

John Neal
and Nineteenth-Century
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26. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 24.
 27. *Ibid.*, 24–25.
 28. John Neal, *Brother Jonathan: or, the New Englanders*. 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1825), 19.
 29. *Ibid.*, 19–20.
 30. Donald A. Ringe, *American Gothic: Imagination and Reason in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982), 119.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. Neal, *Brother Jonathan*, 126.
 33. *Ibid.*, 130.
 34. *Ibid.*, 124.
 35. *Ibid.*, 130.
 36. Tuan, *Escapism*, 24–25.
 37. Dekker and McWilliams, *Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage*, 80.
 38. Quoted in Dekker and McWilliams, *Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage*, 81, 83, and 85.
 39. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans; a Narrative of 1757*, Eds. James Franklin Beard, James A. Sappenfield, and E. N. Feltskog (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), 126–127.
 40. Tuan, *Escapism*, 10.
 41. Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 135–136.
 42. *Ibid.*, 136.
 43. Bergland, *The National Uncanny*, 63–68, 83–107.
 44. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 85–87, 153–154.
 45. Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 175–176.
 46. *Ibid.*, 180–181.
 47. Joseph J. Letter, “Past Presentisms: Suffering Soldiers, Benjaminian Ruins, and the Discursive Foundations of Early U.S. Historical Novels,” *American Literature* 82.1 (2010): 29–55, quotation on 32.

Chapter 3

Eyewitness to History

The Antinarrative Aesthetic of Neal's Seventy-Six

Jeffrey Insko

How do we read a work of historical fiction that seems largely uninterested in the relation between the historical and the fictional? This is the peculiar challenge posed by John Neal's 1823 romance of the American Revolution *Seventy-Six*. Although little known and infrequently read by modern critics, *Seventy-Six* was the novel of which Neal himself was proudest. He considered it “the best novel I have written,” “one of the best romances of the age,” and “quite a faithful history of the old American War—told with astonishing vivacity.”¹ Literary history has not been as kind. As with so much of Neal's fiction, readers of *Seventy-Six* have found it to be an unruly novel, rife with excesses, extravagances, and incoherencies. Where, on the one hand, the novel is notable for its graphic depictions of battle, numerous passages of vigorous prose, and its experimentation with colloquial language—its attempt, as the narrator puts it, to “talk on paper”²—it is marred, on the other hand, by a lack of formal unity, an apparent disregard for thematic coherence, and a convoluted and awkwardly rendered romantic plot. Thus, Edgar Allan Poe's general assessment of Neal's fiction, as Robert A. Bain has pointed out, remains the consensus view: Poe found himself unable “to account for the repeated failure of John Neal as regards the construction of his works.” One always finishes a Neal novel, Poe wrote “with dissatisfaction . . . in no mood to give the author credit for the vivid sensations which have been aroused during the progress of perusal.”³

Poe's difficulty with Neal, endorsed by modern critics almost without exception, rests on a distinction between the formal design of Neal's works—their “construction”—and the experience of reading them—the “vivid sensations” they provoke “during the progress of perusal.” The aim of this essay is not to challenge the dominant view, expressed here by Poe, of Neal as a

writer who failed to produce tightly controlled, unified works of art. After all, Neal himself, as we'll see, didn't dispute that fact. Rather, taking *Seventy-Six* as a particularly revealing example of Neal's aesthetic commitments, I aim to question the distinction upon which Poe's and later critics' negative assessments of Neal's work rest. I wish to do so, in part, because for Neal, there is no distinction between the novel's "construction" and the experience it seeks to engender in its readers. That which happens "during the progress of perusal," in other words, *is* the novel's principle of construction. In the case of *Seventy-Six*, for example, the measure of its success, according to Neal, was that when reading it, "The reader becomes an eye-witness in spite of himself."⁴

Despite Neal's own view of the book, *Seventy-Six* has received very little critical attention. It merits only passing mention, for instance, in George Dekker's influential study *The American Historical Romance* and in Michael Kammen's chapter on the historical romance in his wide-ranging study of the persistence of the Revolution in American cultural memory, *A Season of Youth*. Donald Ringe, in an essay on "The American Revolution in American Romance," devotes more detailed attention to the novel, but only to conclude that "As a sustained work of historical fiction . . . *Seventy-Six* is a failure" that "has little if anything to say about the American Revolution."⁵ In Ringe's view, Neal fails where James Fenimore Cooper and other historical romancers—John Pendleton Kennedy and William Gilmore Simms in particular—succeeded by not recognizing that in a work of historical fiction "the historical and nonhistorical parts had to be integrated in such a way as to reveal the meaning and significance of the entire action." Unlike the works of Cooper, Kennedy, and Simms—and, I would add, Catharine Maria Sedgwick in her later novel *The Linwoods* (1835)—*Seventy-Six* "makes no attempt to unite its disparate strains." In fact, ultimately "the war is simply dropped and attention is focused on the absurd posturing of a Byronic character and the girl he loves."⁶

More recently, Joseph J. Letter has provided an implied corrective to Ringe's view, arguing for important continuities between Neal's historical romance of the revolution and Cooper's novel *The Spy*. Viewing both novels as engaged in what he calls "past presentism," Letter makes a compelling case for reading *Seventy-Six* within the context of Congressional debates, following the War of 1812, over pensions for Revolutionary War veterans, debates that reflected a broader cultural concern in the 1820s and expressed in a number of historical romances of the Revolution for the figure of the "suffering soldier."⁷ The pension debates, Letter shows, "exposed a discursive conflict, a contest between official histories of the Revolution and the popular stories of common soldiers preserved mostly through oral traditions."⁸

Participating in this conflict, *Seventy-Six* calls into question dominant U.S. narratives of historical progress insofar as it "challenges official histories of the Revolution and draws attention to the present nation's failure to acknowledge the suffering at its historical core."⁹ Thus—although Letter does not mention it—the novel's original subtitle, "Our Country!—Right or Wrong," comes to sound less like an expression of nationalistic passion than an ironic critique emphasizing that which the nation has gotten "wrong." Thus for Letter, Ringe would seem to err in treating the Revolutionary period as the locus of the novel's historicity, when in fact the novel's chief concern is the cultural present of its writing and publication. Within this latter context, Letter does indeed reveal how the "historical and nonhistorical" elements of the text are "integrated." As an "allegory of Revolutionary origins," Letter asserts that the (exceedingly convoluted) "familial plot supplements rather than displaces the Revolution," presenting a narrative in which "family personifies nation."¹⁰

Yet however much Ringe and Letter differ in their assessments of *Seventy-Six*, for both of them that assessment ultimately turns on the same kind of question that concerned Poe: how one harmonizes (or how Neal harmonized) the text's interest in U.S. history and the romantic entanglements of its plot. What is the relationship, these critics ask, between the "historical and nonhistorical" elements of the novel? Ringe, for instance, praises Cooper, Kennedy, and Simms in almost precisely those terms upon which Letter's reading of *Seventy-Six* relies. Each "writer's handling of the family conflicts," Ringe claims, "reveals . . . his attitude toward the social" conflicts the text sets out to explore. A common trope in this regard is "the divided family," which provided historical romancers with "the best and most economical means for depicting the American Revolution as a civil war."¹¹ But while *Seventy-Six* is striking, in part, precisely for the *absence* of divided families—there are virtually no Tories at all in Neal's novel—such an absence does not prevent Letter from finding other ways of reading familial relations as depictions (or personifications) of national or historical conditions. In his reading, allegory helps supply the integration of the historical and nonhistorical that Ringe finds wanting.

Neither of these readings, however, considers the possibility that Neal might be interesting, not *despite*, but precisely *because* of his incoherencies. For that reason, in my examination of *Seventy-Six*, I neither attempt to find coherence in the novel's disparate strains nor fault it for failing to integrate them. Rather than dismissing Neal's unruliness, I attempt to take it seriously by considering the lack of coherence or unity of his fiction not as a problem to be overcome (or forgiven) in order to arrive at his texts' meaning, but instead as itself the meaning of his fiction. The peculiar challenge Neal poses in *Seventy-Six*—a challenge both to the discourse of Revolutionary history

(and historiography) and to the conventions of historical fiction—is its keeping of the historical and the fictional more or less distinct, its resistance to assimilating them into some coherent meaning. Neal's American revolution in *Seventy-Six*, in other words, is his insight that the war—and beyond it, history and human experience—does not in itself possess coherent meaning. Neal's fictional narrative is radical—revolutionary—insofar as it attempts to undo, to circumvent, the inherent tendency of narrative to shape and bestow coherence upon experience.¹²

Like Poe, Neal was a shrewd critic. And as Benjamin Lease has shown, he developed and articulated a clear, if idiosyncratic, theory of fiction.¹³ Indeed, Neal was often remarkably candid in his assessments of his own work, at times anticipating (or preempting) the views of critics and scholars who, as we've already seen, have criticized his novels for their formlessness, their bewildering plots and implausible conclusions, his "lack of any idea when to stop." Neal himself described his novel *Logan* as "incoherent" and admitted that another novel, *Errata*, is "loaded with rubbish." Writing about himself (anonymously, in the third person) in his series on *American Writers* Neal claimed that "he overdoes everything," writing "volume after volume, to the tune of three or four a-month; hardly one of which it is possible to read through."¹⁴ He even acknowledged the excesses and waywardness of *Seventy-Six*, writing that "With a little care—some pruning: a few alterations, it might be made an admirable book of."¹⁵

The fact that Neal did *not* take such care suggests that "admirable" books were not exactly what he set out to produce. This is evident to anyone who has made it through the two volumes that comprise *Seventy-Six*, which, because it is relatively unknown, I'll briefly describe. The outlandish plot of the novel defies easy summary. Narrated by an aging veteran of the Revolution, Jonathan Oadley, to his children, the novel begins in late 1776 and follows Oadley and his younger brother Archibald almost to the conclusion of the war. The action begins as Jonathan, Archibald, and their cousin Arthur Rodman prepare to join Washington's army. Before their departure, Hessian raiders descend on the Oadley home, burn it to the ground, ravish Mrs. Oadley, and run away with Mary Austin, a young woman whose identity remains unexplained. At the house of their neighbor, Robert Arnauld, we are introduced to Arnauld's two daughters, Clara and Lucia, the respective love interests of Jonathan and Archibald, as well as a Colonel Clinton, a mysterious figure who has close ties to George Washington and an eye for Lucia Arnauld. Jonathan and Archibald, along with their father, Mr. Arnauld, and Clinton go off to battle, fighting at Trenton, Brandywine, and Valley Forge. Mr. Oadley dies in battle early on, but the valiant Archibald, reckless and brooding in the Byronic mold, quickly distinguishes himself in battle and is

given an officer's commission. Soon enough, Archibald and Clinton quarrel over Lucia and Archibald kills his rival in a duel. Meanwhile, it is revealed that Mary Austin, whom everyone has given up for dead, is alive and well in Philadelphia, although it is revealed that she had nearly been seduced by Robert Arnauld, who confesses and is forgiven for his behavior. Mary is then reunited in Philadelphia with her lover Arthur Rodman.

The war continues, providing Oadley with the opportunity to offer a number of vivid, brutal, and bloody descriptions of skirmishes large and small. Archibald broods over his killing of Clinton and becomes increasingly gloomy over the violence of the war and his love for Lucia. He also befriends another officer, Chester Copely, who, like Archibald, fights a duel and kills his adversary. Jonathan, meanwhile, makes love both to Clara and to a feisty young girl named Ellen Sampson, whom he meets in Philadelphia. But eventually, Jonathan is wounded in battle, loses a leg, and returns to the Arnauld house where the remainder of the novel is set. On furlough, Copely, Arthur, and Archibald visit, at which point the novel's several lovers square off and avow their devotion, resulting in the marriages, in a joint ceremony, of Copely to Ellen Sampson, Jonathan to Clara, and Arthur to Mary Austin. Archibald and Lucia reconcile, but for undisclosed reasons, refuse to marry, and we learn that Archibald is dying of consumption, a fact he has tried to keep secret. In the novel's climax, Lucia reveals that Clinton had seduced her and Jonathan learns the source of Archibald's shame and guilt: the night before the Hessian raid on the house, Archibald had killed another young man in a duel, burying the body at the site of their contest. The sources of their guilt thus partially expiated, Lucia and Archibald finally agree to marry. The novel concludes at their wedding, where, at the instant they are pronounced husband and wife, Archibald dies.

As this brief summary (which scarcely begins to do justice to the plot's intricacy) suggests, *Seventy-Six* is, as Jonathan Oadley concedes near the end, "a disorderly story at best."¹⁶ Indeed, more than just a description of the narrative, disorderliness proves one of the novel's primary topics of interest. Which is simply to say the novel is quite explicit about its incoherence, the signs of which penetrate every level of the text: from Neal's reference in the preface to the "rambling incoherency, passion and extravagance of [his earlier novel] *Logan*"¹⁷ to Oadley's own references to the "rambling incoherent journeying of my thoughts,"¹⁸ his "disordered memory"¹⁹ his "troubled, disorderly dreaming," the "disordered dreaming of my brain," and late in the novel, the "the wild, incoherent, disordered language" of a letter from Archibald to Lucia that Oadley transcribed.²⁰ Moreover, characters in the novel are frequently described as "disordered" or refer to the "disordered wandering of my mind," or "disorderly dreaming."²¹ The battle scenes are

likewise frequently, and aptly, characterized as disorderly.²² Even the material status of the text reflects this fundamental disorderliness and incoherence: it is rife with typographical errors, misspellings, and other printer's mistakes, including, at one point, a missing manuscript page for which the publisher inserts, in the middle of a character's speech, an apology.

The disjointed quality of the text extends to its awkward handling of shifts from scenes of battle in which the novel's characters participate to retrospective discussions of the military campaign and political maneuvering, and scenes at the Arnauld house and elsewhere that advance its intricate romantic plot. For two-thirds of the novel, these three elements seem to vie for primacy in the novel so that it's not quite clear whether Oadley's (or Neal's or the reader's, for that matter) principle interest lies in depicting the brutal experience of war, providing an accurate account of the Revolution's progress in military and political terms, or in exploring affairs of the heart. The narrative of the Oadleys' experience in the war is frequently interrupted, for instance, with digressions that address the politics of the war from an historian's perspective. For these discussions, Neal drew heavily upon Paul Allen's *History of the American Revolution* (1819), large portions of which Neal had written himself. Rather than seamlessly incorporating this material into the action of the novel, however, Oadley explicitly presents it digressively. Early on, for example, as the characters prepare with Washington for the campaign in New Jersey, Oadley writes, "My children! I must pause. I would have you realize the tremendous peril in which your father and uncle—all his family and friends—nay! All the hopes of America were placed at this hour." What follows is a consideration—nearly identical to the one found in Allen's *History*—of why the British army chose not to pursue Washington across the Delaware, a pursuit, according to Oadley, that could have decided the war in Britain's favor. At the conclusion of this discussion, Oadley merely states: "But let me return," at which point the novel's fictional characters are reintroduced.²³

This pattern is repeated frequently in *Seventy-Six*. Following a discussion of the Battle of Trenton, Oadley writes: "There, my dear Children—I have been willing to forget the battle, and the subject for awhile, and amuse you, for I know your taste and that of our people, with a few rockets,—and—but let me return—." Later in the first volume, Oadley takes up the actions of the American Congress, introducing the digression by saying:

And here my children, you will allow me to pause awhile, remarking, that no matter of importance took place for several weeks in our little camp, till Archibald was restored, and Clinton, rejoined us—for the purpose of carrying your thought abroad, to the more distant operations of our country, in the field and council.

What follows is an account of Washington's appointment by the Continental Congress as the supreme commander of the American army (which Oadley views as a terrible mistake, salvaged only owing to the great virtue of Washington), a brief mention of the appearance of Benedict Arnold, and a discussion of the vulnerable weakness of the Continental troops. Yet beyond the function of marking the chronological advancement of the War, these "more distant operations" have little, if any, bearing on the activities of the novel's principle characters. Hence when the discussion concludes, once again with the statement, "So—let us return to our story—," Oadley picks up his narrative at a seemingly random point: "I shall take it up, at the time that I first saw Clinton, face to face" following his return to camp. Later, in what may be the novel's strangest digression, Oadley tells the story of how, after the War, "the artful, terrible" Aaron Burr attempted to enlist Oadley and Copely in his secessionist conspiracy. Copely violently resists, accusing Burr of treason, at which point Oadley concludes the tale by saying, "But let me return—to the Revolution."²⁴

Eventually, even these intermittent attempts to track the Revolution's progress cease entirely. At the beginning of the novel's final chapter, Oadley admits, "My heart fails me. I never shall be able to carry you through the whole war, as I intended to do, when I began. It is out of the question." He begins a final update on the status of the war, but aborts it just as quickly: "Intelligence from the south—no—I will have done with the war." "The war, and the men of the revolution," he continues, "my own sufferings, and those of my family; the army—my country; all are forgotten or remembered, as a matter subordinate to the sorrow, of Archibald and Lucia." It's tempting to explain this abandonment of the war by saying that Oadley or, more likely, Neal himself, has simply run out of steam (in Neal's case, because he has nearly reached the requisite page count for his second volume)—a plausible conclusion given Neal's habits of composition (about which, more in a moment) and hence to view it as a clear sign of Neal's shortcomings as a novelist. But we shouldn't too quickly dismiss Oadley's answer as to why "it is out of the question" to make it through "the whole war": because his interest is absorbed by the story of Archibald and Lucia. It has "taken such possession" of him that he "can see nothing, hear nothing, think of nothing, but him and her."²⁵

On one level, this explanation might suggest that if, as I have claimed, the historical and the fictional elements of the novel vie for primacy for most of the narrative, in the end, fiction trumps history. On another level, however, Oadley here aptly demonstrates a central tenet of Neal's theory of art: that what is paramount is *interest*. Indeed, Oadley's absorption in his own story—disorderly though it may be—provides a figure for the compositional

habits of Neal himself. Neal prided himself not only on his ability to write quickly—in his memoir *Wandering Recollections*, for instance, he boasts of the “wonderful rapidity” with which he wrote *Seventy-Six* over the course of just twenty-seven days in February and March of 1822—but on the explosive power with which he did so. For instance, in *Wandering Recollections*, he describes writing his earlier work, the narrative poem “Battle of Niagara,” as “a clear case of spontaneous combustion,” the outpouring of an inflamed imagination. “I was carried away,” Neal writes, “with a sense of hidden wings, in the contemplation of what I saw and heard, as the picture began to shape itself with appalling distinctness, to my imagination. It was a revelation: I felt as if I had become an eye-witness of the great transaction.” Neal described the creation of *Seventy-Six* in similar terms, as a kind of explosion of pent-up energy: “I had got charged to the muzzle with the doings of our Revolutionary fathers, while writing my portion of ‘Allen’s History,’” Neal recalls in *Wandering Recollections*, “and wanted . . . to go off like a Leyden jar, and empty myself at once of all the hoarded enthusiasm I had been bottling up, for three or four years.” The result, as Neal describes it in his series on *American Writers* is that: “The reader becomes an eye-witness in spite of himself.”²⁶

It’s not just that Neal was willing to sacrifice coherence and polish for emotional power and “vivacity.” Rather, it’s that coherence and polish, for Neal, are actually inimical to vivacity. At the end of his novel *The Down-Easters*, Neal responds to the concern of his publisher that he did not provide a full accounting of the novel’s characters:

It is in vain for me to tell him, that incidents of themselves are interesting in real life, unconnected though they are, with a story before and a story after them, that if a fine girl for instance, were to destroy herself, it would be the fault of the narrator, if people were not interested, without knowing all the causes, all the circumstances, and all the consequences. But all in vain: a plot there must be with a regular development . . .²⁷

The claim Neal makes for “real life” here comes close to expressing a phenomenology of pure experience that is fundamentally at odds with narrative. Narrative seeks the meaning of experiences in causes, circumstances, and consequences, rather than in the experience itself. The function of a narrator (or author) is thus not to explain, but simply to present incidents with such vividness of interest that the reader becomes “an eye-witness.” Thus the controlling idea of what we might call Neal’s aesthetic of incoherence is that narrative is not immanent in our experience, but merely a structure that is imposed upon it retrospectively.²⁸

The same principle holds for history, where experience and knowledge are likewise at odds. To know the history of the American Revolution—to know its major battles, its turning points, its principal players; indeed, to know its causes, circumstances, and consequences—is one thing; to experience the heat of battle is quite another. This is why Neal’s discussions of the former come in the form of digressions, only loosely connected to the latter. The two are, in a very important sense (for Neal) simply unrelated. And both are unrelated to the other incidents the novel depicts: the affairs of Archibald, Clinton, and Lucia, Copely and Ellen, Jonathan and Clara, and the rest. What makes *Seventy-Six* so unsatisfying (apparently), or simply bewildering, as a work of art is the fact that Neal *laments* the idea that “a plot there must be”—an unusual reservation, to say the least, for a novelist to hold.

Yet on another level, Neal’s view possesses a certain logic, in terms of both the kind of “history” Oadley sets out to write and, relatedly, the paradoxical conception of history that Oadley (and perhaps Neal himself) appears to advance. Oadley explains the former in the novel’s opening chapter, where he instructs his children on how to read the story he has to tell. Recognizing that the Revolutionary generation is quickly passing away, Oadley reminds his children that they’ll soon ask, “Our Fathers!—the men of the Revolution—where *are* they?” Having left behind his narrative as a “record,” his children will merely have to open his book, which will “call up his apparition before” them, allowing them to “see his aged and worn forehead—his white hair in the wind.” His book will encourage them to “travel in imagination, with your father, barefooted, over the frozen ground, leaving his blood at every step, as he went” and make their “thought go in pilgrimage, over the same ground, remembering that the old men who traveled it, in the revolution, doing battle at every step, for your inheritance, were an army journeying, deliberately, to martyrdom.” Even more, Oadley vows to conjure forth his fellow veterans: “at my bidding, they will appear! And harness and array themselves—and stand before you, as I have seen them stand before GEORGE WASHINGTON—a battalion of immoveable, impregnable, and unconquerable old men.” Oadley’s insistence here upon immediacy and presence is a desire for his children (stand-ins for readers of the novel) not just to *remember* the men of the Revolution, the scenes of their suffering, and the sites of battle, but to *witness* them. That is, his wish is not that they’ll *know* about the war—for that they could turn to “the blundering, tedious compilations, which, are called the Histories of our Revolution”—but that they’ll *experience* it.²⁹

Of course, the paradox of such a rendering of history—making it present—is that it ceases to be historical. To return to the past, to become an “eye-witness” to historical events, would be to have a present experience—the only kind of experience there is. The dilemma, then, with which Neal

is faced—and the central problem, I would suggest, of the unique brand of historical fiction Neal practices in *Seventy-Six*—is this: how to get the past into one's present experience? By this, I don't mean how to represent the past or how to understand it, or even to remember it. I mean—and this is the unique problem Neal's aesthetic creates—how to render it “interesting,” in Neal's understanding of that term. Neal's way of negotiating this dilemma is through a curious temporal sleight of hand. Consider, in the passages cited above, the most striking feature of the future memories Oadley projects: he would have his children recall the Revolutionary veterans, himself included, not in their youthful vigor at the time of the war, but in their dotage, as “old men.” Indeed, those who did battle at every step, those who were arrayed in front of Washington, were, at the time, not “old” at all. Oadley's image of the men of the Revolution calls to mind the images of decrepit Revolutionary-era specters summoned by Whitman in his satirical poem “A Boston Ballad” and, as in Whitman, they help to figure a generational divide. Oadley's soldiers will appear, he says, as “shadowy sovereigns coming back to a degenerate people.” Just as in “A Boston Ballad,” the present generation—Oadley's children's generation—has lost the spirit of liberty embodied by their forefathers; they've become, Oadley says, “base and showy,” “a fettered people—fettered too, by manacles that would have fallen from the limbs of your fathers like rain.”³⁰

But while Oadley certainly shares Whitman's sense of generational declension, it's less clear that Neal does. Rather, the image of aged soldiers at the start of *Seventy-Six* is Neal's way of locating Revolutionary history itself not in a distant past, but in a living present on the verge of passing away. In this regard, a more apt point of comparison than “A Boston Ballad” is Emerson's famous “Concord Hymn” (1836):

The foe long since in silence slept,
Alike the Conqueror silent sleeps,
And Time the ruined bridge has swept
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.³¹

Emerson's poem betrays an anxiety about remembering not unlike that expressed by Oadley. The poem appears to mourn the fact that the “bridge” that would connect the past to the present has been “swept” away by “Time” into the sea. Yet at the same time, the poem, paradoxically, casts time itself as a ruined bridge. As such, it *always* fails as a means of traversing history. Emerson's poem, of course, was written to commemorate the completion of the Concord Monument, and so by the end it registers hope that the “set[ting]

of a “votive stone” will aid memory in performing the function that time's ruined bridge cannot.

The difference between Emerson and Neal, however, is that Emerson's solution is to substitute memory for time, to cast memory (potentially) in the role of an *unruined* bridge establishing “concord”—a relation of harmony—between present and future citizens of Concord and the Revolutionary past. Neal, by contrast, simply attempts to do away with both time (in the form, once again, of explanatory causes, circumstances, and consequences) and memory (in the form of commemorative monuments). Instead, he locates history in the soldiers themselves. “Look at the men of our revolution,” Oadley says in an apostrophe to his children near the end of volume I:

Where do you find such faces now? Why are not their children's written over, and sculptured so deeply? Why! Because the impress of relationship—the hand of nature, never yet operated upon the countenance of man, and never will, with aught of that terrible distinctness, with which political convulsion chisels [sic] out the head and the faces of her chosen ones. Look at the men of our revolution—their very countenances are the history of the time.³²

At first glance, Neal's metaphors of inscription here might suggest that Neal is simply participating in what Russ Castronovo has identified as the antebellum U.S. “culture of monumentalism,” a particular “historical mode of articulating national culture” that “underscores the interstices between the fabrication of historical consciousness and civic being”—a reading that would accord with Neal's well-known promotion of U.S. literary nationalism.³³ And yet, Oadley's insistence that the faces of the revolutionary veterans “are the history of the time” differs in crucial ways from the monumental impulse. Devoted to “magnificent narrative[s] of homogeneity and unity,” monumentalism effaces the particular in favor of the mythical, the local in favor of the national, and the individual in favor of the collective. As Castronovo puts it, “Hardly worth memorialization, the people are not the stuff of history. Instead, history resides solely in the national.”³⁴ By contrast, for Neal the people—the faces of revolutionary veterans—are *literally* the stuff of history, which is why Neal extols a form of history “written by men acquainted by participation therein” and delivered in “the style of a soldier, plain and direct.”³⁵

However, in arguing that Neal refuses the monumental impulse that Emerson, along with many others in antebellum America, found congenial to the work of consolidating a timeless national identity, I likewise do not wish to align Neal with the kind of “countermonumentalism” that, as Dana Luciano has insightfully shown, informs some nineteenth-century critiques of nationalist commemoration. Luciano describes the countermonument as

“deliberately untimely.” Like Emerson’s ruined bridge, it “marks out spaces in which damaged time becomes visible.” But where Emerson’s poem imagines the healing of such “damaged time” through the unifying power of the monument, “the countermonument supplants the timeless symbolic appeal of the traditional monument with the destabilizing effects of both irony and allegory. The turn to allegory in countermonuments, in particular, reflects a desire to find ways of negotiating the relationship between past and present that depend neither on linear emplotments of time nor on its collapse into timelessness.” Because it “exposes the incompleteness of objects, gesturing toward a referential relationship that is both arbitrary and necessary,” allegory “emphasizes the necessity of making meaning of (rather than receiving meaning *from*) the countermonument, a process that will, like allegory itself, necessarily be dispersed across time.”³⁶ In this, allegory—as Walter Benjamin notes—is related to the ruin, which because it only becomes commemorative over time and derives its variable meanings from later periods, commemorates nothing more than the passage of time itself.

However, *Seventy-Six*, I am arguing, refuses both the timelessness of the monument and the untimeliness of the countermonument and, in doing so, it refuses both the symbolism of the former and the allegorizing of the latter. To read *Seventy-Six* allegorically, as Joseph Letter does, is to treat the novel itself as a ruin, to assume the necessity of the text’s referentiality. Yet this assumption, I am suggesting, is at odds with Neal’s devotion to “incidents of themselves,” his attempt to convert readers into eyewitnesses, his desire to produce a novel in which “plot” is little more than an unfortunate sideeffect, his experiment in constructing a narrative that neither refers nor means, but that simply *is*. Of course, such a project could not *not* fail, given that both writing and reading inevitably unfold in time and given that the historical past is irretrievably past. Yet a large part of the interest—and oddity—of reading *Seventy-Six* is watching Neal make the attempt nevertheless. Consider one of the novel’s more vivid passages: Oadley’s first experience in battle. Robert Bain praises this passage for its “psychological perceptions,” but it is equally notable for its comparative lack of interest in the battle itself or its historical meaning:

For myself, I can hardly tell what my feelings were. First, there was a rush of fierce, terrible delight—and then, a brief alarum in my heart; followed by a sort of religious fervour, exceeding wrath and indignation, tranquilized and subdued, as if God and his angels were fighting with us. Nay, at the very onset; when the word had been given to *charge!*—and all the hills round, rung with the melody of trumpets—the neighing of horses, and the shouting of their riders—when we had joined battle, and I heard nothing but the shriek of women—saw nothing but the pale, wasted face of my poor mother—and the

dead body of Mary, under the hoof of trampling horses—there was no feeling of terror, in all this—none!—but there was a sublimity, that distended my whole heart, as with fire, and flood, and tempest—and when, in the thick of the battle, our ranks were broken, and each was wrestling, man to man, with his adversary, on foot, or on horseback—the face of my father and brother, and that of the death struck Arthur, went by me, in one rank, as I thought—and all fled before them! After all this, I know not what happened, until my horse stumbled among the dead bodies, and threw me into a mass of human blood and trodden snow. God! how the field looked. But stay!—I am anticipating. Is it not wonderful. I had stood, and gazed upon my brother, not a minute before, after the blood of one man was upon him—and listened to his composed voice, and fancied that there was something preternatural in it—but now, I was dripping with it, from head to foot—and I felt no other emotion than a little loathing and sickness.³⁷

To the extent that this passage depicts a sequence of events, those events are not what happens in the fight, but are instead Oadley’s “feelings,” which come in succession: “terrible delight,” then “alarum,” followed by “religious fervor.” Yet the passage never makes clear what induces these sensations, but only that each of them “was.” Distinctions between present and past, outside and inside, collapse. The sensations of the battle itself, its sounds, for example—from the melody of trumpets to the “neighing of horses—and its sights—dead bodies, the “mass of human blood”—are no more real, no more present, than the sensations drawn from Oadley’s past: the face of his mother, the body of Mary Austin. Everything dissolves into an undifferentiated “now.” Indeed, at the one moment when this account begins to slip into a conventional representation—“God! how the field looked,” Oadley begins to say, as if to take an external, retrospective view of the battle and its aftermath—he fights against the impulse, saying, “But stay!— I am anticipating.” To anticipate, in this context, is to narrativize, to think of events as connected “with a story before and a story after.”

Thus when Oadley reminds himself to “stay”—to arrest the inevitable movement of narrative, to resist placing events in sequential relation to other events—he gives expression to Neal’s own resistance to plot and his devotion instead to experience, to the incident as it happens: without the benefit of an immanent direction or meaning, without cause or consequence. The temporality of the passage, in other words, is the duration of experience, rather than the cause and effect relations between successive historical events. Incidents of themselves may possess a certain temporal spread (or duration), but as they are experienced, they do not possess continuity. To the contrary, the principle characteristic of the incident is in fact its novelty. Only in retrospect, after its occurrence, do we set about reconstructing events to account for it, to give (narrative)

shape and meaning to the incident in relation to that which we experienced before and that which is yet to come. This retrospective act of reconstruction is what it means, conventionally, both to narrativize and to historicize.³⁸

Neal's attempt to reproduce for the reader experiences and incidents in themselves, in their autonomous discontinuity, is illustrated in yet another way in the novel's penultimate chapter. All of the principle characters, now (with the exception of Archibald and Lucia) married with children, enjoy a "warm, sultry day" outdoors. As they watch the children, with their hands full of flowers, playing near the woods, Archibald recalls a painting he had once seen. The picture, he says,

"represented a mother and her babe. The story was this . . . The child had crept to the brink of a precipice, before the mother had missed it: when she turned her face, she discovered her babe upon the very verge. God touched her heart—she tore away the covering from her bosom; and the little nestling turned, saw the place of beauty, and remained immovable, til she had crept near enough to catch him, and faint."

Archibald goes on to explain why the painting "troubled" him. "The painter ought to have seen these children," he says, because they demonstrate why the painting's rendering of a similar scene is "wrong." First, the child in the painting "held the flowers, just as a grown person would, by the stems; but these children do not." Rather, they catch at that part which attracts their eye: "the light of a candle—the coloured leaf, or the blossom. It is the flower, that they seize and tear up." A second fault of the painting, Archibald continues, is that the child in it "is sitting upon the precipice":

That was wrong. When the child had gone so far, as to sit upon it, and let its little feet hang over, the danger was already past; the extreme danger I mean . . . Now, my notion is, that the child should not be sitting, but creeping; nay, I would have it so, that the spectator should start, and hold his breath, and put out his hand to save it, if he came suddenly into the room, where the picture was.

Archibald's alternative version of the painting, which he describes in minute detail, would, he remarks, "make your blood run cold."³⁹

What Archibald objects to in the painting is not just its lack of precise verisimilitude (evident in the way in which the child holds the flowers), but its narrative completeness. The picture presents danger averted ("already past"), rather than danger itself. In doing so, it appeals to the viewer's understanding or intellect, not the viewer's emotion.⁴⁰ Or more precisely, it only reproduces the *knowledge* of a moment of "extreme danger," rather than producing in the viewer the *experience* of that danger. Archibald's painting, by contrast,

would make of the reader an "eye-witness," pulling him so powerfully into the moment that he would act, "put[ting] out his hand to save" the child, as if there. The difference between Archibald's version of the painting and the original, then, is that Archibald's would resist narrativizing the scene, would resist *representing* fear, danger averted, potential loss—or whatever else the painting might be said to depict or mean. Instead, it would merely produce a particular sensation in the viewer; it would present (not *represent*) an experience—an experience whose chief characteristic, as Archibald's scenario of the viewer who suddenly enters the room where the painting hangs suggests, is that it is disruptive.

Of course, the scene does not just make its point by analogy. It is itself disruptive and discontinuous in relation to the disparate threads of the novel's plot. Indeed, nothing up to that point in the novel has prepared the reader for Archibald-turned-art-critic and nothing that follows helps to make any sort of sense of the scene at the level of plot or even character development. Like so many other episodes in the novel—whether a depiction of war's ferocity, the facts of Revolutionary history, or love's vicissitudes—its significance is entirely self-contained; it refers only to itself. And yet for Neal, this discontinuity is not that which prevents him from arriving at some coherent meaning of the Revolution. Rather, it *is* the "truth" of history.⁴¹

NOTES

1. The first of these quotations is from Neal's *Wandering Recollections of a Somewhat Busy Life: An Autobiography* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1869), 224; the others appear in Neal's "American Writers," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1825), 197.
2. John Neal, *Seventy-Six: "Our Country!—Right or Wrong,"* 2 volumes, 1823; reprint (Bainbridge, NY: York Mail-Print, 1971), 17; italics original.
3. See Poe, "Marginalia," *Southern Literary Messenger* V. 15 (May 1849), 294. See also Robert A. Bain, "Introduction," *Seventy-Six: "Our Country!—Right or Wrong,"* 2 volumes, 1823; reprint (Bainbridge, NY: York Mail-Print, 1971), xvi.
4. Neal, "American Writers," 197.
5. . Donald Ringe, "The American Revolution in American Romance," *American Literature* 49 (Nov. 1977), 355.
6. Ringe, "The American Revolution," 354.
7. Joseph J. Letter, "Past Presentisms: Suffering Soldiers, Benjaminian Ruins, and the Discursive Foundations of Early U.S. Historical Novels," *American Literature* 82 (March 2010), 35.
8. *Ibid.*, 30.
9. *Ibid.*, 36.
10. *Ibid.*, 46–47.

11. Ringe, "The American Revolution," 359, 358.
12. For an excellent reading of Neal's *Rachel Dyer*, quite different from my own, in terms of experience, see Theo Davis, *Formalism, Experience, and the Making of American Literature in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. chapter 1.
13. Benjamin Lease, "Yankee Poetics: John Neal's Theory of Poetry and Fiction," *American Literature* (Jan. 1953): 505-19.
14. Neal, "American Writers," 426.
15. Neal, *Wandering Reflections*, 197.
16. Neal, *Seventy-Six*, 2:243.
17. *Ibid.*, 1: v.
18. *Ibid.*, 1: 214.
19. *Ibid.*, 1: 199.
20. *Ibid.*, 1: 54, 106, 71.
21. *Ibid.*, 1: 119, 150, 187, 223; 2: 134; 1: 54.
22. *Ibid.*, e.g., 1: 98, 133, 159, 169; 2: 19, 22, 31
23. *Ibid.*, 1: 132, 138.
24. *Ibid.*, 1: 176, 249, 251; 2: 73.
25. *Ibid.*, 242, 243, 242.
26. Neal, *Wandering Reflections*, 173, 5, 224, 169.
27. John Neal, *The Down-Easters*, vol. II (New York: Harper & Bros., 1833), 110.
28. The question, in Hayden White's words, of whether "the world really present[s] itself to perception in the form of well-made stories with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and coherence" has long been a topic of vigorous historiographical debate. White, Arthur C. Danto, and Louis O. Mink have argued that narrative does not inhere in experience. To cite Mink's well-known formulation, "stories are not lived, but told." By contrast, David Carr argues "narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence, independently of our contemplating the past as historians." For some more recent interventions in the debate, see Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Frank Ankersmit, "Truth in History and Literature," *Narrative* 18:1 (January 2010): 29-50. See White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7:1 (Autumn 1980), 27; Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 60; and Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 9.
29. Neal, *Seventy-Six*, 1: 12, 13, 14, 15, 16.
30. *Ibid.*, 1: 15, 16.
31. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Concord Hymn," *Collected Poems and Translations* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 125.
32. Neal, *Seventy-Six*, 1: 247-248.
33. Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 109.
34. *Ibid.*, 130.

35. Neal, *Seventy-Six*, 1: 17.
36. Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 170, 181, 183.
37. Bain, 1: 95.
38. See n. 28. In addition to the work of philosophers of history on the relations between narrative and reality, my account here is informed by the analysis of temporal experience provided by the pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead in *The Philosophy of the Present* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), as well as his essay, "The Nature of the Past." In the latter, Mead writes, for instance,

The memory of the unexpected appearance of a supposedly far distant friend, or the memory of an earthquake can never recover the peculiar tang of the experience. I remember that there was a break which is now connected with just the phases of the experience which were unconnected. We recall the joy or the terror, but it is over against a background of a continuum whose discontinuity has been healed. Something was going on — the rising anger of a titan or the adjustment of the earth's internal pressures which resulted in that which was unexpected, but this was not the original experience, when there was no connection between the events before the occurrence and the sudden emergence. (350)

See Mead, *Selected Writings*, ed. Andrew J. Heck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 350.

39. Neal, *Seventy-Six*, 2: 230, 231, 232.
40. For more on the importance of the distinction between intellect and emotion in Neal's aesthetic theory, see Lease, *that wild fellow*.
41. Neal, *Seventy-Six*, 1: 14.