This book attempts to trace the process by which the novel replaced the epic as the major literary form in English. It explores the hows and whys of this process by an analysis of the subject matter of epic rather than its form or manner; that is, it attempts to find out what post-classical readers understood when they read epic by examination of major commentaries on Virgil's *Aeneid* from the early Middle Ages through the Renaissance. After that it proceeds to the same goal by close reading of major English literary works that bear a parodic relation to epic. I understand the epic tradition this book talks about as a heterogeneous body of materials growing from a single root, always changing and transforming themselves, but changing in ways and directions indicated by their earliest shaping. What I think I am describing is an organic growth toward the novel, observing its own inner laws and rhythms; it is as if the genre of epic possessed a kind of autonomy that pushed its practitioners into channels and branches already potential within it. Innovations within the epic tradition seem almost always the product of internal realignments or mutation, almost never the result of grafting.

In working method and critical position, I have chosen to follow Aristotle's example rather than his conclusions; I try to proceed from the critical description of a single text outward to more general conclusions, gathering evidence as I go. Generally speaking, the book is cumulative. Rather than overburden it at the outset with theory, I have left many things to be clarified and elaborated throughout. I hope that by its conclusion all of my sweeping assertions and cryptic phrases will have been supported and explained. Similarly, in the arrangement of chapters
I have occasionally disregarded chronology for the exposition of a clear logical development. Terminology I found a maddening problem, not yet resolved to my own satisfaction. In some cases, I invented or purloined useful words; in others, old and somewhat weak-hammed warhorses were trotted out for another go-round. This is particularly true of "form and content" — a distinction I find more and more artificial, but which seems rhetorically necessary to the clarity of my arguments.

Beyond all this, this study because of its scope produces a great deal of fallout: it has something to say about the Medieval distinction between the allegory of the poets and the allegory of the theologians, about the meaning of ut pictura poesis, about poetic imagery and the seventeenth-century revival of atomic theory, about the meaning of narrative or plot in novels. I would call it an idiosyncratic book; others may think it merely cranky. Certainly I do not claim to be right in my conclusions in the sense of being exclusively right. What this book adds up to in my mind is one satisfactory mode of dealing with all of the factors I have examined. That there are other modes of so doing I have no doubt, but this one pleases me: it answers for me the basic questions of how and why the novel supplanted the epic, and it explains their essential relation — and those are the questions that pushed me to undertake this study in the first place.

I am grateful to many institutions and individuals for support and encouragement: to Ohio State University for a quarter of assigned research duty; to the Humanities Center of Johns Hopkins University for the fellowship that enabled me to do the basic research for this book; to the State University of New York Research Foundation for two Summer Grants-in-Aid that allowed me to write it; to two (to me unknown) readers for Ohio State University Press, for numerous pertinent and helpful suggestions; to good friends, whose names would read like a litany of my colleagues at Stony Brook, for advice and occasional consent; and to the late Earl Wasserman, for help and for friendship over many years. My greatest debt I acknowledge in the dedication.