

Chapter 1

Introduction to the American Novel

*From Charles Brockden Brown's
Gothic Novels to Caroline
Kirkland's Wilderness*

The practice of writing fiction in the United States developed along with the nation.¹ Like the nation, the form of the novel adjusted its boundaries and expanded to make sometimes audacious claims on neighboring territories. Like the nation, the novel encompassed practices that, in hindsight, sometimes seem heroic – such as the struggle against slavery in the fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe – and sometimes seem embarrassing. Stowe's fiction (notably *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1852], perhaps the bestselling novel of the nineteenth-century United States) can engage the reader with what then might have appeared as picturesque dialect and now can look like racist caricatures. The very popular frontier fiction of James Fenimore Cooper now appears as an uneasy justification for the atrocities of border warfare. The ambivalence with which a twenty-first-century reader must regard the many political decisions affecting the history of the nineteenth-century United States frequently makes for difficulties in reading the nineteenth-century novel. Fictional practices often engaged readers (and citizens) in supporting the separation of gendered

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spheres of action as well as defending decisions such as the extension of slavery into new territories and the removal of sovereignty from the Cherokee nation.

As well as encountering such a changed political climate, the expectations of a twenty-first-century reader might meet many practical interpretive obstacles. Often the attention to details that a reader brought to bear in the nineteenth century included assumptions about shared references – including Shakespeare plays, biblical citations, and sentimental poetry – that are rarely as easily available for readers in the twenty-first century. That set of assumptions tends to permeate narrative address for much of the first half of the century, but throughout the century authors felt it necessary to address their readers and to inform them about the designs that they had on readers’ politics, sympathies, and morals. Such moral and emotional claims may now appear to belong to a premodern era, one difficult for readers to re-inhabit. A primary goal of this book is to suggest a way to read such fiction as a richly textured enterprise, one replete with satisfactions both literary and cultural.

Later in the century, the burgeoning questions posed by industrial capitalism and by increased urbanization would receive few answers in fiction, yet inevitably fiction tried to make these questions as visible as possible. In the short novel *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), set among the hard-working immigrant laborers of what is now West Virginia, Rebecca Harding Davis plaintively posed the question this way: “Is this the end? Is life as fragile, as frail?”² Davis asked this question by way of making the crises of laboring classes part of an aesthetic enterprise, one bound up with their strivings as well as her own, as a disenfranchised “western” woman writer. The goal of the novel in the nineteenth century was to ask that question over and over while demonstrating a resilience and strength that suggested forms of life in every location.

In writing about the nineteenth-century novel in the United States, the critic Richard Chase once drew a firm distinction between the novel and the romance. Unlike the romance, he declared, the “novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail.”³ As evidence, he cited the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, who explained in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851): “When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a

certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel.”⁴ For all the influence Hawthorne came to have on the form of the novel, such a discrimination between a category of fiction tied to “reality” and one freed by the writer’s imagination to engage with the “moonlight” Hawthorne found best to illuminate his fiction has not persisted in critical analysis of nineteenth-century fiction. Overall, the position of what we call the novel, especially what has been called the “great American novel,” has won out over the romance. The concept of the romance, that is, has become subsumed into that of the novel and Hawthorne’s plea for latitude sometimes seems an affectation designed to free him from too close contemplation of the busy commerce and industrialization that surrounded his production of fiction.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) had a limited readership at publication, has become required reading for students of United States literary culture, a detail that would have surprised professors in the New England colleges of his day. Hawthorne’s readership was small compared to that of his contemporary, Susan B. Warner, widely renowned in her lifetime for the intensely private universe of *The Wide, Wide World* (1850); yet Warner’s novel disappeared from view by the mid-twentieth century, something that would also have surprised nineteenth-century readers. The religious virtues Warner celebrated had become separated from a concept of great literature based on esthetic values. And the extent to which Hawthorne’s fiction sets out to provide a moral compass has become submerged in the concept of his literary production as something to be read outside of the time and space of its production in the politicized world of nineteenth-century New England.

The Role of the Novel

To adapt the architectural metaphor later proposed by the novelist Henry James in his collection of prefaces *The Art of Fiction*, the house of the novel was built – and then rebuilt – on American soil.⁵ According to James’s famous image as he described his own process

of composition, the “house of fiction” has “a million windows.”⁶ James asserts that the viewer from one window views a different landscape from the viewer at another. As readers who engage a variety of territories, while still enjoying the relation between home, spectatorship, and landscape presented here, we must challenge James’s assumption that only one house appears with such a plethora of windows.

The popularity of domestic fiction in the nineteenth century forces us to ask whether the viewer, certainly as a woman reader, might not want to turn to look *inside* the house. A viewer who stands looking out of the window both overlooks the role of the writer as a domestic laborer and paradoxically must be called to notice the invisibility of domestic labor in fictions that emphasize gender and race. The problematic concept that the viewer remains forever within the house ignores the mobility of novel reading. Further, let us challenge the assumption that neither landscape house changes *could* change through the act of description, that describing is a neutral act. To mount such a challenge contaminates the process that for James remains more immaculately contained. Novels in the United States repeatedly stage the messiness of interactions between viewer and viewed, between writer and reader, between the novel and the world. Above all, readers in the nineteenth-century United States assumed that the novel must *act* in the world.

The nineteenth-century United States found writers busy responding at once to political changes in national boundaries and volatile market changes. Witnessing such dramatic historical shifts as the Civil War and the end of slavery, their fiction created a shift in the related concepts of the nation and the novel. Indeed, the formal construction that came to be known as the American novel emerged from early attempts to document historical change in the new nation. To consider how the novel evolved during the nineteenth century, we must look at the formatting of genre within, for example, choices made by writers who produced the epistolary, gothic, sensation, sentimental, and historical novel.

To tip my hand immediately, let me note that these genres can never appear in isolation. The letter-writing activity associated with epistolary fiction appears well suited to the appearance of supernatural elements in gothic fiction. The dramatic and often unbelievable

events, crises, and catastrophes in gothic fiction function nicely to produce the emotional ruptures of sensation fiction. The cliff-hanger elements of both gothic and sensation fiction operate well to spice up the plotting of historical fiction. And the attention to national identification in historical fiction can complement the desire to establish a home in domestic fiction. The epistolary and gothic novel forms associated with the late eighteenth-century novels produced after the American Revolution were fading by the early nineteenth century. Novels of sensation and sentiment that succeeded them held sway until mid-century when the Civil War produced a gloomier reading public whose appetite for realist and naturalist fiction was honed through the rise of urbanization and industrial capitalism. Historical fiction, however, and the domestic fiction that both supported and supplanted it, remained popular throughout the nineteenth century.

Within the historical novel, reliable narrators are coded for us through the author's prefaces. In the popular novel *Hope Leslie* (1827), for example, Catharine Sedgwick's remarks at once declare her reliance on original records and call attention to the domestic nature of her concerns. Sedgwick's narrator allows the historical record to speak tellingly; she cites the seventeenth-century Massachusetts governor John Winthrop who called it a "sweet sacrifice" when his troops burned Pequod women and children.⁷ But she also disrupts his authority with a narrator's interjection that the story of Magawisca, who describes living through the same event as a terrible tragedy, has more "truth."

The novels most often associated with the nineteenth-century United States by later readers are novels such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), or Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1886). One must notice, of course, that all these authors are male. The bestselling authors of the nineteenth century tended to be female and literary critics once asserted that popularity in and of itself argued against literary value. Yet each of these novels, once considered "timeless classics," can be read as a historical novel, presenting episodes from United States history through the lens of the author's nostalgic retelling of past trauma. *Moby-Dick* analyzes the whaling industry as it went into decline; *The Scarlet Letter* revisits Puritan judgments

about sin two centuries later; *Huckleberry Finn* re-enacts the crisis of slavery decades after the Civil War had ended the practice.

The Place of Polemic

That nineteenth-century writers used fiction to compel action emerged from a history of significant public uses of narrative. In New England, for example, the earlier practices within a state-sanctioned church to declare religious conversion publicly in effect produced identity as the proper business of narrative. To tell a public story about private identity, within a community that presents the narrative formation of a self as fundamentally important, once appeared as a condition for joining a religious community. The community of readers that emerged in the nineteenth-century United States still read published sermons and captivity narratives as they also read novels that emphasized interiority. In relating private reading and public action, such novels related reading and political mobilizing, transforming at once public spaces and interior spaces, the space of the mind and the heart, through narrative declaration.

Conversion narratives were popular well into the nineteenth century, yet they were eclipsed by captivity narratives, typically depicting escape from an Indian raid. These accounts of compelled errands into the wilderness became transformed into origin stories for other forms of American identity.⁸ Stories about escape from captivity were joined by escapes from slavery, emancipation narratives that fused racial differentiation with the progressive enlightenment associated with Christianity. Learning to read in these accounts provides access to freedom. In the nineteenth century, such non-fiction accounts overlap with the historical romance to forge national narratives into courtship dramas. These fictional travels through time supplied through the dramatic plots of historical fiction can be seen to supplement travel narratives that produce vicarious existence at the same time as the twists and turns in their courtship dramas produce and reinforce a concept of “home.” Novelists like James Fenimore Cooper, in *Home as Found*, paradoxically suggest that the home found in the wilderness is at

once appropriate and appropriated by sojourners who might need to return to Europe.

Violence and the Novel

Fiction written in the United States before and after the conflict now referred to as the Civil War presents different accounts of violence. In particular, early nineteenth-century fiction often refers in laudatory terms to wars such as the American Revolution, the Mexican–American War, Indian warfare, and clashes at the borderlands. Seldom does it reveal the terror and randomness of such violence, though the depiction of “border ruffians” in such novels as Cooper’s *The Spy* (1821) suggests an anxiety about its purposelessness. Later in the century, realist and naturalist fiction describes the failure of reconstruction and the tactics associated with lynching (in novels such as Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* [1900]). The very foregrounding of the color red in novels such as *The Scarlet Letter* and Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) emphasizes the color of blood as the color of shame and belonging at once. These novels, long taken as markers of adolescent passages within the United States, as well as staples of the literature classroom, produce an uncertain value through allusions to blood. Novels frequently use killing to motivate movement of characters and plot and mobilize identities through staving off interracial sex and indeed any chance of reproduction. Such tactics appear in almost all of James Fenimore Cooper’s novels.

Although the Civil War continues to serve as a momentous dividing line between the understood antebellum and postbellum novels, it scarcely ever appears as a subject in the postbellum world of fiction. Before the war, troops declared themselves to be inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s bestselling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). During the war, northern troops sang “John Brown’s Body” and “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory” to the same tune. Southern troops read Augusta Evans’s *Macaria* (1863), which was dedicated to the “Glorious Cause” (and secretly read in the north). A postwar exception to the great silence in fiction about the war experience is John De Forest’s *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867). This novel

seems to have been intended as a conversion narrative for the politics of the United States at large and contains disturbingly vivid battle-ground scenes from an author who had, in fact, experienced the southern front. In developing his own historical fiction as well as writing about its purpose, De Forest was said to have issued the call for the great American novel and is credited as the first to use the term. The major novel associated with the Civil War had to wait a generation. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), by a young author who listened to tales of veterans rather than fighting himself, formulated for the warriors who survived an account of fear and cowardice as well as heroism that has seldom been equaled.

Novels in the Early United States

Many novels written in the early United States republic emphasized the training for citizenship that reading might confer. Novels that empowered forms of thinking were favored, whereas those that encouraged bodily sensations were devoured privately while publicly viewed with suspicion. Like other guilty pleasures, however, they were nonetheless pursued, although sometimes associated with the deteriorating moral capacities of women readers, a condition parodied in Tabitha Tenney's satirical *Female Quixotism* (1801). When he began to write, the most famous creator of fictional men in the wilderness, James Fenimore Cooper, first tried to write domestic fiction. His early prefaces reveal that he still understood his audience to be women readers.

Cooper was charged with imitating the famous historical novelist across the Atlantic, Sir Walter Scott. Such an anxiety of influence makes it even more difficult to see early historical novelists such as the prolific southern author William Gilmore Simms or the Maine author John Neal or the Border States' John Pendleton Kennedy, all of whom wrote popular historical novels in the early nineteenth century, as other than imitators of Cooper. Gestures of dominance and subordination recur in descriptions of women authors as well. Although ranked as a peer by their contemporaries, Catharine Sedgwick wrote historical fiction whose reputation gradually dimmed in relation to that written by Cooper.

Significant authors like Tabitha Tenney presented a burlesque of the novel-reading heroine Dorcasina Sheldon as a “true history” in *Female Quixotism* (1801). Although she encounters soldiers who have survived the fighting of the American Revolution, Dorcasina reserves her affections for imposters who can imitate the language of the sensation fiction she admires. The novel proclaims itself to have a didactic purpose, as did many early novels. Fiction writers such as Catharine Sedgwick and Lydia Maria Child joined their historical fictions with numerous polemical domestic fictions and writings for children. The critical desire to categorize and summarize such works in the centuries that have followed has produced useful comparisons between male and female authors, yet these comparisons have also produced a hierarchy that sometimes values the experience of men in the wilderness as a topic for fiction over that of women at home. That is, the gendered polemics of describing a home for women overshadow the extent to which such women frequently venture into the wilderness as well as seek to found a home there.

In a somewhat typical move, the narrator who presents herself as a writer in the wilderness, Clara Wieland, is accused of unfaithfulness after the machinations of a villain, yet in *Wieland* the villain, Carwin, courts chaos more than gain. His extraordinary appeal for Clara Wieland consists largely of his voice. The very resonance of his voice turns out to be an alluring object that Carwin can separate from the location of his body. Such a talent is called “biloquism” in the appended novella, proving background but neither justification nor convincing analysis for Carwin’s behavior and calling him a “biloquist.” The term suggests a self split even as voice is split from body. Carwin follows impulses willfully, yet his goals are repeatedly to undo order while willful girls like Capitola, in the later sensation novel *The Hidden Hand*, deviously function as a sentimental mechanism to re-establish justice. The uncanny function of Carwin within *Wieland* is also to provoke the dramatic clarity – however shocking – of the desires of other characters.

Despite the murkiness of his appearance and his motives, Carwin seems to produce an unyielding force. Perhaps the elder Wieland has failed in his duty to provide converts for the Moravians among the Indian tribes of western Pennsylvania. Does he deserve to perish for

his failure? A spectral voice may be the answer. Perhaps Pleyel would like to delay his planned wedding to Clara? A spectral voice may suggest she loves another. Perhaps Wieland desires to kill his family in order to end up in his sister's bedroom. A voice suggests the horrible option, and presents sacrifice as the named duty. Perhaps Carwin wishes to unnerve the estimable Clara whose writings, discovered in her closet, he so admires. Perhaps he wishes her to have difficulty holding her pen when she thinks of him. He certainly succeeds. She begins the novel uncertain if her grip on the pen will continue as she attempts to relate its shocking deaths. Such a conflation of events may blur the question of whether or not Carwin's voice is the precipitating force in each event.

To the extent that the comparison reveals a larger structure of motives and desires in nineteenth-century fiction, I would like to point out that the pressures facing a woman alone in a room, especially a woman alone in a room in a house in which her inheritance is also in question – act differently from, though they may be fruitfully put in contrast with, the still viable scenario coined decades ago as “The Madwoman in the Attic.”⁹ In these scenarios, the reader finds the heiress in the attic – and, in the case of Clara Wieland, the writer in the closet. Literally closeted, the activity of writing in *Wieland* overlaps with, and competes with, the thrown voice. Who will be the “author” of this tragic tale? Brown is certainly capable of showing heroic deeds by women – look at Constantia Dudley in *Ormond* (1799) – but the worlds of women in Brown's novels are typically full of perilous moments where, alone in a room, the heroine's virtue is assailed. She does not, like Samuel Richardson's Pamela, write about it as it happens, yet the act of writing becomes imbued with the sense of threat.

Nationalism

In addition to the questions of masculine and feminine identities taken up by authors of the American novel, nationalism preoccupied novelists in the United States even as they were sometimes understood to be imitating British writers. Notoriously, Cooper achieved his early fame as the American Scott, and Charles Brockden Brown as the

American version of William Godwin. Brown's originality and uniqueness seem to inhere in his fantastic landscapes and unpredictable reworkings of events like yellow fever epidemics. His fiction displays a fascination with medical or scientific discoveries and phenomena like sleepwalking or with social and political movements like feminism and the French Revolution.

Anxieties about cultural value still pervade critical descriptions of authors such as Cooper, Sedgwick, John Neal, or Lydia Maria Child. In historical romances like *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826; Cooper), *Hope Leslie* (1827; Sedgwick), *Logan* (1822; Neal) and *Hobomok* (1824; Child), these authors offered to do for America what Scott had done for Scotland: provide a heretofore colonized country with a history seemingly all its own. While these authors produce an American identity through historical romances patterned on classical or Shakespearean themes, they also produce dramas whose crises reach the most difficult edges of the American landscape. These dramas include controversial topics: Indian–white marriage or progeny, incursions or excursions west or south, and the sexual vulnerability of women. Delineating the boundaries of such topics provided the United States novel with its hardest challenge.

Contemporary critics expressed anxiety about corrupting young women by fiction, yet they also pressured writers to produce national romances. Attention to the Americanness of fiction became blended with the staging of national drama through adventures of courtship and marriage. Historical romances thus energize the cultural work performed by the novel by engaging emotional attachment to a nascent nation. This attachment frequently operates through correlations between the destinies of women and the destinies of national movements. As young women in this fiction learn to trust the political attachments expressed by the appropriate romantic hero, they also learn to combine their romantic attractions and their political affiliations.

The Making of the Middle Class

The vicarious experiences that formed part of the novel's appeal depend in part on the development of a middle-class sensibility, a

sensibility developed by a fluctuating class of persons whose initial response to reading fiction was to announce it as a guilty pleasure.¹⁰ The moral anxiety that narrators sometimes exhibit when they address such readers shows that the guilt about reading fiction emerged from the novel-reading practices of a leisure class once chided for the conspicuous consumption of idle time spent reading novels. It may be a necessary simplification to state that the habits associated with urbanization were also regarded with suspicion. The relation between class formation and the novel develops because of the changes in agricultural labor made possible by urbanization and industrialized labor. The very production and distribution of novels was greatly speeded up by urban practices of commerce. And the particular practice of reading novels aloud in a family parlor has an uncertain relation to reading alone after a day at the factory.

Certainly, the emergence of the middling classes accompanied an increase in the production and consumption of novels in the early United States. And the subjects of inheritance and dispossession that appeared in the background of gothic novels still influenced the portraits of achieved or deferred marriages in domestic and historical fiction. For many such novels, the transmission of property appears through romance and marriage; the crucial impact of romance and marriage is how property can be transmitted in the inevitable crossings of fiction with courtship. While celebrating what twentieth-century critics have variously called the hero in space, the American Adam, or the virgin land, therefore, plots of early novels frequently focus on women's bodies.¹¹ As a way to talk about the nation's destiny, issues of seduction, courtship, and marriage dominate. The tensions of these novels can depend on exposing women's bodies as available outside of marriage or only to be gained in marriage. Further, the association persists in the period between women reading novels and the assumption that their bodies will become therefore more available.

The relation between privacy and violation that appears as standard fare in the plots of novels raises the matter of privacy that goes along with reading practices. Novels in the early United States display new understandings of what it is to have a separate and private identity that accompanies a desire for the privacy that might be necessary for reading them. That is, at the same time that they market and display

this identity, novels encourage reading practices that will aid and abet it. In so doing, novels reinforce class stratification at a time when newspapers were available everywhere and novels initially an expensive reading pastime.

Many early novels are epistolary, presenting their plots through a series of linked letters as in Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), or through the conceit of an extended letter, as in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) or *Edgar Huntly* (1799). The essentially mobile quality of the letter as a device, as a piece of writing designed to be mobile, reflects the mobility of the population as well as the increasing mobility of the novel as an object. Early nineteenth-century novels could be carried around in pockets. The epistolary nature of these novels may also allude to the way they take up the private space in the home that might once have been occupied by letters and letter writing.

Landscapes and Houses

Enforcing as well as enacting relations between public and private spaces, the novels of the rapidly expanding United States bring landscapes home. Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* (1837), for example, critiques but also uses the language of opportunism as it promotes a class that could appreciate the landscape (as possible purchasers) and hence the novel works at once as a satire and as a sales pitch. Tracing domestic life at the frontier of Michigan, the novel asks how reading practices persist when readers must negotiate between romance and land contracts. The romance appears as various fantasies that have inspired new settlers; the contract intrudes as they try to survive collisions with corrupt land speculators.

In many respects such novels ask: What is the nation as boundaries, populations, and languages change? Their larger populations kept mid-Atlantic and New England states as the novel's major focus, even as national struggles over the character and destiny of the United States took place at their margins. Family relations and genealogies – uncovering secrets of origins in order to establish an inheritance – mean that such novels obsessively declare origins that legitimate, explain, and authorize the stories that have produced

them. Producing a paradox of reciprocal definitions, novels locate at once a starting point for national identifications and their potential dissolution.

As the popularity of novels increased and as methods of production and distribution improved, the contents of novels shifted. During the early national period, the nascent ideologies of the early United States nation were necessarily caught up with embodiments – such as the charged rendition of bodies in domestic spaces characteristic of the gothic novel. To speak of how bodies appear in domestic spaces, whether in historical fiction or novels by women, calls attention as well to the novel's investment in moving between interiors and the natural world. Whether looking at women at home or men in the wilderness, early republican novels produce attention to spaces that are at once gendered, classed, and racialized. That is, through attention to the invasion or destruction or abandonment of homes, the question of who may be permitted to be at home in the new nation is repeatedly and dramatically lived out.

The texture and detail of being displaced from a home dominate the best early novels as they move from landscapes like the maze of wilderness facing Cora and Alice Monroe in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* to the streets of Philadelphia wandered by Arthur Mervyn in Charles Brockden Brown's eponymous novel. Solitary bodies repeatedly stand out against these backgrounds. In Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, the Pequot Magawisca jumps from a great height to interpose her arm for the neck of her beloved Everett, the son of white settlers; in Cooper, the dark figure of Magua, felled by the rifle of the ambiguously white Hawkeye, topples over a precipice; in another eponymous Brown novel, the beleaguered Edgar Huntly crouches in a cave gnawing the raw flesh of a panther.

And yet, though the plots of these novels often depend on what will happen to a woman alone in a house or a man alone in the woods, the protagonist is not merely alone. The spectatorial function of the reader and the presence of the author (often highlighted by asides) are mimetically engaged by a hidden observer, usually in the form of an alien presence. From the ventriloquist Carwin hidden in Clara Wieland's closet to the murderous lurking of Magawisca's father in *Hope Leslie*, from the malevolent vigilance of Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans* to the designs of the seducer in *Female Quixotism*

or even the comic bumbling of Teague O'Regan in the extended production of *Modern Chivalry* (1815) by Hugh Henry Brackenridge, such lurking figures are usually Irish or Native American. The conspiracies these figures portend serve to highlight a whiteness at once vulnerable and inept (in contrast to the abilities of the onlooker) and yet resourcefully resilient (implicitly because American). The very vulnerability of the main characters might be said to produce American-ness as embodied. And even as they suggest equivalence between whiteness and vulnerability, these novels ruthlessly identify and exclude exceptions. But in excluding the alien from the newly constituted nation, novels like *Edgar Huntly* internalize alienation. After a dream-like search through the wilderness, Edgar Huntly wakes assailed by a thirst so powerful that he imagines drinking his own blood. Instead, he first drinks the blood of a panther and then kills so many Native Americans that the blood soaks his skin and hair. He thus wakes to violence that makes the wilderness into a national home, the site of the incorporation and domestication of a savagery that can no longer be projected elsewhere.

Crossing Borders

Anxieties about border crossings pervade the early novel – the boundary of the ocean, of the nation, of the alien territory. Even the boundary line between animal and human comes to seem a national border, possibly to be crossed, suspiciously and repeatedly to be named and described. Paragraphs appear in Cooper's frontier fiction to explain which appearances are human and which are animal for the benefit of confused interlopers from white settlements. The domestic enclosures or temples of rural retreat that appear in the fictions of Charles Brockden Brown tend to be safest in England – transplantation to the new world means violation. In short, the business of America frequently appears as the violation of the expected boundaries between animal and human, Indian and white.

Such violations of boundaries include confusion about boundary crossing. Race and sexuality, for example, often stand in for each other. If James Fenimore Cooper writes fictions that provide a wilderness foundation for the national sense of self, he also writes

foundational nightmares that introduce the premise that the shedding of blood in the wilderness might enable certain forms of socially approved marriage. By producing a phenomenally engrossing figure like Natty Bumppo, who repeatedly stalks into the wilderness in ambiguous relation to a male Native American companion, Cooper also opens the door to figures like Nick Slaughter, created by the southern novelist Robert Montgomery Bird. In *Nick of the Woods* (1837), the goal of revenging the death of his family motivates often indiscriminate and grotesque carnage against Native Americans.

This gothic tale, like Cooper's, still relies on a plotting of inheritance, stolen birthright, and courtship with a suspiciously dark heroine to resolve the matter of alien boundaries. And like *The Last of the Mohicans*, however much it may tease with racial mixing, the novel ends with the marriage and retreat of the racially palest characters. Even in gothic fiction like Brown's *Wieland*, forms of miscegenation may be seen to threaten national identification – of the nation or of citizenship as a racial category. Perhaps through the novel's preoccupation with the maintenance of order, sexuality becomes racialized. Moves to legislate the boundaries of race and identity subsume or merge with land claims that depend on courtship narratives. Notably, contests about identity seem to invoke a valorizing in which, for example, class trumps gender, sexuality trumps class, and race trumps sexuality. Each seems to gain ground, as it were, at the expense of another. The relation between possessive individualism and the individual's possessions – whether in land or in bodies – appears as part of the founding gesture of the republic.

By crossing the boundaries the New World presented, the increasingly popular form of the novel provided an uneasy but enduring form for the romance of America. As the generation of the 1820s turned to writing the story of the American Revolution 50 years later, the romance of the nation and the romance of the family collided. The intangible business of locating national identifications through novels emerged through material questions of land ownership and women's bodies. In such novels, rewriting the revolution celebrated as a founding moment could subsume the relation between expanding immigrant populations and the new territories claimed in the name of a coherent nation. At the same time as a political investment in national narrative began to take form in the novel, the founding

stories of families were uneasily located in the tense relation between property and women's bodies.

Water

In addition to the attention that the novel pays to transatlantic migrations and, famously, to the whale trade, there are internal migrations, along the rivers and inland waterways of the United States that preoccupy its characters. These migrations through the external geographic terrain markers of such waterways accompany migrations internal to the body, such as that of blood. Concepts of sacrifice draw on a contract, a compact sealed with blood sacrifice as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. As he substitutes the body of the "ram caught in the thicket" for that of his son, Abraham enacts a form of substitution that seems to be re-enacted mimetically by writers such as Cooper who find at certain compelling crisis points in historical fiction that it might be convenient to sacrifice a darker character in order that a lighter one might survive. These gestures of substitution might also lead readers to ask about the founding move of the nation, announced by John Winthrop as a city on a hill and understood to be the compact, the "visionary compact," that would allow other substitutions.

Such relations of compact and substitution enter into the novels of the most prominent fiction writers of the mid-nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. Each published a momentous novel between 1850 and 1852. In Stowe's best known, and bestselling, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the central concepts of property and bodies become a network shuttling in between the matters of slavery and reproduction. What is it to have a child under a system of slavery? It is to have offspring who are also property. Such offspring, even when they appear white, sometimes seem to be present in order to be offered up for sacrifice, as with little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Stowe's novel, the compact of forgiveness for the national sin of slavery is to be offered over Eva's dead body.

The question of children born into a puritanical New England in the seventeenth century was addressed in a novel published the

previous year, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). The role played in that novel by the illegitimacy of the baby Pearl might appear entirely far from the political crisis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet the two works share an investigation of the close interweaving of religion and politics in determining what rights women have to their children and what role children play in pressing contractual relations about the concepts of sin and redemption. In Hawthorne's novel, the sacrifice over the child's body remains somewhat more elusive. Does Pearl's redemptive force exist for her mother, for her father, or for a reader seeking to reconcile Old World attachments with New World morality? Pearl's inheritance from her putative father, Chillingworth, the tormentor of her biological father, makes her an heiress beyond the reach of Puritan imaginings of her destiny.

Other Hawthorne novels, such as *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), insist on the importance of inherited property in determining the identity of families. The combined legacies of blood and land combine in that novel to make "Maule's curse." For Herman Melville, the mobility of property separates it from women's bodies and the uncertain consequences of reproduction in novels like *Moby-Dick* (1851). Such attention to the relation between property and women's bodies shows up throughout the nineteenth century, in novels set on New England soil, on the ocean, and even in novels about the west, such as Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) and *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872).

The pattern of increased urbanization later in the nineteenth century saw novelists turning to the structure of social class as they presented marital prospects. The formidably loquacious Henry James led the way for observers of social manners with novels like *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). The crisis faced by the new heiress Isabel Archer takes place on European soil, yet it becomes an American story by virtue of her American suitors and her American past. The crisis of marital prospects that Isabel faces as an American abroad appears bound up with the cultural crisis of inheriting the values of Europe versus America (and resembles the romantic conflict between the slave-owning South and the reforming North in James's *The Bostonians*). In *The Bostonians*, James turns to the quirky habits of a class in Boston that had derived value and

significance from protests, such as the protest for women's suffrage, which had dwindled into caricature; this novel articulates the uneasy romance of abandoning the thrill of reform for the unsteady pull of marriage.

Reading Fiction

An account of how to read all the fiction produced in the nineteenth-century United States remains beyond the scope of any single critical book. To suggest the direct consequences of the compression here, let me note some consequential omissions. Some of the most popular novels of the United States focused on religion. Prime examples are Susan B. Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* (1868), and Augusta Evans's *St. Elmo* (1866). The sensation fiction of such writers as George Lippard, George Thompson, and E. D. E. N. Southworth tended toward an exposé of urban crime and advanced the motif of class transgression that appeared later in the century in Horatio Alger's popular novels of newsboys who rose to riches from the streets of Boston and New York. The consequences of racial oppression appeared in novels such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) whose subtitle suggests its aims. When Wilson asserts that slavery's shadow falls in the north, she brings the entire country together in the question of race and sexuality.

In *Clotel*, William Wells Brown explored the extreme misery of light-skinned women sold into sexual slavery, with the provocative assertion that his title character was the daughter of the former president Thomas Jefferson. The popular humorist who called himself Mark Twain started out with a boy's book, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and then complicated readings of race and identity in the United States with the problematic story of a raft headed down the Mississippi River in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain revisited the questions raised by *Clotel* about racially mixed children whose ability to control their own futures is fatally compromised by slavery in his dark comic novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Such novels view the United States as a country conceived in liberty but repeatedly caught up in the proposition that its dedications engage slavery.

To view fiction as a path to freedom persuasively carries these novels toward the twentieth century.

What happens in a twenty-first century re-reading of the fiction that suffused nineteenth-century reading practices in the United States might reflect what we anticipate. What we find as readers must inevitably include the expectation that progress appears as a telos of fictional exposition as well as of historical events. Yet these discoveries may mean that our expectations will be up-ended. James Fenimore Cooper, for example, wrote a science fiction novel, *The Monikins*, in 1836. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote nostalgically about Maine in *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862). Herman Melville wrote about brother–sister incest in the emphatically landlocked *Pierre* (1852), as well as sending characters on a journey down the Mississippi River in *The Confidence Man* (1857). A key sentimental novelist, Maria Cummins, followed her urban novel *The Lamplighter* (1854) with a story about Syria and Islam in *El Fureidis* (1860). Augusta Evans wrote romantically about the southern confederacy in *Macaria* (1864), but in an earlier novel, she also took on Texas in *Inez* (1850).

The novel in the United States does not follow set patterns. It might almost call for a fractal critical attention, the ability to follow patterns that fold ideas into one another while admiring designs that appear to arise organically, as if without volition. The residual critical involvement in such apparent aberrations in literary style, substance, and tactics demands of readers who wish to pursue an accompanying narrative, one that insists of the novel in the United States that it can be summarized by one evolutionary design over another, that they maintain a flexible story line. In this narrative line, the boundaries of the novel as well as the boundaries of the United States continue to arise in a state of contestation over languages, identities, and territory.

Notes

1. The self-conscious use of the term “nation” here must include a reference to and an acknowledgment of the literary critics who have recently been so attentive to the problematic associations of nationalism with evolving state practices that were often quite repressive. These practices include the endorsement of legalized slavery and the removal

of other nations claiming territorial boundaries, emphatically including members of the Cherokee nation. The romantic ideology of a white nation gradually expanded during the nineteenth century to include members of other races and nations, but the earliest expressions of nationalism in American fiction refer most often to a nation composed of white male citizens. See, for example, Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago University Press, 1988); Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Race and Freedom* (University of California Press, 1995); Robert Levine, *Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Dana Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Duke University Press, 1998).

2. Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills* (*Atlantic Monthly*, April 1861).
3. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Doubleday, 1957), p. 12.
4. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), p. 351.
5. Note also Leonard Tennenhouse, "Writing English in America," in *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750–1850* (Princeton University Press, 2007).
6. Henry James, *The Art of Fiction* (1884), p. 12.
7. Catharine Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie* (1827), p. 32.
8. Cf. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Harvard University Press, 1956) and R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1955).
9. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1979).
10. See, for instance, Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford University Press, 1987). In addition to continuing to think about the novel in terms of the emergence of the middle class first suggested by Ian Watt, Armstrong does a careful reading of the role of gender among not only readers but also narrators, as in the female narrators used by eighteenth-century authors like Samuel Richardson. Armstrong notes, "Domestic fiction mapped out a new terrain of discourse" because "the social values of women" as they appeared in fiction could "represent an alternative form of political power" (28). See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in*

Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding (University of California Press, 1957). See also Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford University Press, 1986). Davidson notes that by examining ownership names inscribed in the one thousand existing novels she surveyed, she found that “women’s signatures outnumbered men’s roughly two to one” (8). In proposing a reading of the novel in terms of its political activities, Davidson suggests that the picaresque novel can do that most easily: “by its very insistence on diversity and indeterminacy [it can] emphasize the complexity of the political world of the postrevolutionary era” (152).

11. For examples of such literary criticism from the mid-twentieth century, see R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (University of Chicago Press, 1955), and Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard University Press, 1950).