novel's original audience by suggesting that they would only know the immediate headline context of Wyoming's bid for statehood and its constitutional inclusion of female suffrage. They would have been familiar with the elements of the typological agenda as well. The richer literary and historical ramifications, some posted by Wisterian design, some automatic with "the matter of Virginia," make *The Virginian* an interesting book indeed—certainly capable of, and perhaps actually successful in, doing more than the "two things at once" (67) in Mitchell's estimate.

MICHAEL KREYLING
Vanderbilt University

Reply:

Michael Kreyling's letter calls for little in the way of response. His terms are inexact (his is hardly a "typological" approach). His main point has been anticipated by others in standard readings of the novel (starting with Douglas Branch half a century ago). And he is prone to contentious assertions that are either wrong (Wister's reference to "the Virginian" patently does "leave his main figure 'unnamed'"); misleading (I never imply my interpretation was the "only" one available to the novel's first readers); or unhelpfully silly ("Wisterical"?). Most important, if Kreyling aspires to debate constructively, he should focus more closely on the question raised by the author he chides. I remind him that in this case that question was, Why did Wister's novel fail to fit the popular formula it inspired? Nothing Kreyling says helps explain that failure or makes it any less baffling.

LEE CLARK MITCHELL
Princeton University

Social Reality

To the Editor:

Sandy Petrey's article "Castration, Speech Acts, and the Realist Difference: *S/Z* versus *Sarrasine*" (102 [1987]: 153–65) is a stimulating contribution to the current debate about realism. A difficulty arises, however, from the claim that the "dissociation of the constative from its referent furnishes a way to separate realist mimesis from the referential fallacy as well" (155). It seems to me that Petrey is merely shifting the locus of that fallacy in his argument that "realism enacts a constative vision of the world by simultaneously denying language's connection to objective truth and affirming its expression of social truth" (155).

The concept of the "social" recurs throughout the article in a variety of forms: "social reality" (157); "not

physical realities but social fabrications" (157); "[t]he process of meaning in *Sarrasine* is not the road to objective reality but the expression of what society accepts as real" (162); "social consensus" (164). In every instance a "social" reality is played off against an "objective" or "physical" reality. In the very act of dethroning objective reality as the referent for the literary text, Petrey appears to be enthroning another—undefined—social reality as the arbiter of authority.

What needs to be addressed is the ontological status of the category "social." Petrey's argument would be more persuasive if he were willing to push it a step further through the recognition that "society" and "social" are themselves products of the text. At more than one point in the article he seems on the verge of such a recognition, for example, when he emphasizes that "*Sarrasine* certainly negates all its affirmations of sexual identity, but not 'as uttered,' not before establishing a context in which their constative validity is secure" (156) and that "*Sarrasine* is a fully developed demonstration that words name not in *fact* but only in communities" (157). It is essential to acknowledge that the communities in question here are *internal* to the text, which establishes its *own* context to ensure the validity of the constative utterance. It does this by positing an internal field of reference, which acts as a cognitive frame for the formation of consensus, that is, "the idea others form of it," in the phrase Petrey cites from Balzac (157).

If the realist fallacy is not to be reinstated in another form, those "others," who collectively make up society, and on whose reading the fact depends, must be seen as intrinsic to the text. In *S/Z*, Petrey maintains, "what is real in realism are those textual elements deprived of meaning" (164). But having been deprived of referential meaning, they are reinvested with an "other" meaning created within the parameters of the text and contained in its codes.

LILIAN R. FURST
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Reply:

Lilian Furst is correct to bring to the foreground what my article left implicit: every definition of reality in a literary text necessarily addresses a textual ontology, "an internal field of reference, which acts as a cognitive frame" during the reading experience rather than for all time. Social reality in and of itself authorizes realist discourse no more than does physical reality. Balzac's contradictory names for a single character become facts because the work in which they appear establishes (rather than reproduces) contexts in which their validity is secure, and my article should indeed have paid more attention to how this establishment takes effect.

Yet I disagree with what I take to be Furst's assump-

tion that recognizing the text's specificity prohibits critical concern with social reality as experienced by those of us who exist outside the text. I live in, as well as read about, society and its facts, and Balzac's representation of the two as mutually constitutive is relevant to societies that his text does not delineate as well as to those that are in Furst's words "created within the parameters of the text and contained in its codes." My argument was that those codes themselves can be productively approached through J. L. Austin's concept of speech acts, and Austin's concern for how words do things was in no sense confined to the things they do in literary texts.

To contend with Austin that truth is a social fabrication does not replace one reified referent with another but focuses attention on the collective dynamics by which ideology produces the referent it pretends to represent. To read Balzac as agreeing with Austin does not assume that the Balzacian text reproduces a frozen past but focuses attention on how that text exposes an ideological presence. Although I agree with Furst that this presence "must be seen as intrinsic to the text," I see no reason why criticism should not interrogate its extrinsic importance as well.

SANDY PETREY
State University of New York, Stony Brook

Hisperic Style

To the Editor:

Roughly half of James Earl's "Hisperic Style in the Old English Rhyming Poem" (102 [1987]: 187–96) is devoted to the connections between the Old English poem and early medieval Latin and Old Norse verse techniques—especially in regard to the use of rhyme—and half to philological conundrums in the text of the Old English poem itself. In both parts of the paper a great deal of the detritus of past scholarship on the poem and on the dark style of early medieval writing generally continues to revolve with a hollow sound, like the gritty remains of old cement in the turning drum of a cement mixer. Some novelties of interpretation stand out (e.g., that of *wilbec*), and Earl is certainly to be congratulated for presenting these faraway Anglo-Saxon things to an academic audience that would not regularly hear about them in *PMLA*, but it seems to me that some dissonances in the secondary literature on the poem and its analogues could have been eliminated from the article or else brought into harmony with the more basic tendencies of present research on the Latin and Germanic literatures of the early Middle Ages.

If Earl chooses to "imagine" that the "Rhyming Poem" author knew something about Old Norse literature and language, he will have to provide other evidence for this hunch than Egill Skallagrímsson's "Höfuð-

lausn," which is quite exceptional in Skaldic verse for its virtuoso *runhent*, or end rhyming. It is precisely the exceptional artistic quality of this poem that has led scholars since the nineteenth century to cite it over and over again in discussions of the origins and spread of rhyme in Germanic poetry. Earl rightly rejects the rhyming model this poem offered the Anglo-Saxon poet, but what evidence is there in the "Rhyming Poem" that its author could have read "Höfuðlausn" anyway? Such Old Norse cognates as *skreið*, *skrýða*, and *skrúð* to the mysterious Old English vocable *scrad*? I think it would be wiser to assume that the Anglo-Saxon rhymer knew neither the Old Norse language nor its literature and to have done with this line of argument once and for all. I might mention in passing that Skaldic verse poses its solvable riddles on the basis of a commonly shared "kenning system," for which there is no obvious counterpart underlying the diction of the "Rhyming Poem," which seems removed even from Old English poetic language.

Much more promising for research is Earl's statement that "[t]he 'Rhyming Poem' seems to be a singular case of hisperic or hermeneutic verse experiment carried out in Old English, and it should be read in the context of its Latin cousins in this style" (189). The poem, then, is an anomaly to be explained from early medieval Latin versification practices. So far so good, but for some reason Earl has tried to collect similar Latin instances of rhyme and alliteration in the poem under the heading of hisperic rather than hermeneutic style, though the heroic work of Michael Lapidge on ninth- and tenth-century Latin art poetry would suggest that the techniques that Earl is interested in belong almost exclusively to the hermeneutic style. His excuses for preferring hisperic to hermeneutic are sure to cause confusion, if accepted: "First, the [hisperic] style probably did originate in Ireland. . . . Second, the term *hermeneutic* stresses Grecisms as the essential feature of the style. . . . So I will use *hisperic* here, to refer to playfully erudite poetic obscurantism . . . " (189).

As this professed hispericist must know, these two points are involved in rather warm debate these days. In any case, Greek and pseudo-Greek words were not the only formatives of either hisperic or hermeneutic vocabulary, and on the Continent the seventh-century grammarian of both styles, Vergil of Toulouse, is still holding out (at least since last I looked into the matter) against the determined efforts of Michael Herren to domicile him in Ireland. If we address ourselves, however, to the historical *Hisperica famina* from which Earl has generalized his term, we must see at once that neither rhyme nor even alliteration was a systematic stylistic feature of those poems. So I am afraid that the hispericist will have to become a hermeneuticist if he wishes to carry with him the scholars in these fields; but if he doesn't like that ugly term he can simply remain an ordinary decipherer of the dark style in the post-Carolingian dark ages, when a "playfully erudite poetic obscurantism," wherever its