Preface

THIS is a descriptive and critical survey of the American novel up to the year 1820. The achievements of the major American novelists of our century sent me back to reading their immediate and more remote forerunners. I then discovered how unevenly the work of Cooper's predecessors had been studied and made accessible to us. There has been no comprehensive study of the period in question since Lillie Deming Loshe's *The Early American Novel* (1907). Individual writers have been dealt with—some of them repeatedly—in full-length studies and doctoral dissertations, and many varied aspects have received attention in dissertations and contributions to scholarly journals. Histories of American fiction have devoted to the beginnings of the novel the limited number of pages that could be spared in an extensive survey, and the student gratefully turns to the opening chapters of Quinn, Cowie, Van Doren, Wagenknecht, to mention only a few names. Among scholars who have treated the subject at some length within the specific context of their work, Herbert Ross Brown, Teut Riese, and Terence Martin should particularly be mentioned.

Many findings in Dr. Loshe's doctoral dissertation at Columbia University are sound and stand in no need of correction. But we do know more today about the early American novel than was known at the beginning of this century; the results of research done in the past sixty years have been incorporated in the present study. Some of the data, such as the synopses of the novels discussed, may make this survey useful as a handbook. Dr. Loshe's book covered the years from 1789 to 1830; mine ends earlier but includes some works of fiction written before

[ ix ]
1789, among them three novels published (or prepared for publication) in London. *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) must still be considered the first American novel written by an American author and published in the United States, but perhaps *Adventures of Alonso* (1775) and *Mr. Penrose: The Journal of Penrose, Seaman* (completed ca. 1780), and certainly *Adventures of Jonathan Corncob* (1787), have a claim to be considered in a study of the early American novel. So do the novels of Helena Wells as well as Imlay’s *The Emigrants*. Nor is there any reason why we should depart from the custom of including Mrs. Rowson, and John Davis deserves at least a passing mention.

I have thought it advisable to cut off the last decade treated by Dr. Loshe. It seems to me that the more sophisticated climate of the first decade of the Cooper era is more profitably considered as a new beginning. Whereas in each of the three decades preceding the year 1821 thirty-odd works of fiction appeared in America, more than four times that number were published from 1821 to 1830. Magazine fiction is not studied here, though it might confirm the findings gained by the examination of the novels; it must be remembered, however, that many of the magazine stories were translated or adapted from European sources, usually without acknowledgment. On the other hand, certain essay-series which first appeared in newspapers and periodicals and were later published in book form are treated in their appropriate contexts. Proceeding on the assumption that the American novelists were following current English and Continental models, I have made no further attempt to define the kind and extent of individual influences on authors or single works. The comparative approach might be rewarding both with avowed and unconscious imitations; but it would have overburdened the expository structure of this study while remaining precariously conjectural more often than not.

It is hoped that the reader will be led to see, beyond the information on the nature of the contemporary novel, some characteristic features of the age. A number of current assumptions and concerns may emerge, more particularly with respect to the possibilities and limitations of fiction and the genre of the novel, its moral soundness and its role within literary and
national traditions. I might echo the observations made by a number of scholars over the past thirty years or so: Stanley T. Williams and William L. Hedges, for example, in their studies of Irving; or Richard Beale Davis in his Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia, from whose introduction I may quote three sentences easily applicable, mutatis mutandis, to the present study: "This work is in large part an assemblage of evidence. It includes minutiae and details, many of them of little intrinsic separate value, which add up to what it is hoped is at least the broad outline of an image. The majority of the belletristic writers here discussed, for example, have left no great impression in the history of American literature. But they do offer through their work clues to an understanding of Virginia interests and tastes in a significant period, and a few of them deserve more attention generally than they have received."

Parts I and II of this study take stock of the views, materials, and resources of the readers, novelists, and critics; Parts III and IV focus on the novels that grew out of these views, materials, and resources. In trying to recapture the expectations and misgivings of the people concerned with and about fiction, evaluation has been made only incidentally. I have followed the example of J. M. S. Tompkins, who stated in the preface to The Popular Novel in England, 1770-1800 that she had treated this fiction "with perhaps over-scrupulous gentleness," since nothing was to be gained from exposing it "on the gibbet of scorn." In the dedicatory epistle prefixed to The Polite Marriage Dr. Tompkins also anticipated some of the results of the present study of minor American authors, when she said that such authors need not have any clear conception of "the nature of literature or of literary forms. They have taste, not passion. They accept the literary fashions of their day and shape their materials contentedly to them; or they please themselves by mild reforms and small adjustments."

Most of the early American novelists, who usually wrote only one or two books, tamely and unimaginatively employed just such themes and materials as will be isolated in the first chapters of this survey, but in a few cases the conventional brick and mortar of the novel-builder were used with a certain degree of
independent artistic consciousness. No doubt the study of the more skillful writers is easier to justify and much more attractive than that of the mass of imitators. I definitely prefer Henry James to Mrs. Rowson, and Faulkner to Brockden Brown, but I do not wish to sound too apologetic about the time and effort devoted to the poor ancestors of the masters. Nearly a century ago Edwin P. Whipple stressed, in his contribution to The First Century of the Republic and with reference to Brockden Brown, that no writer should be the victim of “the bitterest irony of criticism, that, namely, of not being considered worth the trouble of a critical examination.” More recently, an exchange of views in American Literature (1961) about Emmons’s The Fredoniad raised this question again. We must attempt a balanced view of the individual significance and the historical importance of any work of literature: neither must be emphasized at the cost of the other. It is undesirable—and indeed, impossible—to conceal the fact that most of the early American novels are failures; but it is possible to say in what sense and for what reason they failed. By answering such questions, we pay a tribute to the pioneer efforts made to keep the novel alive, and prepare the ground for an adequate appreciation of the comparative achievements among the contemporary and the later fiction in America.

Since the fiction treated here must have its significance supported by a close interrelation with its background, footnotes and references have multiplied rather formidably. To forestall a further proliferation, I have included in the text volume and page references to the novels and tales individually discussed. I have also preferred not to burden the quotations with too frequent a use of “[sic]”; the vagaries of eighteenth-century spelling and typesetting are not too distracting, nor is the erratic punctuation an obstacle to the understanding of the texts.

It is a pleasant task to acknowledge here the generous grants of the Schweizerische Nationalfonds and of the Janggen-Pöhn-Stiftung in St. Gallen, Switzerland, which enabled me to spend nearly one full year in the United States in 1961-62. I collected my source material chiefly at the Houghton and Widener Libraries.
of the Harvard College Library and at the seat of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. I also had access to rare books at the Boston Athenaeum and the Boston and New York public libraries. I have obtained microfilmed material from the Alderman Library (University of Virginia, Charlottesville); the Beinecke Library (Yale University, New Haven, Conn.); the Howard Tilton Memorial Library (Tulane University, New Orleans, La.); and the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.). Previous to my stay in America and since my return to Switzerland, the services of the Stadtbibliothek Biel and the Zentralbibliothek Zürich have helped me in many ways. The staffs of all these libraries invariably proved friendly and resourceful, and I gladly take this opportunity to extend my warmest thanks to them. I am also very grateful to Mrs. Jeannette Zehnder, Miss Karin Wogatzky, and Mr. Walter Naef for their painstaking proofreading and indexing, and to Mrs. Susan Collins, of the Ohio State University Press, for her efficient and sympathetic editorial advice.

Professor Heinrich Straumann, of the University of Zürich, Switzerland, who was the first to hear of and respond to my interest in early American fiction, has lent a patient ear to my discussions of the topic ever since. Other colleagues and students of mine, too, have had to listen to them; and I can only express my gratitude for their courtesy, from which I have derived much encouragement and stimulation.

H. P.

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List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been adopted in the footnotes and bibliography for frequently cited periodicals.

AL  American Literature
AQ  American Quarterly
CAAS Bul.  Canadian Association of American Studies Bulletin
CE  College English
EALN  Early American Literature Newsletter
HLB  Harvard Library Bulletin
HLQ  Huntington Library Quarterly
JA  Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien
JEGP  Journal of English and Germanic Philology
MLN  Modern Language Notes
MLQ  Modern Language Quarterly
NAR  North-American Review
NEQ  New England Quarterly
PAAS  Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society
PBSA  Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America
PMHB  Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography
PMLA  Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
SP  Studies in Philology
SR  Sewanee Review
Trans. Wisc.  Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts and Letters
VMHB  Virginia Magazine of History and Biography
WMQ  William and Mary Quarterly