).

Yet regionalism's prominence in this list is no accident. If, to recall the *Ladies' Home Journal's* review of Freeman, regionalist sketches force readers to engage literary subjects by finding out "their minds and characters for ourselves," then regionalism emerges as a privileged genre within closer reading practices. Its generic conventions emphasize the gradual unfolding of character knowledge, shirk any overly strict realism, and highlight the human social landscape, in particular downplaying family in favor of friendship. Its stories center on widows, widowers, lifelong bachelors, spinsters, and others whose primary affective connections typically link them into nonfamilial networks of affinity. Sarah Orne Jewett's narrator in "A White Heron" (1886) thus describes a typical regionalist setting when she names "home" a place where most "didn't hitch" (*Novels and Stories* 673). Moreover, even the regionalist sketch's family-bound characters cannot help but forge social links within their immediate localities; regionalism binds its inhabitants through what Freeman terms, in "A New England Nun" (1891), the "soft diurnal commotion" of local associations, as well as the geographic fixedness that results from poverty, duty, history, desire, old age, and disability (*New England Nun* 22). As such a list suggests, the regionalist sketch does not depict utopian or even quasi-utopian spheres of friendship free from the acrimony, contestation, and competition found in an otherwise "real" world, for, as Wai Chee Dimock puts it, "the commingling of lives is always a form of imposition" (259). Instead, regionalism acquires particular significance for the closer reader as a genre uniquely attuned to how one lives with and even values the imposition of proximate others. It suggests to readers a practice of friendship that hinges on immediate, local, and diurnal cohabitation—what Aristotle refers to as "liv[ing] together"—instead of abstracted, a priori, and assumed sameness (261). Regionalism invites readers to become familiar with social worlds that foreground the anti- or nonfraternal friendships that, according to Whitney, closer reading enables and desires.

The sketch form likewise reinforces closer reading's ideals. Writing sketches enabled regionalist authors to free themselves from novels' plot imperatives, which are so often inextricable from compulsory heterosexuality and, more to (p. 303) the point, compulsory marriage. As a character- rather than plot-centric form, the sketch isolates finer moments of interpersonal exchange, moments that, in their casual everydayness, signify the repetition and constancy through which intimacy is produced and enhanced over time.¹⁰ We can, in this sense, read "A White Heron" as a meta-commentary on the sketch form itself. When the story's young heroine decides to rebut romantic attentions proffered by an intriguing and handsome outsider, she decides, as it were, to remain within the social world of the regionalist sketch while also fending off the romantic teleology that accompanies so many nineteenth-century novels. Opening the pages of the latest Freeman or Jewett or Murfree sketch, closer readers entered fictional worlds teeming with the forms and contents of friendly affinities; there they found an ideal imaginative setting in which to enhance their own skills and sensitivities as friends and neighbors.

Even readers unfamiliar with the *Ladies' Home Journal's* program for closer reading may have become familiar with its practices and aims by reading regionalism. The framing devices typical to the regionalist sketch enable it to formally represent and model a closer reading practice that extends from fine observation to accomplished intimacy. Through hearing and interpreting stories—practices homologous, in the logic of the frame narrative, with reading—characters turn relationships of mere convenience or proximity into meaningful, "genuine" friendships. *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for instance, comprises a sequence of framed narratives that incorporate the narrator, a traveling spinster from Boston, into Dunnet Landing's overlapping social networks. Each sketch tracks the narrator's keen skills as a reader of verbal and nonverbal communication as she collaborates with various residents to forge intimate ties across sometimes stark difference: she becomes "the best of friends" with Captain Littlepage, whose nostalgia has succumbed into an alienated disorientation; she wordlessly navigates a mutual, tender, and chaste affection with the socially phobic William Blackett; she moves from being "strangers" to being

“warm friends” with the hopelessly melancholic Elijah Tilley; she becomes “sincere friends” with the imperial, imposing, inconsiderate, and “strange” traveler, Mrs. Fosdick; she expands upon an increasingly deeper intimacy with her host, Mrs. Todd; and she even enters into a paradoxical fellowship with the memory of Poor Joanna, “one of those whom sorrow made too lonely to brave the sight of men” (*Novels and Stories* 399, 486, 424, 421, 444). The novel’s opening paragraph instructs its readers how to make sense of these dynamic and developing intimacies. Contrasting the fleetingness of romance with the more fluid and strenuous work of friendship, the narrator writes: “The process of falling in love at first sight is as final as it is swift … but the growth of true friendship may be a lifelong affair” (377). Rather than minor episodes, the framed sketches of regionalist fiction constitute building blocks out of which intimacies resist stasis and fraternity. By representing friendship as a way of life, the genre itself labors to reward closer reading, even as it models the sensitive and careful consideration that closer reading demands.¹¹

(p. 304) **Regionalism's Historiographies**

I have been arguing about regionalism and reading, but literary historiography and critical methodologies have never been far from my concerns. The archives of reading and reception are not merely relevant for ascertaining immediate historical context; they additionally change how texts resonate across time, across readers, across critical practices. Leah Price puts it this way: “[T]he history of books is centrally about ourselves. It asks how past readers have made meaning (and therefore, by extension, how others have read differently from us), but it also asks where the conditions of possibility for our own reading come from” (318). To enter into the archives of reading is to bring strangeness and variety into readers’ roles and experiences; paradoxically, it is to come face-to-face with our own roles as readers, teachers, students, critics, and historians.

As one such archive, the *Ladies' Home Journal* enables two arguments—one methodological and one historical. In opening the contemporary literary critic to a radically different regionalism than that we find in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Journal* suggests that the history of reading is not merely a way of ascertaining how previous readers understood and interpreted literature. It is additionally a way of rethinking both genre and methodologies of genre criticism. Fredric Jameson claims to lay to rest the “typologizing abuses of traditional genre criticism” when he insists that “genre theory must always in one way or another project a model of the coexistence or tension between several generic modes or strands” (141). The history of reading productively shifts such a project beyond what even Jameson has in mind. It exposes how genres are in tension not only with their own intra- and intergeneric “modes and strands,” but also their own multiple receptions. Ultimately, the history of reading and genre criticism are versions of one another. That is, the kind of work this chapter relies upon—archival research into the literary cultures that influenced how and why people read—constitutes a crucial mode of inquiry into the generic interconnections between texts and, indeed, between texts and readers. Histories of reading uncover sets of conventions that shape genres by, in turn, shaping the kinds of patterns that readers mark as generic. It is apparent that the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Atlantic Monthly* articulate different conceptions of regionalism because they brought to it such starkly different reading practices. Yet we can also push this claim a step further. Might not the *Journal*’s regionalism and the *Atlantic*’s regionalism comprise two separate genres entirely, made up in large part of the same texts, yet tracing starkly different sets of interconnection, isolating different sets of attributes, and calling for related yet unique literary histories?

Jewett points us in the right direction when, in a letter to her friend Alice Meyness, she suggests that friendship occupies its own “country” (*Letters* 200).¹² The twofold description most obviously refers to a geography that circumscribes the accumulation of those everyday interactions out of which intimacy develops, but it also marks this fluid intimacy as a distinct sociopolitical territory. Jewett thereby suggests a way of understanding one’s intimate social life as superseding the loyalties of

patriotic citizenship and the imagined communities of fraternal camaraderie.¹³ The *Ladies' Home Journal* privileges this antinational geography of friendship precisely by associating it with the reading of Jewett's preferred literary genre, the regionalist sketch. Yoking reading to the philosophy of friendship, the *Journal* assigns new conventions to regionalist fiction. Its pages associate regionalism not merely with the depiction of rural lives and customs, but also with the careful representation of sociality apart from familial prescriptions; not only with the specificity of the local, but also with a meditation on how to transform friendship into a process, a way of life; not merely with the sketch form, but also with a roomy aesthetics that allows readers to find out "minds and characters for ourselves." We likely have no way of knowing the exact extent to which the *Journal*'s mode of regionalism became a resource for antinational intimacies. Yet as a prominent and influential archive of regionalism's reception, the *Ladies' Home Journal* at the least helped to popularize Jewett's model for friendship. In advancing an ideal association between reading and intimacy, it aligned regionalism with social relationships that could never be subsumed into generic attachments—relationships, therefore, that ran afoul of the experiences of social belonging that undergirded "American" nationalism.

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Notes:

(1) The *Journal* spent its first three years as the *Ladies' Home Journal and Practical Housekeeper*. For more on the *Journal's* history and influence, see Damon-Moore and Scanlon.

(2) For Chesnutt's work with syndications, see Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace* 4. I focus only

briefly on Johanningsmeier's relevance to Kaplan and Brodhead because others, including Johanningsmeier himself, have already made clear the relevance of his findings for reconsidering their theses. See Johanningsmeier, "Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins" 61; Howard; and Fetterley and Pryse.

(3) Another way to gauge Sarah Orne Jewett's widespread readership is to look at Katherine Cole Aydelott's wonderfully exhaustive PhD dissertation, "Maine Stream: A Bibliographical Reception Study of Sarah Orne Jewett."

(4) This meta-discourse includes Annie R. Ramsey's "Books and Bookmakers" (1889), "Some Books on My Table" (1890), and "An Hour with New Books" (1890); multiple columns by Edward W. Bok on subjects ranging from "Words for Young Authors" to "Is Literature a Trade?" (1889–1906); "In Literary Circles" (1890–1892); "Literary Women in Their Homes" (1892–1895); "Droch's Literary Talks" (1896–1897); and "Mr. Mabie's Literary Talks" (1902–1904).

(5) On the disciplinary axis dividing critical from uncritical reading practices, see Warner.

(6) See also a column written by the *Journal*'s editor, Edward Bok, that admonishes "the most radical believers of realism in fiction" (12).

(7) For an excellent history of realism and the *Atlantic*-group magazines, see Glazener.

(8) See also Abbott, Porter, and Rees.

(9) Although these recommendations recur throughout reading advice books of the 1870s and '80s, you can find them (and more) in a convenient eighteen-point list in Moore 11–13. For a recent history of "the reading habit" as a recurrent concern in the late nineteenth-century United States, see Hochman.

(10) For a related argument, see Fetterley and Pryse 171–172.

(11) For a separate examination of friendship in Jewett's text, see Shannon. For a related argument about the work of framing devices in regionalist fiction, see Pryse.

(12) Elsewhere, I argue that F. O. Matthiessen provides us one surprising and prominent example of a reader who merges antinational affiliation with the closer reading of regionalism. Reading Jewett enabled Matthiessen to construct meaningful intimacies outside of the heteronormative limitations of U.S. national identity. See also Celia Thaxter's *Among the Isles of Shoals* for her representation of the region as an alternative form of political anticitizenship, in which residents "troubl[e] themselves but little about what State they belong to" (13).

(13) See Anderson 7.

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