Conclusion

If we assume the average size of the early American works of fiction to have been about 220 pages, one-sixth of these books are definitely subnormal in length, and as many have more than four hundred pages. One-third are first person narratives; half that number have a frame introducing the narrative proper. This frame is likely to have often been not an artistic necessity but a device of camouflage to conceal the author's identity, and simultaneously perhaps guarantee the authenticity and intrinsic interest of the story that was thus introduced. If the epistolary form was employed in one out of every four works of fiction, this is not due to a survival of the novel in letters but to the convenience of the device of the fictitious traveler who finds much to write home about. Such imaginary correspondents were generally created by men, who made more frequent use of fictional forms for non-novelistic purposes than their female colleagues, while they were about equally responsible for the production of the novels, in the strict sense. A small number of books went beyond a first edition within the period discussed; yet half of the authors discussed tried their luck as writers of fiction more than once.

If we limit our view to the novel, we cannot help concluding that the novels published in America to the end of 1820 are marked, above all, by the limited range of their authors. Their plots at first sight strike one as inventive, even wildly so; but it soon becomes evident that they merely achieve new combinations of old and familiar elements. Perhaps this is true of all fiction. It applies in a particularly crippling sense to the early American novel because of the nature of the material then at
hand. The unfolding of its plots hinges on coincidences and misunderstandings; cases of mistaken identities, frequently combined with apparent infringements of the social barriers and conventions, puzzle the protagonists and the reader of, for example, Margaretta, until a more or less fortuitous and spectacular revelation restores their certainties. The underlying patterns—lovers' trials, young girls' vicissitudes, young men's adventures—depend on and reveal the heroes' and heroines' passivity; the actively conditioning elements on the other hand are unsympathetic parents, jealous rivals, petty surroundings, agents of pure evil, and providential interventions which appear deterministic more often than not. The characters themselves are subordinated to the events; individually they tend to remain undeveloped and static, and differentiation between them is attempted only in the moralistic opposition of good and bad characters. The writers' limited range also shows in their preference for only a few moods and tones. Their emphasis lies in the didactic confrontation of good and evil, which they strive to render more dramatic by a pronounced reliance on the pathetic, especially the helplessness and alienation of some victims of villainy, as in Mrs. Read's Monima; conversely the horrifying may also have a similar effect, some persecutor or form of persecution assuming monstrous proportions. In other cases horror and terror seem to suggest the presence of the inexplicable in our existence, but are at length explained away as an irrational response to some phenomena inaccurately perceived and imperfectly understood. The authors' limited range of style, finally, derives from these conventional plot situations and moods that impose upon the writer a certain vocabulary, which is in many instances language worn down to clichés. While some of the writers were content to work within this narrow framework, others tried to shake off or offset the imitativeness threatening them by an exaggerated attempt at originality. They gave their heroes and villains superlative features and, in particular, over-exerted themselves in the cumulative descriptions of their settings, which were probably meant to convey a sense of place or, more generally, to heighten the mood of fear or grief asso-
ciated with their narrative. Mrs. Botsford’s *Adelaide* is a typical product of constant straining for effect.

Generally speaking, innovations were few and far between. The use of American settings, topographical as well as historical, was attempted, but this went little further than a listing of place names or the names of historical figures and events. Such topics as democracy and slavery appeared early; but they were introduced, at best, as elements of exposition and discussion that had no valid connection with the narrative as such or its characters. A notable exception, of course, is *Modern Chivalry*. In view of what the next decade was to bring, the introduction of the American Indian into fiction was perhaps, on the whole, the most successful elaboration of an element still comparatively fresh. Here, too, a distinction must be made: the Indian could be used as one picturesque ingredient among others which vary the adventures and responses of the protagonists, as in Mrs. Rowson’s *Reuben and Rachel*; or he could be treated as a part of the American experience rendered by the author, as in *Maria Kittle*.

The poverty of early American fiction (and early American literature generally) argues for a dearth of individual talents, as well as the powerful influence of the models from which the authors were trying to learn. Yet what they wanted to create was an American literature, that is, a literature independent of, but equal to, any European—and especially English—models. They strove to fulfill the nationalistic program voiced in many solemn statements: literature by Americans and for Americans, using American settings and characters, themselves the (possibly propagandistic) expression of the principles underlying the new country and its institutions—church, government, education. But though they were suspicious of their Old World models, the ambitious American writers were beginners and had yet much to learn; could they do this without imitation of these very models? Lewis Leary has aptly described the achievement of a typical writer of the period, John Blair Linn: “Accepting him as he is, he represents with John Dennie in criticism, William Dunlap in the drama, and Brockden Brown in the novel,
more certainly than any other poet of his immediate generation
the struggle of American men of letters to catch up all at one
jump with the literature of England, to create by imitation a
literature which would be at once full-blown and distinctively
American.” The American authors needed models, but it was
their duty to imitate them selectively, that is, without following
corrupting examples; this meant that the problem could become
a moral, rather than an esthetic, literary issue. The field of the
novel could perhaps be looked upon as more promising than
other departments of literature. The novel was a new genre, for
which as yet no formidable prescriptive canon existed; above
all, the novel was popular, and the novelist could hope to find
an immediate response among the existing novel-reading public,
which was a consideration that might encourage a writer’s
nationalistic as well as personal ambitions. Yet if there was no
canon for the novel, this also meant that no helpful rules were
provided. The beginning novelist was therefore most likely to be
guided by the demands of a comparatively inexperienced read­
ing public which seemed to prefer the familiar to the new. This
raised a further difficulty: the popularity of the novel and its
recurrent elements were suspected of being in direct ratio to its
immorality. This again returned the writer to the need for
morally selective imitation.

The pull of such forces of habit, prejudice, and criticism—
some encouraging, some hostile—made for an uncertainty which
could hardly be expected to foster strong individual talents and
ideas. In spite of its reputed dangers, it was the European novel
—and naturally the English novel, first of all—that served as an
example for most American novelists of the day; but this had
fallen away considerably from the level of Richardson’s and
Fielding’s achievements. American authors generally sidestepped
controversial sociopolitical topics and employed the patterns of
the conventional story of love, adventure, and mystery, though
with circumspection. The motif of seduction, for example, was
wrapped up, as The Power of Sympathy demonstrates, in explicit
warnings and lessons and counterbalanced by serious contempla­
tions on death and a moral existence. Such contrived and ex-
traneous checks and balances frequently proved, however, insuf­

cient to change the essentially worldly character of the human
concerns and weaknesses that fundamentally determine the plots
and the characters' actions and reactions of any novel.

Within the strictly conventional forms and uses of the cus­
tomary motifs of fiction, there are only perhaps three novels
which emerge slightly above the contemporary average: Mrs.
Foster's *The Coquette*, Miss Rush's *Kelroy*, and John Neal's
*Keep Cool*. But the best American fiction of the age used the
fashionable models as a starting point rather than as a norm,
and it took a decisive personal element, in addition to specific
American materials, to give their work distinction. The robust
inventiveness of Mrs. Tenney and the satirical detachment of
Royall Tyler perhaps took them beyond the established forms
of the burlesque or the picaresque purpose novel. Brackenridge's
scope and learning, literary sophistication, and humor joined
forces with his serious concern over the possibilities and pitfalls
of democratic practices. Less vigorous than Brackenridge, Irving
possessed more wit, more charm, and above all a stronger de­
termination to do his literary gifts justice (above and beyond the
necessity to live by them). Brockden Brown brought to his work
as a writer an absolute intensity which accounts for his insight
into his characters' confused intellects and emotions, and the
implications of the settings and conflicts of his novels, but
also perhaps for their structural incompleteness. Brackenridge,
Irving, and Brown clearly are not unrelated to English and
Continental traditions. They apparently did not find them in­
hibiting: the literary precedents were to them an indication of
where expansion was possible, and their individual talents to­
gether with their sense of literary openings made them the active
pioneers (among a larger group of passive ones) of American
fiction.