Alide Cagidemetrio
Fictions of the Past: Hawthorne and Melville
Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992. Pp. xi + 197. $12.95
Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

The critical approach to literature generally subsumed under the term "New Historicism" has led to an increased interest in the historical circumstances of a text's production as well as in the ideological and political forces that influenced what is perceived as an object in time rather than as a timeless aesthetic construct. Since literature is understood as a participant in historic processes, the aim of investigation is not—as in older materialistic theories—a text's reflection of a historical situation, but rather its interaction with it.

Alide Cagidemetrio's study is concerned with the interaction of literature and history with regard to the histories that these fictions construct for their own political and cultural realities. Studying texts from the margins of the oeuvre of two centrally canonized American authors of the mid-nineteenth century, Cagidemetrio investigates these authors' attempts at a rather idiosyncratic historiography: "Hawthorne's *Legends of the Province-House,* and his unfinished romances, and Melville's *Israel Potter* are read here as experiments in writing the past 'anew,' in a cultural age that experienced an unprecedented acceleration towards the future and quickened the disappearance of the signs of the past" (ix). The book is divided into two completely separate parts, the first one examining Hawthorne's "American Claimant" stories with regard to the question of an American identity independent of a British heritage, the second one reading Melville's 1854 novel led by a concern for the interpretation of the American Revolution in an age of increased nationalist sentiment deriving from this revolution.

Cagidemetrio reads Hawthorne's tales as attempts to express in symbolic form the hidden existence of the past in the present. The phantasmagoria, an early nineteenth-century performance intended to present ghosts and aerial images, serves as a model for Hawthorne's presentation of the forces of the past in contemporary society. Cagidemetrio sees Hawthorne using his descriptions of his characters' daydreams as means to express the persistence of the ghosts of the past, "the way is opened for the replacement of a represented past by a represented self in the process of 'taking in' the past . . . the morally progressive imperative (onward!) becomes true only when it means to 'see' the past in process within the forms of the new" (86).

Melville's novel *Israel Potter* is a very different kind of historical fiction than Hawthorne's tales. The book, a rewrite of a supposedly factual biography, is read by Cagidemetrio "within the tension originated by 'reading' a truthful 'text' of American history and challenging its rhetoric in the name of the same narrative values it means to vindicate" (120). Analyzing the novel's narrative structure and allusions as well as its implied audience, the study identifies the text as "the story of a private soldier . . . rewritten into a symbolic national biography" (156). Considering detailed changes from the original biography of Israel Potter and some of Melville's open allusions to the use his age was making of the country's revolutionary past, Cagidemetrio singles out *Israel Potter* as "the high point of Melville's

reformative thrust in history" (139) and an attempt "to show America's unique value" (158) in historical perspective.

Analyzing the fictions of the past that both Hawthorne and Melville present to their readers, Cagidemetrio concludes that although the two authors proceed very differently from each other, they nonetheless share an important common basis: "both Melville and Hawthorne share a concern with the 'authenticity' of shared vision" (135). This concern is clearly not one inspired by Rankean ethics of historiography—to get everything *factually* right—but rather by humanist considerations: "For both writers, the notion of a usable past shuns forgetfulness, and, at the cost of the age's 'optative mood,' their fictions 'remember.' . . . They aim at constructing a contemporary subject of moral value who can form his own judgment of the past" (181, 186). In *Fictions of the Past*, Cagidemetrio manages to show how these processes work in the texts under investigation. The study on occasion wanders off the topic and becomes hard to follow because of a detailed study of potential influences (DeQuincey, Carlyle, Emerson), but it generally manages to make its point well and to place the fictions by Hawthorne and Melville in their historiographic contexts.

Carlos Fuentes
The Orange Tree or The Circles of Time
Mexico: Alfagura, 1993
Reviewed by Alfonso González

Carlos Fuentes's latest collection of stories is a continuation of the author's recent practice of writing connected short fictions that develop one central theme *(Burnt Water* (1981); *Constancia* (1990). The five narratives that constitute the present volume deal mainly with the relationship between humanity and history. History appears as the cyclic repetition of the individual's eternal essence, a conflicting fragmentation, against a backdrop of constantly flowing time. Although historical chronology creates the illusion of change, the individual's contradictory nature remains intact. Four of the stories are narrated by historical figures, one by a fictitious character. The objectivity of the stories is enhanced by the fact that all the protagonist-narrators are dead. Triumph, whether political or personal, is a common thread as Fuentes makes reference to the conquest of the New World, Mexico, Spain, and one's own fears. Another common element in the stories is the constant fragmentation of humans and history. Absolute personalities or events are nonexistent; there are only contradictory fragments that, when pieced together, give a glimpse of their true nature. Individual titles of the stories confirm this fragmentation, suggesting a duality: "The Two Shores," "The Two Numancias," "The Two Americas."

The orange tree functions also as a graphic metaphor that unites these opposing cultures. It is something concrete that the Europeans brought to America. The orange tree represents Europe's first successful foothold in the New World. As it took root and in turn produced oranges that brought forth other trees, it became a model for the possibility of unity of the two continents.