Hartman’s critical development covers a period of radical transformation in American literary criticism. His position as a critic of the Yale school demonstrates his relationship to American literary criticism in one of its most revolutionary phases. When he started his critical career in the 1960s New Criticism had a hegemonic hold in the academic field, and consequently romantic literature had come to be largely neglected or underestimated. Hartman’s influence combined with that of Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom to bring about a revival of interest in romantic literature and to open up possibilities of reading romantic poetry in new and unexpected ways. At first Hartman was not aware of the subversive impact that his reading of romantic poetry had produced on the theoretical edifice of the New Criticism.

It was Hartman’s association with the Yale critics Harold Bloom, Paul de Man and Hillis Miller that gave him a sense of the large theoretical implications of his own early works. His early discussions with Harold Bloom were mostly on English romantic poets. He writes of Bloom’s influence on him:

Harold Bloom, already sophisticated and polemical, and at that time strongly impressed by Northrop Frye, helped me to think about
English Romantics other than Wordsworth and the modern European writers I was familiar with. (CJ xvii-xviii)

Later on, Bloom benefited from his association with Hartman when he was working on The Anxiety of Influence (1973). Hartman says, “This was the period of our closest co-operation; and I felt like a midwife to the parturitions that resulted in The Anxiety of Influence (CJ xxii).

Hartman wrote a brilliant review of The Anxiety of Influence, praising Bloom’s unparalleled scholarship, literary insight and “the daring of Bloom’s [psychoanalytic] thesis” (FR 54)

Hartman’s association with Paul de Man was also very close and fruitful. In 1965 Hartman helped de Man to found the Graduate Program in Comparative Literature at Cornell. Referring to his association with de Man at Yale, Hartman says,

At Yale, too, we worked closely together and organized “Literature Z,” a course in “Reading and Rhetorical Structure” for a new literature major—established around 1970 to satisfy undergraduates who wished to break out of the framework of national literature departments and to have more popular culture in the curriculum. (CJ xxiii)
While Bloom remained relatively indifferent to European thought, de Man and Hartman emphasized the need for studying and absorbing European intellectual tradition. De Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1971) proved to be one of the first important deconstructive works in American criticism. Hartman's deconstructive writing appeared later. It was Derrida's *Glas* (1974) that inspired him to write most of the essays contained in *Saving the Text*. In his interview with R. Moynihan Hartman comments on this late influence of Derrida on his thinking:

> My contact with his writing is relatively late. I probably had read no Derrida before about '68. My real interest in him did not come until *Glas* appears, and that was 1974. Before that I had read in him but had not particularly studied any essay. (*Criticism* 76)

*Glas* exerted an intense influence on Derrida and gave a definite deconstructive orientation to his critical writings. The Yale critics as a group created a climate of ideas with which Hartman was in sympathy and to which he also contributed. They shared certain common assumptions about the critical situation in their own time and about the direction that criticism was to take in the immediate future.

Hartman's affinity with the Yale critics is evident in three main features of his critical writing. First, his attempt to reinterpret Wordsworth's poetry, seeing him as an inaugural figure in modern poetry, harmonized with the efforts of the
Yale critics to restore romantic poetry into critical esteem. Hartman has described his own way of reading the complex tradition of romantic poetry:

> With my center firmly in Romantic poetry, I traced its complex revival of an older undying tradition of Romance: oneiric, visionary, vernacular, sporadically supernatural—attuned, that is, to ideas of an animate, sympathetic cosmos, in which humankind was at once kingpin and outcast. (CJ xxiv)

This reading of romantic poetry, at once accurate and exalted, historicist and modern, places Hartman in the company of Bloom and Frye who explored the mythical and archetypal elements which give a universal character to the works of Shelley and Blake.

The second feature of Hartman’s criticism which aligns him with the Yale school is his revolt against the theoretical postulates and exegetical practice of the New Criticism which had dominated the academic field from 1930s to 60s. In Beyond Formalism and Criticism in the Wilderness Hartman rejected most of the key concepts of New Criticism such as organic unity, impersonality and closure as inadequate and “deceptive.” He also attacked the plain-style pedagogical character of New Criticism and its unwillingness to engage Continental thought.

A third feature of Hartman’s criticism which makes him a representative of the Yale school is his intense preoccupation with deconstructive criticism in the
late 1970s and early 80s. In *Saving the Text* Hartman enthusiastically praises Derrida's "exemplary contribution to literary studies" (*ST* 122) and defends and reflects on the key terms and concepts deconstructionist discourse has put into currency. Like de Man, Hartman has also come to be recognized as one of the American disciples of Derrida, although his commitment to deconstruction has been rather short-lived compared to that of de Man.

Hartman's affinity with the Yale critics on these counts is a quite obvious part of the history of modern American criticism. It is also equally obvious that he cannot be completely identified with the Yale school. Hartman avoids strong partisan identification with any school or movement. As Douglas Atkins has rightly observed Bloom, Burke and Hartman are, "each of them, *sui generis*" (*Contemporary Literary Theory* ix). What constitutes Hartman's individuality as a critic is his awareness that all theory is essentially reductive and that the task of the critic is to renovate reading by text-centred hermeneutic activity.

In *The Unmediated Vision* Hartman delights in the sheer act of interpreting the poetry of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Valery and Rilke, and the theoretical chapter on unmediated vision appears to be superadded to the main body of the text. *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* is an exciting hermeneutic adventure from a recognizably phenomenological point of view. *Beyond Formalism, Fate of Reading* and *Easy Pieces*, despite their theoretical focus, contain interpretive
studies on poets and novelists including Collins, Blake, Yeats, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Malraux and Blanchot.

The task of the critic, according to Hartman, is not to hasten to value-judgment on the basis of a determinate reading of the text, but to hold the text in the mind till its full semantic and linguistic potentiality is realized. It is to achieve this aim that Hartman adopted a phenomenological approach in his early criticism and turned to the practice of deconstruction in his later criticism. Even before he came under the direct influence of Derrida he used concepts such as indeterminacy, intertextuality and multivocality in his reading of literary texts. Hartman interpreted major and minor authors of the past so as to restore them to the present even while situating them in the past.

Hartman's call for the rewriting of literary history is consonant with his concept of textual interpretation. He is dissatisfied with the relative indifference of the New Critics towards the question of literary history. He also questions the periodization of literary history which privileges modern literature and overlooks the continuity between modernity and romanticism. As Hartman clearly puts it:

The revaluation of Romanticism is a special feature of post-New Critical or revisionist criticism in America. The term revisionist, in fact, is perhaps most appropriately applied to the rethinking of literary history now going on, which questions a periodization that
has given “modernity” a polemical and prestigious life separated from Romantic origins. (*CW* 44-45)

Jonathan Arac has argued that Hartman’s critical position is inimical to the writing of a new literary history:

Hartman, for all his richness, helped obstruct a new literary history by refusing judgment and choosing indeterminacy. (*Critical Genealogies* 27)

Arac’s observation does not do justice to Hartman because the large body of Hartman’s hermeneutic criticism contains clues, themes and motifs for writing a history of literature which will not only preserve continuities but also bring into focus the contemporary effect of past literature. Hartman has envisioned a literary history written from the point of view of the creative writers themselves; but such an ideal is too exalted to be realized.

Hartman has made a distinction between two kinds of critical style—“that of the learned specialist and that of the public critic” (*MP* i). The former has developed literary studies as a discipline requiring method and an immense amount of historical knowledge. But the latter writes with the public in mind that regards the arts as its common and intelligible heritage. The style of the learned critic often appears difficult, *abstract* and esoteric to the common reader whereas the style of the public critic appears conversational, elegant and friendly.
Hartman’s own style is that of the learned critic who pursues criticism as a specialized discipline. In his early works his style is lucid, lively and powerful, combining self-assurance with a probing curiosity. In his middle period the style becomes complex, allusive, difficult and experimental. During his deconstructive phase Hartman developed a creative style of his own which is, as Chris Baldick has observed, “dense with elaborate puns, conceits and far-fetched etymological digressions” (Criticism and Literary Theory, 175). The title of his essay “Words, Wish, Worth, Wordsworth” suggests the nature of the experimental style that he developed during this stage. Cairns Craig has admired the inventive, pleasing, playful style of Hartman,

who seems most fully to fulfill the deconstructor’s conception of the critic as artist, generating his critical insights out of an energetic playfulness with language that offers the pleasures of literary invention alongside the pleasure of literary perception. (TLS, 1314)

At its best Hartman’s style is creative, engaging and experimental. This is clearly exemplified by his essays “Evening Star and Evening Land” (The Fate of Reading) “Blake and the Progress of Poesy” (Beyond Formalism) “Six Women Poets” (Easy Pieces), and the more important sections in Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814.
There are, however, occasions when Hartman's style tends to be difficult, self-involved and obscure. A typical, probably extreme example occurs in the essay "History Writing as Answerable Style" in *The Fate of Reading*:

An interpretability becomes more important than historicity, and the prey is relinquished for the shadow, art-objects seem to split into, on the one hand, a *gegenstand*, the artifact is indeterminable, more obstance of the interpreting mind; and on the other, a prehensite corpus of explanations incited by its ipseity. (*FR* 105)

It cannot be denied that passages like this obstruct communication except perhaps in the case of specialized readers and fellow-critics. This occasional obscurity of style is one of the noticeable limitations of Hartman as a critic. Another limitation of his criticism is that he does not present his arguments in a linear fashion. He seems to depend too much on allusions, inner quotations, conceits and puns used in such a way as to displace arguments. An excessive use of Continental speculative ideas is another factor which constrained Hartman's efforts to develop an independent American perspective in criticism. His shifting allegiance to theories might appear as another limiting factor which has led to his being variously represented as a phenomenological critic, as a deconstructionist and as a humanist.

The present study is an attempt to view Hartman's works chronologically so as to trace his development as a critic and to identify the dominant concerns
which give unity to his works. His critical career began with The Unmediated Vision in which he recorded his direct response to the poetry of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Valery and Rilke. Although he has described this book as "criticism without approach" (UV x) traces of a phenomenological approach is quite evident in the way he responds to the poetry as the expression of the poet’s consciousness. The Unmediated Vision showed Hartman’s openness to Continental thought which proved to be a refreshing and reorientating source of ideas for him throughout his career.

Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814 constitutes Hartman’s most sustained contribution to hermeneutic criticism. It is from a phenomenological point of view that Hartman interprets Wordsworth’s works. He has said that the book covers three things: "the individual poems, the sequence of the poems, and the generic relation of poetry to the mind" (WP ix). It is in exploring this last subject that the phenomenological focus emerges most clearly. Hartman examines Wordsworth’s poetry in terms of the interaction between self-consciousness and imagination, self and nature, between the thinking subject and all the objects of its contemplation. This is essentially a philosophical position.

Hartman’s method of interpreting Wordsworth differs from that of the New Critics in radical ways. Hartman does not go by the principle of organic unity, impersonality, or the autonomous character of the verbal artifact. Unlike the New Critics, he moves form poem to poem looking for intertextual motifs and
resonances and emphasizes the poet’s intentionality and the relation between the poetic self and the subject matter of the poetry.

Hartman’s interest is in understanding and interpreting poetry and in relating it to our ways of thinking rather than in making authoritarian value-judgments. He identifies Wordsworth’s faith in what he calls “the principle of generosity” as being central to the poet’s experience and vision. This “principle of generosity” is seen as the source of Wordsworth’s “dialectic of love” and is related to his theory of creativity and cognition.

Hartman’s analyses of “Tintern Abbey,” “The Boy of Winander” and “The Prelude” open up possibilities of reading Wordsworth in new ways. Hartman has abandoned the familiar approach and phraseology of traditional Wordsworth criticism characterized by terms such as transcendental pantheism, nature-worship, sublimity and eloquence and has substituted them with the terms imagination, cognition, perception, self-consciousness, the dialectic of mind and Nature and reciprocity between man and the external world. Hartman’s sustained use of this new set of critical terms gives a freshness and vitality to his hermeneutic engagement with Wordsworth’s poetry.

Hartman emerges as a theoretical critic for the first time in Beyond Formalism. In this work he makes a consistent and powerful attack on the donnishness, academicism and insularity of formalist criticism. However the focus in the book is as much on interpretive criticism as on theoretical studies. His
interpretation of poets and novelists from Milton to Wallace Stevens and from Virginia Woolf to Maurice Blanchot exemplify a broad range of approaches with can be variously termed as historicist, intertextual and phenomenological. His studies of Blake, Yeats, Virginia Woolf and Blanchot take their place in modern criticism as brilliant and original examples of hermeneutic practice.

A decisive shift occurred in Hartman's critical attitude when he turned to deconstructive criticism in the late 1970s under the influence of Derrida. Derrida’s Glas confirmed Hartman’s view that commentary can be accorded the status of the text it comments upon. For Hartman deconstruction is not a philosophy of life or a theoretical system, but a technique of reading. It destroys the illusion that a work has a single, univocal meaning. It encourages reading that looks for indeterminacy, contradiction, ambiguity, play, etymological puzzles and multivocality. Hartman’s reading of texts at this stage is experimental and creative. He does not, however, share the hard-core deconstructionist view that the interpretation of the meaning of a text is to be indefinitely deferred. Hartman has adopted from deconstruction certain interpretive strategies which helped to expand and enrich his own mode of reading. Alluding to the deconstructive phase in his career Hartman has said in retrospect, “I never could see deconstruction as a doctrine, however, or more than a way of expanding the range and depth of reading” (C J xviii). Even in the heyday of deconstruction Hartman maintained that “to call a text literary is to trust that it will make sense eventually, even though its quality of reference may be complex, disturbed, unclear” (S T xxi). He has also emphasized the effect of the
works on the psyche which makes his position more empirical than that of the deconstructionists:

Yet to talk about writing as such or about language as such is too abstract, just as to talk about literary language per se is too isolating. At some point the affective power of voice, as well as the relation of particular words to that resonating field we call the psyche, must be considered.” (ST xxii)

It is clear that Hartman’s engagement with deconstruction did not change in any fundamental way his position regarding the nature of the literary text or its relation to the author’s consciousness. What deconstruction has done is to give intensity and depth to his interpretive act. His interest in psychoanalysis has also produced a similar effect. It has refined his critical vocabulary and enabled him to unravel the hidden meaning of poetic text with uncanny insight.

After the deconstructive/psychoanalytic phase, Hartman’s criticism moved to a larger terrain marked by an interest in the humanities, society and culture. Taking his clue from Schiller, Hartman holds that the humanities which includes literature can heal the wound inflicted upon culture by “the divisional or departmental approach to knowledge” (EP 166). The general aim of culture, in his view, “is to understand creativity and then to use that understanding to provide an environment in which creativity flourishes even more richly” (EP 177).
Hartman cautions against certain totalizing strategies in the field of cultural studies since the ideologizing of culture can lead to militancy and violence. As an antidote to the militant use of the concept of culture Hartman turns to Wordsworth. Wordsworth's "widening sensibility" (FOC 141) exemplified by his choice of rural subject matter and natural diction gives evidence of a culture which is not vulnerable to fascism. Hartman reinterprets Wordsworth's poetry from a cultural point of view in order to establish his supreme relevance in modern cultural studies.

The present study has emphasized that Hartman’s critical career has passed through four phases—the phenomenological, anti-formalist, deconstructive/psychoanalytical and the cultural phase. What unifies his writings of these various phases is not his doctrinaire or theoretical commitments but his undoubted hermeneutic skill and vitality. He finds critical theory from Formalism to Marxism to be essentially reductive. He has said that theory has "a tendency to cerebrate rather than celebrate" (MP 74). In contrast to reductive theory he characterized interpretation as "a feast, not a fast" (FR 18).

Hartman’s critical practice is guided and supported by a hermeneutic theory although he does not formulate it explicitly or systematically. It is possible to gather the elements of this theory from his writings of various periods. The first significant feature of his theory is that unlike in formalist criticism it places
emphasis on the literary object, the author and the interpreter. He has said in an
essay entitled "Hermeneutic Hesitation,"

When we say "interpretation," we presuppose not only that there's
an object out there ... an object to be interpreted, but also, to some
extent, an ideal of correctness, some adequacy of the thing to be
interpreted and the interpreting mind. ("Hermeneutic Hesitation"
102)

The "literary object" for Hartman is not always a unified whole marked by
interpretative closure. He holds that too great an emphasis on unity comes from,
a fear of ambivalence or of split states of consciousness ... devotion
to unity may become a demand for "totality" and turn against art in
the name of a more comprehensive (religious or political) vision.
(FR 10-11)

Similarly, too much stress on the integrity of the text springs from an
unwillingness to accept ideas from other disciplines like philosophy, anthropology
and psychology.

The second feature of Hartman's hermeneutic theory is the assumption that
the literary object is too complex a verbal structure to be grasped in terms of the
New Critical shibboleths like organic unity, impersonality, irony or paradox. The
task of the hermeneutic critic is not to show that contradictory elements are
reconciled within the work:

Hermeneutics does not necessarily insist on harmonizing or
reconciling. It does not try to be pedagogic, inevitably. It may even
seek to find the problem. It may even try to find contradictions, and
it may sometimes therefore import false contradictions into the text
or the object, the field of its enquiry. ("Hermeneutic Hesitation"
102)

The hermeneutic critic does not try by any rhetorical means to reconcile the
contradictions and ambiguities in the text. On the contrary he holds the text in the
mind as long as required to understand the contradictions and ambiguities in
relation to the multiple meanings of the text. He aims at a freestyle of the mind and
fullness of understanding rather than at hasty value-judgments.

Both in his early and late criticism Hartman has related the literary works to
the consciousness or psyche of the author. This is an important aspect of his
underlying hermeneutic theory. It has guided his interpretation of Wordsworth,
Blake, Yeats, Virginia Woolf, Blanchot and other writers of major and minor
standing. He has also studied their works in relation to their sense of vocation,
their struggle with it and the authenticity of that struggle.
Hartman's conception of the role of the critic in interpreting the text is another remarkable feature of his hermeneutic theory. The traditional critic often felt a kind of "inferiority complex so endemic to a profession which writes books about books" (FR xiii). Even Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot accorded a subordinate role to the 'kritik vis-à-vis the creative writer. Hartman envisages a creative role for the critic in the act of interpretation. The formalist critic who overobjectifies the literary text brings as little of his personality as possible into his reading of the text. For the decorstructive critic the basic activity is reading in which philological and etymological knowledge plays a vital part. In hermeneutic criticism the critic feels the need, as Hugh Silverman puts it, "to produce meaning rather than find it" (Textualities 14). Interpretation thus becomes a creative, at times wilful, act. Hartman claims that his own generation has achieved such a criticism:

I claim that we are now in the midst of a reversal that stands the New Critical reduction on its head by demonstrating that there is such a thing as creative criticism or a creative element in criticism. (EP 205)

Hartman's own greatest claim to distinction is that he has produced a body of brilliant creative criticism which is remarkable for its hermeneutic persistence and vitality. To gain a full perspective on his criticism it is, however, important to note that his development as a critic parallels the development of American
criticism in the last four decades and that his attempt to assimilate European
thought has been one of the decisive factors transforming the American critical
scene.