1. THE MORAL AND CRITICAL DISCUSSION
THE THREE DECADES ending in 1820 are not considered a distinguished epoch either in the history of American writing or, more specifically, in the development of the American novel. Indeed, the student of the period is likely to be struck not with many individual achievements but with widespread mediocrity. In the contemporary judgments on the writers of the age he will find little praise that is reasonably well deserved and generally agreed to; but he will frequently hear complaints, and among them two which turn up regularly in prefaces, in book reviews, and in essays. Neither went uncontradicted; yet in spite of the counterarguments, the complaints did not cease, and to us they still express a feeling of dissatisfaction.

One of them concerns the lack of distinction, originality, and productivity which many thought characteristic of the American literature of the day. The other is the criticism aimed at the contemporary novel generally, partly because of the faults attributed to the genre and partly because of the lack of skill or the idiosyncrasies of the individual writers. The evidence of this mood of dissatisfaction is considered in the first part of the present study, for it provides a relevant background to the manner in which writers of fiction in the United States went about creating and defending their work in those days; the views referred to are often those of writers who at one time or another wrote fiction themselves. Not all the comments are American: usually the severe tone of English observations and the apologetic remarks made by Americans reveal an equal dissatisfaction with the literature of the United States. This chapter deals with views on that literature; the second offers a sample of a novel of the age; and the third discusses then current opinions about that form of fiction.