

From Aesthetics to Political Criticism: Theories of the Early American Novel¹

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The "Infancy" Thesis

For a long time, critical discussions of the early American novel were characterized by an almost habitual dismissal. Although the influence of modernist aesthetics intensified this dismissive attitude, the low esteem in which critics held the novel of the early republic can be traced back to Romanticism and its cult of originality. Already in 1907, Lillie Loshe had described early American novels as hopelessly bad, because they lacked originality: "Not one of these early novels, with the possible exception of *Modern Chivalry*, whether intended for edification or for amusement, can claim any enduring literary merit, or any real originality" (25–26). The early American novelists "discovered no new or characteristic type of novel, but sought their novels in the very British fiction whose influence they were trying to destroy. Unfortunately, they followed the methods of British fiction in its most uninspired and uninspiring period" (27). Since the early American novel showed no artistic distinction, the only question remaining was how bad it really was. In 1940, Herbert Ross Brown begins his study of the sentimental novel in America by saying: "Many of the titles of these faded favorites, it is charitable to remark at the threshold of this book, deserve to appear on any list of the world's worst fiction" (vii). Even Henri Petter, whose survey of the early American novel introduced a new seriousness into the study of the topic, still refers to the "poverty" (399) and "widespread mediocrity" (3) of most of the early novels and readily concedes a "lack of distinction, originality, and productivity" (3).

The narrative model on which such views of the early American novel are based is that of the "rise of the novel." The concept gained prominence with Ian Watt's seminal book on the rise of the English novel in which the term is used as a sociological category. For Watt, the rise of the novel is the equivalent of the rise of the middle class, for which the novel provides effective forms of self-definition. In contrast, Loshe and other American critics take their point of departure from the Romantic idea of organic growth in which each organism has to pass

through childhood and youthful immaturity before it can hope to reach maturity: "Like all literary forms, the novel and the short story are the fruition of a long course of development and, in the childhood of the race as in the childhood of the individual, the events rather than the characters enchain the attention" (Quinn 3). The early American novel's first steps are therefore that of the infant toddler who is still learning to walk: "For the dearth of good American literature during the first 150 or 200 years of the white history of the country, apology is needed less than explanation. A new nation, like a new-born baby, requires time before its special characteristics become discernible" (Cowie 1). The "immaturity" of the early American novel is thus not surprising at all. A national literature has to begin somewhere, and its first efforts will most likely be awkward.² In spite of the work of Charles Brockden Brown, the period before the Jacksonian era is therefore treated as prelude to the actual beginnings of the American novel around 1830: "The period covered—that from 1789 to 1830—opens with the publication of the first tentative and amateurish American novels and at its close leaves the novel an established form in American literature" (Loshe v).

From a literary point of view, these early novels "do not have great importance as evidence of an incipient literary culture." Why should we study this body of works then? The reason Loshe provides draws on the ethos of the literary scholar who fearlessly explores all unknown territories of the literary map, even at the cost of painful self-sacrifice in the form of much boredom. To be sure, the task may not always be dreary, because their "very amateurishness" gives many of the early novels "a naively amusing quality . . ." (26). Still, the chief reward is not amusement but historical insight:

Yet inconsiderable as was their accomplishment from the point of view of literary merit they have a certain interest as documents in the history of taste. For their authors, and presumably their readers, were of a cultivated class, of the class which would consciously seek what it supposed to be the best. (28)

For Herbert Ross Brown, too, many of the early novels may appear on any list of the world's worst fiction; "collectively, however, they represent a wide level of taste, and they have had an enormous influence upon the lives of the American people" (vii). Similarly, for Quinn the primary

justification for dealing with the early American novel lies in the possible insight gained into a cultural history of taste:

The novels of domestic life which followed *The Power of Sympathy* are of interest historically as an example of the depths from which the American novel arose, and as an illustration of the taste of that time. . . . It is easy to dismiss these novels as unreal and unrepresentative of actual life. But to the social historian who reads between the lines they are not negligible, and to those possessed of a sense of humor, their perusal will not be without reward. (13–14)

In the context of the “infancy” premise it makes sense to justify the study of the early American novel by what could be called the “cultural document” argument. If early American novels are not artistically valuable, they can at least offer some insights into the culture of their time. The “cultural document” argument therefore remained the dominant strategy of legitimation in almost all discussions of the early American novel until roughly 1970. But what is it that novels can actually tell us about a culture? The promise to gain some kind of insight into the taste of the times is easily made, but it remains hollow as long as the question is not pursued in the larger context of a social history of taste. For such a history, however, the comparatively small number of early American novels seems to constitute a rather arbitrary selection of evidence, especially in view of “the omnipresence of European fiction” in the colonies and in the early republic (Davidson, *Revolution* 11). Moreover, how do fictional texts reflect taste? The problem with the “cultural document” argument is that both fiction in general, and the early American novel in particular, are poor, unreliable documents. The historical insight they provide can be gained much more effectively in other ways. In fact, whether and to what extent a novel can be regarded as a document can only be determined on the basis of a prior historical study based on other, more reliable documents. Finally, by justifying the study of the early American novel as part of intellectual and cultural history, instead of literary history, the argument confirms the very suspicion it seeks to dispel.

In contrast to the vague promise of a social or cultural history of taste, Terence Martin offers a more ambitious version of the “cultural document” approach in his essay on “Social Institutions in the Early American Novel.” He, too, takes his point of departure from the as-

sumption of a "largely subliterate quality of the early American novel" and does not even try to make claims for its literary merits: "It is a body of fiction for the most part trite, undistinguished, conventionalized, ridden with formula, thematically uninspired." However, "such a body of fiction . . . can tell us many things about the culture in which it was written," because it "reflects the attitudes and assumptions of its society A study of the early American novel may thus provide insights into the quality and texture of American life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century . . ." (72). The insight Martin gains is not one into historical reality, however, but into "a desiderated—believed-in—reality," namely, an "unquestioned belief in certain institutions" (73). One of these institutions is the nation, the other the family:

The institutions of the nation and the family are therefore in the most precise sense functional in this fiction. They allow the writer to order, to form, to judge his material, they allow the characters in the stories to act as members of recognized social (or political) units, and to assert themselves by identification with these units, and finally they allow the reader to identify himself as American or member of a family group. (75)

Those characters that deviate from family loyalty or willfully violate it are the villains and must be punished. However, why are they deviant in the first place? The

most amazing thing about the villain is that it is difficult if not impossible to discover why he performs his villainous acts. More than any other figure in the early American novel he is unmotivated. Apparently he seduces women because he is a villain and because a villain seduces women. At times he may appear to be in pursuit of money, but the stakes are never very large, and he is not truly interested; at no time does he appear to seduce out of sexual desire. It would seem that he acts evilly because he is incapable of acting otherwise. (80)

This, in fact, is where the early American novel provides insight into "a fundamental attitude of the American mind" (80): American society has no real concept of evil in the sense that it cannot "conceive of evil as native" (81). The "flaws" of the early American novel are therefore those of the American mind: "this was the new, unspoiled, virgin country; this was the land of hope and promise; how could evil be indigenous to such a country?" (81). To understand the early American novel thus means "to understand what made us what we are" (84). Martin's "cultural document" approach, it turns out, is only another version of the "infancy" thesis which is now extended to American society at large.

American society is governed by a naive optimism, and the tame conventionality of the early American novel merely reproduces this official ideology.³

In the history of discussions of the early American novel, the monographs by Henri Petter, *The Early American Novel*, and Michael Lowenstein, *The Art of Improvement: Form and Function in the American Novel, 1789–1801*, published in 1971, signal a departure from traditional theories. Although Petter's book has become the better-known of the two studies, because it provides a diligent documentation of plots and recurring motifs, Lowenstein's challenge to traditional theories of the early American novel is actually the more ambitious one. In contrast to Lowenstein, Petter continues to consider most of the early American novels as "failures" (xii), calls the period not a distinguished epoch in the history of American writing and complains about a widespread lack of distinction, originality and productivity (3). Why should we study this literature, then? For the simple reason that these novels are part of American literary history and hence in need of analysis: "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" (xii). To be sure, this task may be dreary. Throughout his study, Petter's tone is that of a brave man who has taken on a thankless task others have shunned. And yet, somebody's got to do it!

The attempt to do "justice" to the up to then ugly duckling of American literary history is put on a more theoretical level by Lowenstein. In contrast to Petter, Lowenstein insists on a "historical view," in which contemporary standards are not simply projected into the past: "What they do deserve, however, is a critical point of view more pertinent to minor literature, for most of their modern commentators have looked back at them from the taste of today, a taste . . . nurtured by major and enduring works" (3–4). For Lowenstein, these novelists did not aim at "art," but at improvement, or, more precisely, at "the art of improvement." It was "fiction's true purpose . . . to provide educational experience" (23). The early novelists saw themselves as educators: "Like any educator, the novelist was especially interested in improving the minds of youth, in helping to form good men and useful citizens" (41). In keeping with his promise to take the early American novel seri-

ously, Lowenstein provides an extended and useful description of its theory of effect in which he pays special attention to the role of the imagination and the debates of philosophers and novelists of the early republic on how fiction could function as a positive mode of instruction. However, at a closer look, the “novel-as-educator” argument turns out to be only another, actualized version of the “novel-as-cultural document” argument. What is documented is no longer a vague history of taste, nor a particular set of American beliefs, but the educational philosophy of the time.⁴ In his attempt to describe the early American novel as a socially and culturally “respectable” project, Lowenstein talks only about one of its aspects and disregards the tension between education and “fiction” which provided the new medium with such provocative effects.

The price for making the early American novel respectable by tying it to an educational function is to move the genre away from literature. It was tempting, then, to find more specifically literary justifications. There is a (relatively brief) moment when critics seemed intent on rejecting the negative literary judgment accepted so far and to justify the study of early American novels on formalist grounds. For example, in her essay “*The Power of Sympathy* Reconsidered: William Hill Brown as Literary Craftsman,” published in 1975, Cathy Davidson speaks of “Brown’s artistry” (25) and claims: “Our ‘first American novelist’ thus shows himself to be something of a conscious and conscientious craftsman; *The Power of Sympathy* proves to be more than an example of ‘the first and worst’ in American fiction” (14).⁵ But eleven years later, in Davidson’s major study *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, the main reason for studying early American fiction has become a political one: “The early novel also constituted a definition of America different from the official one that was being worked out after the end of the Revolutionary War” (vii). In the unstable post-revolutionary period, the new and heavily criticized genre of the novel functioned as a threat to established authority and empowered those marginalized voices “not always heard—women, minorities, the poor, political radicals” (ix):

For many average and even underprivileged Americans, and especially for women, this reading revolution conferred an independence as pro-

found as that negotiated in Independence Hall. . . . The revolution that did not occur for many Americans on the level of the political and the legal system did occur, to a greater or lesser extent, within a fictive world of words. (vii)

From this political point of view, the early American novel gains an altogether new importance:

Differing from . . . more traditional literary forms such as the biography, the history, the religious or the social or political manifesto, the early novel spoke to those not included in the established power structures of the early Republic and welcomed into the republic of letters citizens who had previously been invited, implicitly and explicitly, to stay out. (79)

Where former critics only saw formulaic escapism, Davidson, writing as "a feminist and a sociological critic" (12), sees the truthful depiction of a sad reality: "Thus, if many early novels end unhappily, it may be because they acknowledge the sad reality of marriage for many women" (123).

The category of the "early American novel" is already an abstraction. At a closer look, we have at least three major subgenres, the sentimental novel, the picaresque novel, and the Gothic novel. It is interesting, therefore, to see to what extent and in what way this differentiation is taken into account. Until the political turn, discussions are dominated by a clear hierarchy, expressed in exemplary fashion by a text like Marcus Cunliffe's history of *The Literature of the United States*. Because he is restricted in space, he does not deal with the genre of the sentimental novel at all. Only *The Power of Sympathy* is mentioned because it is most likely the first "American novel." Other than that, however, it does not have anything to recommend it. In contrast, Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, as the best-known example of the picaresque novel, is a "more solid contribution to American fiction" (64) on which Cunliffe spends a whole paragraph before he moves on to the work of a writer with "a more subtle imagination" (65), Charles Brockden Brown. This view already informs Loshe's pioneer study of 1907 in which she deplores the lack of "enduring literary merit" and "real originality" in the early American novel, "with the possible exception of *Modern Chivalry*" (25–26), a book "which displays more ability than any other American tales before those of Charles Brockden Brown" (22).

This hierarchy is the logical consequence of the "infancy" thesis. In its strong emotionality, the sentimental novel seems to be closest to the child. The satirical picaresque novel places itself at a distance from any form of emotional excess. However, for Loshe, this is achieved at the price of "satirical moralizings" and leads to an almost complete dominance of the book's "educational intention" (23), while Charles Brockden Brown is "the first really gifted American novel-writer" who brings the "period of amiable amateurishness" (29) to a close. For Cowie, the sentimental novel remains "in many ways inferior" (17) in its "ceaseless dissection of the emotions of immature persons who seem to have no mental life whatever" (38). Thus, before "the novel could grow up it badly needed some development of its intellectual content." This intellectual interest is provided by writers like Imlay, Tyler and Brackenridge who "all discussed problems of interest to adult readers" (38).⁶ With these writers the American novel "begins to evince signs of coming maturity. . . . Hysterical girls and handsome lifeless young men are replaced by persons capable of pondering problems relating to government, economics, 'professional' life. Satire, a token of intellectual growth, . . . replaces whimsy" (68). Unfortunately, however, "all three of these men were a little cavalier with respect to the principles—loose though they were—of narrative writing: they allowed their stories to get cold while they followed intellectual trails" (68).⁷ This flaw is (almost) overcome by Charles Brockden Brown whose novels are marked by an "undeniable spell" and, at the same time, a "high seriousness" (69). Brown may not have produced any novel that "remained unblemished by glaring faults of structure or expression" (69). And yet, his "innate power was so great, his prose so interladen with . . . beauty, that he has survived defects which would have wrecked an average writer" (69). Consequently, with Brown the early American novel approaches "the threshold of . . . fictional art" (69).

From Aesthetics to Political Criticism

It is interesting to see what happens to the hierarchy which the "infancy" thesis of the early American novel had established in the new revisionist literary history. Clearly, feminist criticism could not accept a view of the

sentimental novel as nothing but an illustration "of the depths from which the American novel arose" (Quinn 13–14). How, then, can one make the sentimental novel "respectable"? In her 1975 essay on *The Power of Sympathy*, Davidson still relies on new critical terminology and arguments. Instead of being the "first and worst in American fiction," *The Power of Sympathy* is "surprisingly sophisticated in technique, structure, and theme" (28). But this argument rests on the questionable transformation of structural inconsistencies into deliberate, even "sophisticated," acts of ironic foregrounding, in which the claim of "ironic subversion" often reflects nothing but the modern reader's historical distance to the text: "It is difficult for the reader to take seriously any character who takes himself so seriously with so little justification" (15).⁸ However, in an essay on "Mothers and Daughters in the Fiction of the New Republic," published in 1980, the argument has changed: "The horrors of childbirth, the stigma of illegitimacy, and the economic helplessness of the unwed mother were all overworked plot devices in sentimental fiction. Such bugaboos, however, were not foreign to the lives of women during America's first century as a nation" (119). Thus, as "implausible as these books may seem to the modern reader, they were realistic enough to ring true for the majority of readers of the time" (123). The theme of the fallen woman, for example, was "so prevalent in America's first popular fiction precisely because it was so true" (125). The sentimental novel "in its bleaker aspects could suggest the dark possibilities of life for America's potential mothers. But these same novels also reflected the new romantic obsession with motherhood" (119). In the essay "Flirting with Destiny: Ambivalence and Form in the Early American Sentimental Novel," published in 1982, this ambivalence moves to the center. Its strong presence in American sentimental fiction is now hardly surprising, because "the truths of life in the new republic, especially for women . . . were often contradictory and confusing" (19).⁹

Davidson's shift from "ironic foregrounding" to a mimesis of social contradictions allows her to come up with a new reason why the sentimental novel deserves critical attention: from "craftsmanship" and "artistry" she moves to "realism" and "truth." Consequently, in *Revolution and the Word* the importance of the sentimental novel lies in its critical commentary on American reality. *The Power of Sympathy* is now

read as indictment of “a grossly inequal distribution of social power and social worth, imbalances that should be corrected in a country purporting to be a republic” (107–08). To be sure, the novel is about seduction, but the theme functions as a form of social criticism:

One main implication is that seduction is a social disease which will not be fully cured until men such as the elder Harrington and Martin are forced to surrender much of their inauthentic status or are shamed into exercising it more responsibly. Another is that women can learn to take preventative measures, be taught to appreciate the high price that must be paid for seduction given the time and place within which they live. (108)

Seduction is seen as metaphor “not just of women’s status in the Republic but of a range of problems,” so that the novel, in the final analysis, is really one about “the instituted inequality of the society itself” (108). In order to make her point that the sentimental novel is realistic and not sentimental in our modern sense of “self-indulgent fantasies bearing little relationship to real life” (122), Davidson adds a chapter on the lives and legal status of women in the early republic and points out

a contiguity between the sociology of the early American family and the plots of the sentimental novel that is easily overlooked by the contemporary reader. . . . Given the political and legal realities of the time, the lack of birth control, the high fertility rate, and the substantial chances of death at an early age, many of the readers fared no better than did their most unfortunate fictional sisters. (122)

Thus, the “sentimental novel spoke far more directly to the fears and expectations of its original readers than our retrospective readings generally acknowledge” (122).¹⁰ It is for this and other reasons that Davidson does not even shrink away from applying the historically charged term “social realism” to the sentimental novel.¹¹

For the Davidson of *Revolution and the Word*, who has replaced aesthetic criteria by political ones, the justification of the genre of the sentimental novel in the early republic can thus be put on new grounds:

A number of novelists of the early national period turned the essentially conservative subgenre of the sentimental novel (with its fetishization of female virginity) to a subversive purpose by valorizing precisely those women whom the society had either overtly condemned (the fallen woman) or implicitly rendered invisible (woman as *feme covert*). (151)

Yet the subversion has its limits. Even “the most progressive sentimental novels still focused primarily on women’s restricted familial role” (151).

In contrast, politics is a central issue in the picaresque novel. It confronts political controversy directly.¹² Since it takes on a whole range of often conflicting political opinions, it may remain contradictory in its political position. However, in its rambunctious heterogeneity and inherent duplicity it troubles "the mainstreams (either Federalist or Republican) with different, discordant, marginal thought" (173). Even Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* reveals an unexpected political dimension:

In contrast to these female picaresque fantasies, Tabitha Tenney's book provides a hard core of realism—and it does not paint a very pretty picture of women's lives. Dorcasina retreats to fiction at the end of her life because, first, her education has been so elementary that she simply cannot read anything more challenging than popular fiction, and, second, because fiction itself is finally far more satisfactory than anything she has found in the world at large. She prefers, not unreasonably, a happy fantasy life to an unhappy actual one. (190)

In the "infancy" thesis, there is no way in which the early American novel can win. It is, by definition, infantile. Now, in Davidson's "social realism" thesis, there is no way in which the early American novel can fail. Even escapism is really, at bottom, a form of realism and subversion. If there is a problem remaining in the early American novel, it is its lack of an agenda of political change:

Like the sentimental novel, which provided the nation's single most telling critique of patriarchy without offering specific agendas for eliminating institutionalized sexual discrimination, the picaresque novel pointed out what was rotten in the American *polis* but stopped short of outlining a project of political change. (210)

The same is true for the third genre, the Gothic novel, which "focuses on the systemic possibilities and problems of postrevolutionary American society and of the postrevolutionary self in action in that society" (215). In their examination of the problematics of individualism, these novels "are all concerned with the very way in which evil can be rooted in the concept of individualism" (235). Again, the political critique has one shortcoming, however: "The same novels which provide a salient, systemic critique of America's early maladies do not, however, abound with suggested remedies, although the villain's final discomfiture may inoculate [*sic*] the reader against following his course" (236). Nevertheless, as Davidson tries to show in her interpretation of Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Arthur Mervyn*, this does not necessarily un-

determine the political significance of the early American novel. It simply has to be sought somewhere else, namely in what, at first sight, appears to be the text's weakness, its "irresoluteness," or, as in the case of *Arthur Mervyn*, its undissolvable ambiguity:

It did not, in short, take the twentieth century to invent Derrida or Bakhtin. *Arthur Mervyn*, I would finally suggest, might best be seen as an early American version of Bakhtin's "dialogical" text, a carnivalesque performance in which the author resolutely refuses to delimit his intentions while also allowing his characters their own ambiguities and even spirit of "revolt" against any constraining proprieties the text might threaten to impose. In Bakhtin's view, the dialogical text is particularly subversive since it challenges complacency, forces the reader's active participation in the text, and resolutely refuses to assuage uncertainty with comforting, final solutions. (253)

Inevitably, a primarily political argument must shift the terms of valorization. For the "infancy" thesis, literary form provides a test of maturity, for political criticism it is a manifestation of politics. To Davidson's credit, one has to point out that she does not evade the question of how the literary text achieves its political goals through its form. The reason why we should study the early American novel lies in its "social realism" which provides insight into the "class, gender, and racist inequities in the new land and even explicitly advocated an end to these inequities" (258). These political pleas for justice may not always have been sufficiently explicit or unequivocal, but the irresoluteness or inner contradictions of the early American novel do not undermine its political function, since they provide the text with a carnivalesque, dialogical, and hence subversive dimension that gives it a poststructuralist, even postmodern quality *avant la lettre*. Not only does Davidson draw on (the authority of) Derrida and Bakhtin, she also claims that "Brown, soon after the inception of the novel in America, wrote metafiction" (253). Altogether, Davidson aims at an "[o]ppositional or dialogical history" (255) based on Bakhtin's concept of the subversive power of the carnivalesque. Consequently, it is the purpose of her book to make a case for the overlooked subversive qualities of early American novels. And since she wants to make a case for the genre as a whole, because her reason for its importance is that it is the voice of the "marginalized,"¹³ it is hardly surprising that she discovers subversive elements in all major subgenres of the early American novel.

With her shift from aesthetics to politics, Davidson has put the critical assessment of the early American novel on new grounds. The focus of the debate is no longer the question of literary merit (or its lack). Differences in interpretation and evaluation can now be traced back almost exclusively to disagreements about what political function early American novels *really* have. For example, in Cynthia Jordan's interpretation of *Modern Chivalry* in her book *Second Stories: The Politics of Language, Form, and Gender in Early American Fictions*, the fact that Brackenridge opted for the genre of the picaresque novel (although it is certainly open to dispute how far he actually managed to write one) seems to be irrelevant. What counts is the novel's exertion of cultural power through its "linguistic politics." Although Jordan's view of the novel's lack of structural unity is not that far apart from Davidson, her explanation of its political meaning is quite different: where Davidson sees a rambunctious heterogeneity at work, Jordan registers an increasing loss of aesthetic control that signals the gradual breakdown of Brackenridge's trust in paternalistic leadership and a "patriarchal linguistic politics that tried to silence other views—'otherness' itself—in American culture . . ." (x). For Jordan, Brackenridge's failure is instructive. His novel highlights a "discrepancy between the mode of socio-political authority Brackenridge intended to promote at the outset of his novel and the picture of failed authority that has emerged by its end" (76). The contrast to Davidson is striking. Instead of being the voice of the marginalized, the novel functions as an instrument of patriarchal authority;¹⁴ far from being subversive, it merely reveals a failed attempt at social control that can tell us a lot about the dominant ideology of the time: "More specifically, Franklin, Brackenridge, and Brown, writing in the wake of the Revolution, which granted authority to new Fathers, believed with varying degrees of optimism that language could be used to maintain a patriarchal social order in the new nation" (x). If literature provides subversion, then only with the beginning of the following period:

In the romantic period that followed, Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville repeatedly criticized the patriarchal linguistics that tried to silence other views—"otherness" itself—in American culture, and their own experiments with narrative form reflect their attempts to unmask the

fraud perpetrated by their cultural fathers and to recover the lost second story. (x)

Similarly, Rubin-Dorsky, in his introductory chapter to *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, argues against Davidson's main thesis of a covert or even overt critique of the existing social order and claims "that such a glorious scenario never really took place" (14), because "the novelists themselves were too conservative in their relation to the state, too ambivalent about the location of legitimate authority, and too uncertain about where their loyalties ultimately lay to have become genuine 'cultural voices' and to have written powerful social critiques." Rather, "these writers remained wedded to the rhetoric of the Revolution, and thus were still intent upon educating an American readership to be good citizens of the Republic" (14). The result are "didactic textbooklike texts that tried to freeze values that were even then in flux" (14).¹⁵ What we get is "not the novel as reflection of its society . . . but a sham sermon to hold change at bay, mere imitations of older British forms" (15).¹⁶ In a neo-historicist reinterpretation of the place of the early novel "in the various forms of discourse and practice in the early republic," Shirley Samuels, in her essay "The Family, the State, and the Novel in the Early Republic," goes even further and claims that "[t]hese novels, which frequently depict the family as a model for the nation, also demonstrate the ways in which it has become an instrument of social control" (386–87).¹⁷

In shifting from literary value to the question of political function, a new criterion of legitimation is established. The question is no longer whether there are any literary grounds on which the early American novel can be salvaged, for example, by distinguishing a period-specific "art of improvement" from "modern" aesthetic criteria such as originality or conventionality. In consequence of the shift to politics, the primary question is now whether the early American novel is liberating or not, or, more specifically, whether it is subversive or complicit.¹⁸ For Davidson, the early American novel gives a voice to marginalized groups and thus functions as a form of political empowerment. For Rubin-Dorsky, early American novelists did not distance themselves radically enough from existing social and literary conventions: *The Power of Sympathy* leaves too many unanswered questions, *The Coquette* "only

reinforces the codes that Foster has in other ways tried to subvert" (18), *Charlotte Temple* still does not resist "the pieties and homilies of the culture it has been vilifying. . . . In the end it winds up promoting the values that cloak forms of (male) oppression; it authorizes the very authorities it has previously sought to displace" (19). Altogether, the sentimental novel failed "because it could not sustain a coherent critique of American society" (19), while the picaresque novel, although engaging more openly in political argument and debate, also has the "inherent weakness" of "an inconsistency in its point of view": "It was often difficult, sometimes impossible, to tell where its author stood on the vital political issues he (and it almost always was 'he') was discussing" (19–20). In contrast, the Gothic novel's, and especially Brown's, problematization of reason, the self, and the clear distinction between appearance and reality, can be seen as radical and unequivocal critique of American society:

The gothic thus became the perfect form for expressing the fears that American society, with its concomitant ideologies of liberalism and individualism, not only had continued the abuses of a hierarchical social structure but also had actually opened the way to even greater treacheries: self-made, self-improved, self-confident, and self-determined men abusing power, subverting authority, undermining order. (21–22)

Again, the difference to prior political interpretations could not be greater: while Davidson's and Jordan's arguments rest on something like a teleology of individual liberation (from patriarchy), for Rubin-Dorsky the age of liberalism and individualism actually seems to be represented as worse than the "hierarchical social structure" preceding it.

Recently, the argument that the early American novel, despite hopeful tendencies, is, in the final analysis, not yet radical enough and remains complicit with the social and ideological system has won the day. This has not brought an end to interpretive disagreements, however, since the nature of the complicity (active/passive?) and its degree remain disputed. In this debate, the arguments by Larzer Ziff, in his book *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print, and Politics in the Early United States*, and Michael Gilmore, in his contribution to the new *Cambridge History of American Literature*, present another step away from the "subversion" theory. In contrast to Davidson and Rubin-Dorsky, Ziff sees the early American novel neither as subversive self-empowerment,

nor as documentation of a lack of forceful opposition. For him, the early American novel enacts a systemic logic and, in doing so, provides insight into "the unarticulated anxieties of American society" (71). This view is based on the assumption that literary representation parallels political representation. Both are generated by "a shift in the economic sphere from real to personal—or represented—property" (x). Thus, "print culture and American political culture were twins born from the same conditions and dependent upon another for their well-being" (x). Both are characterized by a drift from immanence to representation, "from a common belief that reality resided in a region beneath appearance and beyond manipulation to the belief that it could be constructed and so made identical with appearance."¹⁹ The sentimental novel of seduction, for example,

strikingly embodies society's pervasive suspicion that deceit is latent in every relationship. . . . Beneath its detailing of the threat to traditional standards of female conduct another concern was at stake, one for which sexual misconduct served as an attractive dramatic vehicle. This was a concern with the destructive consequences of a discrepancy between what another represented himself as and the self he truly was, an anxiety about the ease with which persons could be separated from property in a mobile society in which traditional guides to an individual's worth were unavailable or inapplicable so that self-representation had to be accepted as the self. (56)

For Ziff, this explains the frequency of the victimization pattern in the sentimental tale of seduction through which women are cast in the role of

lost immanence . . . by a society that yearned for an absolute behind the appearances that seemed to have replaced it in all transactions. Women were put in the position of embodying the quality of a fixed reality that had disappeared from the everyday world of getting a living; their chastity figured in the plot as a determinate value in a world in which the worth of most things was indeterminate. (72)

Not surprisingly, the author who registers this "social shift" (75) most clearly is Charles Brockden Brown:

The society constituted by Brown's novels is one in which the difference between appearance and reality is uncertain. Commercial, political, and literary representations amplified its power but they also made its members uneasy. Representing and misrepresenting were dangerously alike and the individual's capacity to become other than what he had been was not clearly distinguishable from his capacity to deceive. (82)²⁰

For Gilmore, the issue is more complex than a mere homology between economic structure and literary representation suggests. His approach is one of the few in recent criticism which acknowledges an inner tension in early American fiction. The early American novel is seen as the site of a struggle between republicanism and individualism, between modernizing tendencies and a discomfort with individualism. These novels were not "preordained to assume an individualistic cast. In its formal and rhetorical emphases, the genre was often more in sympathy with republicanism than with the liberal and private values of the nineteenth century" (625). However,

if the novel drew upon an understanding of narrative as common inheritance, it also contributed to the disintegration of that perspective. It transformed stories into marketable commodities and displaced the collectivity with the individual voice. . . . For every sign of communal, republican culture, one can adduce an apparently antithetical sign betokening the novel's growing commitment to individualism. (628)

Letter-writing in epistolary novels provides an example:

It was suggested earlier that the novel of letters . . . reproduces as technique the era's communal ideals. . . . But epistolary fictions also signal a transition toward modern commodity culture, for the letters composing such texts are addressed as much to strangers as they are to their fictional recipients. (628-29)

Similarly, Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* and Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, "two of the stronger fictions of the period . . . embrace the primacy of the civic sphere" but "simultaneously sanction centrifugal modern forces" (637). However, the "early novel's ability to hold together premodern and individualistic urges" soon began to unravel. Brown's work is already "saturated with the ideology of an ascendant print culture" (647) which "also links his fiction to the rise of commerce" (649). This rise of commerce and individualism finds its strongest expression in *Arthur Mervyn*, which is seen as "Brown's most substantial achievement and arguably the finest novel written by an American during the formative period. It is a prescient book, a harbinger of the triumph of individualism in society and of subjectivity in the novel" (652). Brown was "in advance of republican culture, a proponent of liberalism and the market ethos" (658-59). Print culture and novels, which "have a special relation to print" (657), replace an oral tradition, communality is displaced by individualism and by modern commodity cul-

ture with its anonymity of social relations. In Gilmore's view, the novel may not have been the primary agent of this transition—on the contrary, there are elements of resistance—but ultimately “a strong case can be made that it was complicit from its origin with the ethos of the marketplace” (620).

For the feminist critic Davidson, the issue of women's disenfranchisement functions as a model for society as a whole. For critics like Gilmore or Watts, the woman question is part of a larger historical development, the emergence of liberal capitalism and its cultural hegemony of individualism. In the introductory chapter to his book on Charles Brockden Brown, “The Novel and the Market in the Early Republic,” Steven Watts acknowledges the existence of those subversive elements in the early American novel on which Davidson focuses her attention. But these elements of resistance are skillfully integrated into the needs of the new social order:

Sentimental novels particularly served this cultural purpose. . . . Such sentimental texts, as scholars have pointed out, frequently deployed socially displaced figures like orphans, adventurers, or prostitutes as protagonists. By either showing their destruction or integrating them into a larger community, these narratives tried to harness a “socially unstabilized energy” that threatened society. Gothic novels often moved in a parallel direction by depicting individuals whose aberrant processing of the physical world led them into dissipation and doom. (18)

Thus, “by sublimating social distress and public criticism into the language and structure of the novel, writers steered them into a relatively harmless channel” (18). What is perceived as political empowerment by Davidson presents a case of depoliticization for Watts:

A potential discourse of political perception and power became depoliticized as it was translated into a literary discourse of imaginative, privatized communication. Collective issues of social class, gender relations, and cultural authority translated into dramas of individual confrontation and adjustment, and over the whole there descended a didactic or sentimental blanket that provided the reassuring warmth of human decency and conflict resolution. (18–19)

Even the dramatization of internal tensions or dark, hidden dimensions of the self, e.g. in Brown's novels, only helped to create a new psychological type, the ‘persona,’ a kind of pluralistic, fragmented self which became the “‘modal personality type’ of capitalist society” (24). The early American novel, in other words, “played a major role from 1790 to

1820 in creating American liberal society, the liberal culture that sustained it, and the 'liberal ego' that inhabited it" (25). It "played a key role in the hegemonic shift toward liberal capitalism in the era 1790–1820" (16). Even where they "clearly criticized social and political tenets of the ascending liberal order . . . these fictional efforts worked indirectly, perhaps even unconsciously, to diffuse and neutralize dissent" (18).

In contrast to Watts, Michael Warner's context for an understanding of the early American novel in his study *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* is that of modernity. Warner sees the novel as manifestation of a distinctly modern structure of power in which power is now exerted by print and its "publication" of a democratic rhetoric, because "print discourse" constitutes the political subject.²¹ In this discursive system, novels play a crucial role. They help to usher in the transition from eighteenth-century republicanism to the modern nation-state of the nineteenth century. Even though American novel writers "consistently regard their writing as belonging to the civic arena" and "write novels that are answerable to the standards of virtue," the novel's

generic conditions required that any public identification found there be an imaginary one. The reader of a novel might have a virtuous orientation, but his or her virtue would be experienced privately rather than in the context of civic action. So the novel, despite the most rigorous intentions of its authors, developed a nationalist imaginary of the modern type. (150)

Actual political participation is replaced by imaginary identification:

This imaginary participation in the public order is . . . a precondition for modern nationalism, though it is anathema to pure republicanism. The modern nation does not have citizens in the same way that the republic does. You can be a member of the nation, attributing its agency to yourself in imaginary identification, without being a freeholder or exercising any agency in the public sphere. Nationalism makes no distinction between such imaginary participation and the active participation of citizens. (173)

In a lengthy interpretation of *Arthur Mervyn*, Warner seeks to demonstrate that Charles Brockden Brown still struggles with this conflict, whereas sentimental fiction—note the reversed order—fully unfolds and furthers the historical transformation, although, at first sight, it seems to

hold the promise of democratization. Again, Davidson's theory about the sentimental novel is turned on its head.²² If there is a subjective experience of empowerment, then this fulfills a larger development of political disenfranchisement: "For the public of which women were now said to be members was no longer a public in the rigorous sense of republicanism, and membership in it no longer connoted civil action" (173). Women may have gained symbolic access and recognition, but the sphere to which they gained access and in which they received recognition was already a depoliticized one. Altogether, the historical role of the early American novel has to be seen in its contribution to a cultural construction of the nation, albeit indirectly.

In his book on *The Transformation of Authorship in America*, Grantland Rice, too, is concerned with the relation between the novel and print culture. But again, Warner's argument is almost reversed when Rice describes the early American novel as "the literary means of last resort for a tradition of civic authorship facing the vicissitudes posed by the dawning of the age of economic liberalism and mechanical reproduction" (155). The book begins by questioning "a tradition of scholarship which has emphasized the liberating characteristics of print culture, especially in relation to the development of the free press and the constitution of a 'Fourth Estate' and other institutions Habermas argues derived from a 'bourgeois public sphere'" (4). Actually,

the celebration of a free press reflected the move from a "positive" classical republican and civic humanist notion of liberty as a corporate body's right of self-determination and the individual's right to share in the power of the state by participating in the life of the polis to a Lockean idea of liberty as the "negative" right of self-interested individuals to act and to secure possession of property without undue restraint. (11)

Thus,

while the lapse of censorship and the explosion of print culture in the last half of the eighteenth century may have freed writers from the threat of persecution from church and state, they did so only by transforming printed texts from a practical means for assertive sociopolitical commentary into the more inert medium of property and commodity. (4)

The early American novel, however, does not simply reenact this development. It is seen as an endeavor to preserve "a tradition of civic writing attempting to persist in a commercial print culture." Brackenridge, who feared the power of a democratic print culture to consolidate

a coercive public opinion, does this best. The discontinuous narrative of *Modern Chivalry* undermines a widespread belief in the rationality of print. Brackenridge does this so successfully, in fact, that the book cannot yet be considered a novel. Only after Brackenridge's death, his "sustained critique of republican print culture" was turned into a representative American novel by the industries of print culture.

Brackenridge, however, remained an exception. As writers in the early republic "were increasingly forced by social, political, and economic changes to address the problems of maintaining civic virtue by the indirect means of inculcating domestic or private virtue" (Rice 159), they "turned to the site where the disposition toward virtue was thought to be instilled—the republican household—and addressed the audience on whom their writing could make the biggest difference—the impressionable Columbian daughter" (159). In the view of Rice, this turn to the sentimental novel created a problem: "But the novel as an indirect means of inculcating civic virtue and the novel as seducer of readers were at odds; and nowhere was this contradiction more apparent than in the prose fiction of the early Republic" (161). Following Gilmore's suggestion, Rice sees Hannah Foster's image of the coquette—"a young flirt who entices an audience but does not follow through with the promise, who simultaneously surrenders and withdraws herself from the object of her attention, and who, in an indecisive erotic play, leads her partner to an end he cannot fathom"—as a "wonderful analog to what I am suggesting was the structural nature of the early American novel. The coquette neither consummates the seduction nor wholly repudiates it either; instead, she suspends allure and rejection in one mesmerizing dance" (161). However, in becoming "literature" in the modern sense of a separate aesthetic sphere, the early American novel betrayed its political potential by compromising its "overt didactic purpose," "moral intent," and political goals (172).²³

Professionally, the new political readings have solved the problem of legitimizing the study of the early American novel, because artistic shortcomings or cultural orthodoxies do no longer matter. Politics provides a new source of relevance and a far better one than the "cultural document" argument could ever hope to present. In this context, the renewed interest in the early American novel reflects a growing perception

of the early republic as a crucial historical moment of transition from republican ideas of civic and political participation to a triumph of economic liberalism with its laissez-faire ideology of the market. There are different ways of describing this transition, but in all cases discussed here, the story is one of loss. Critics like Ziff, Gilmore, Watts, Warner, and Rice posit something like a golden age of social criticism and/or political participation that came to an end with the arrival of a liberal market capitalism that commodifies everything in its reach.²⁴ The crucial question for a political criticism, then, must be: what is the relation of the novel to this historical watershed? The answer that has emerged in the revisionist criticism of the last twenty years is that the novel must be seen as a crucial instrument, if not an "important agent" (Watts 19), of this social transformation. Whatever its aesthetic shortcomings may be, politically it plays a crucial role, because it presents a new type of literature, one that is no longer based on political dispute (with the exception of a writer like Brackenridge), but on imaginary identification and private indulgence. Rice even draws an analogy to Adorno's critique of mass culture. From a form of social criticism, literature turns into fiction which is a depoliticized form by definition, either because it implies a private mode of reception or because it constitutes a separate sphere of the "literary" or the "aesthetic." This view reverses Davidson's radically. Rather than articulating the dissent of the marginalized, the early American novel illustrates what happens to dissent in the American system (figuring variously as liberal ideology, marketplace capitalism, or the nation-state). In some versions, the novel struggles (and dramatizes anxieties), in others, it becomes almost an agent of ideological seduction, but in all cases it functions as allegory for the fate of social criticism and political radicalism in America.

Textual Politics

How, by what means, do literary texts mean in current theories of the early American novel? How do they represent their politics? By criticizing the early American novel for its artistic shortcomings, 'traditional' critics such as Loshe, Cowie, or Petter also implied that the early American novel failed to reach the level of 'meaningful' communica-

tion, because it merely circulated outworn clichés or was formally too incoherent to be meaningful. Thus, the fact that traditional critics dismissed the early American novel on formal grounds was not just the whim of an aesthetic elite. It was based on the premise that these early novels cannot mean much, if they have not developed the specific means of signification that characterize literature and the novel.²⁵ In recent theories of the early American novel, on the other hand, there is hardly any consideration left of whether novels have any specific modes and forms of signification. For example, in the discussion of *Modern Chivalry* by Rice, for him the exemplary case study of the period, the satirical mode of the novel plays no significant role. The Brackenridge Rice presents stands in a tradition of social criticism in which social commentary is all and form, obviously, nothing. It seems inexplicable to him, therefore, that *Modern Chivalry* "attracted surprisingly little attention" (143). To even consider the element of aesthetic experience would mean to succumb to exactly those forces of privatization against which Brackenridge (or rather: Rice's interpretation of his work) is directed. This opposition between critical content, as the site of the political, and "literary" aspects, as mere vehicles of escape from politics, creates a theoretical dilemma, however, for clearly the way in which a novel reaches and influences a reader must be considered part of its politics and possible political function.²⁶ There is a politics of form, and the interesting question is how the more recent theories of the early American novel address this aspect.

The first challenge for any revisionist approach is to come to terms with the often noted "contradictions, inconsistencies, and instabilities" (Rubin-Dorsky 25) of the early American novel. One possible response is to deny them, as Arner and the "early" Davidson do by claiming that apparent incoherence is really a cunning ironic design and thus a token of craftsmanship. Such claims did not gain wide acceptance, however, and were soon dropped. The shift from aesthetic to political criteria solved the problem, because it now became possible to reinterpret textual inconsistencies as politically meaningful or instructive symptoms.²⁷ What was considered a flaw before now became a source of insight. But what insight can be gained from textual inconsistencies and contradictions? Or, to put it differently: what is the political meaning of textual

inconsistencies and contradictions? Basically, there are two answers. One is to consider discrepancies, ruptures, or inner tensions as a source of resistance through which the text undermines norms of order, coherence, rationality, etc. The other is to see them as inner contradiction that reflects the strain of ideological adjustment. In keeping with general developments, the first view is gradually replaced by the second in recent theories of the early American novel.

The first sustained consideration of the subversive power of textual inconsistencies in the early American novel and, in that sense, the earliest "revisionist" approach to it, is Leslie Fiedler's idiosyncratic and willfully iconoclastic theory of American literature in his *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Although the book is directed against the new critical orthodoxy, it still stands in a tradition of literary criticism in which "great" literature is the only authentic source of social rebellion. What distinguishes Fiedler's argument from other versions of this argument, however, is his version of what makes literature "great," namely the power of expressing unconscious, anti-bourgeois urges. From this point of view, sentimental novels like *Charlotte Temple* and, even more so, *The Coquette* provide examples of a tame, degraded Richardsonianism.²⁸ *The Power of Sympathy*, on the other hand, makes "a serious bid to enter the lists of literature" (116), because, in introducing the subject of incest, Brown's book "studies the strange, sometimes fatal attractions which move us beyond the power of will" (123).²⁹ Ultimately, the book is divided, it "finally equivocates in a way not untypical of the later American novel, hanging onto not the best but the worst of two possible worlds: the smugness of liberal gentility and the factitious sensationalism of anti-bourgeois sentimentality" (124). Its inner division is a sign of an inner struggle and thus of an opening to unconscious drives which, for Fiedler, is the mark of true literature. Hence the—from today's point of view—amazing fact that he dismisses *The Coquette* in a few sentences and spends almost ten pages on an interpretation of *The Power of Sympathy*.

Fiedler's cultural reading of inner tensions of the early American novel is not a "formal" one. But it appeals to the authority of our experience with the text. Textual contradictions are attributed to a culturally instructive indecisiveness in which the paralyzing effects of a degraded,

"genteel" sentimentalism manifest themselves.³⁰ However, this inner tension provides a novel like *The Power of Sympathy* with a dimension of experience that other novels in the same tradition lack. In this sense, inner tensions make literature interesting, even potentially subversive. For Fiedler, this subversive power derives from the liberation of the unconscious which literature makes possible. *Edgar Huntly* "is a charmingly, a maddeningly disorganized book, not so much written as dreamed, but it convinces the reader, once he has been caught up in the fable, of its most utter improbabilities; for its magic is not the hocus-pocus of make-believe, but the irrational reality of the id" (157). Beneath its inconsistencies, then, the novel has a principle of organization; the inconsistencies are, in fact, the price for giving expression to psychic and mythic needs that must otherwise remain hidden and repressed. In this sense, the novel's lack of organization is "meaningful": the meaning is provided by a subtext to which the "disorganized" surface draws our attention. Recently, Ann Douglas has extended this argument to *Charlotte Temple*:

But the greatest works of American fiction, whether verbally complex or crude, would swerve, as *Charlotte Temple* swerved, into the realm of "subliterate myth." One thinks of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth's *Retribution* (1849), Herman Melville's *Pierre* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)—texts that, like *Charlotte*, strain and swell and crack with their inability to escape from incestuous symbiosis into adult individuation, an inability to break a family paradigm that strangles and seduces maturation from its goal. (xlii)

Fiedler and Douglas describe the early American novel as being (fortunately) in the grip of dark, unconscious forces which the authors themselves cannot grasp. Where any of these early novels stand out, a subliterate myth has successfully broken through the thin genteel veneer. This cannot satisfy Davidson, who wants to describe the early American novel, and especially the much-maligned sentimental tale of seduction, as politically progressive, not only on the level of content but also on that of its textual organization. Davidson's *Revolution and the Word* is therefore the by far most text-oriented of all recent theories and large-scale assessments of the early American novel. In a chapter with the title "A Novel Divided Against Itself," she approaches the problem

of "obvious incongruities and disjunctions" in a novel like *The Power of Sympathy* and attempts to describe these not as effect of a textual unconscious but as the result of a struggle between two conflicting goals. On the one hand, there is the novel's obvious didactic purpose, on the other, "far from adhering to this worthy program," subplots and digressions "center on subjects ranging from rape to slavery and become progressively more morally complicated and morally obscure" (99). In fact, at a closer look, the "moral discourse" and "novel discourse" are not the only "types or models of discourse" in the novel, so that, in the end, "the opening disharmonious duet has picked up a whole cacophonous chorus" (101). In a "characteristically American tone" (101), the author has become a *bricoleur*, trying his hand at this and that. However, to read the novel as mere bricolage or cacophony of voices cannot be in the interest of Davidson's larger argument. Thus, in the following chapter she goes back to the political meaning of the novel and finds it surprisingly unequivocal:

The novel is also a surprisingly subtle anatomy of seduction and insists upon the relevance of seduction to the whole moral fiber of the new American nation. More particularly, *The Power of Sympathy* attests that the very mechanism of seduction signifies a grossly unequal distribution of social power and social worth, imbalances that should be corrected in a country purporting to be a republic. (107–08)

For Davidson, the inner division of *The Power of Sympathy* "runs so deep that at times it almost seems as if we have two distinct and even contradictory discourses, a didactic essay and a novel, shuffled together and bound as one book" (99). In Davidson's reading, the novel discourse articulates the claims of the individual against official moral doctrine.³¹ For Gilmore, too, it is *The Coquette's* "undeniable sympathy for the heroine" (632) that creates a tension in the novel: "Foster's anti-individualistic message is at variance with her book's openness to subjectivity and desire. The novel as coquette struggles against the novel as teacher" (633). In contrast to Davidson, however, this articulation of individual needs presents not a political promise but a political problem, because it supports "the novel's growing commitment to individualism" (628) and thus contributes to the novel's move away from communal republican culture.³² Innertextual tensions are thus no longer a sign of resistance but of possible co-optation and surrender. Consequently, Rice,

in taking up Gilmore's suggestion, reads the image of the coquette as metaphor for the fate of public, civic-minded writing in the early republic. For him, "the idea of the republican novel as a 'coquette' is a powerful insight into the peculiar structure of early American prose fiction," because the coquette is

a young flirt who entices an audience but does not follow through with the promise. . . . What better trope to describe the efforts of early American authors who found they had to identify with bourgeois readers at the same time they lectured to and chastised them? And what better description of the divided nature of the early American novel, which both wanted to teach, and was compelled to seduce, its readership? (161–62)

In this reading, the image of the coquette points to a conflict within the American writer who faces the pressures of an advancing market capitalism and its tendency toward co-optation. Because Gilmore and Rice see the idea of individual liberation as sell-out to a liberal illusion, the political meaning of innertextual tensions is now completely reversed: they no longer keep the possibility of subversion open; rather, they represent a struggle to neutralize the issue by evading it:

In short, the novel suspended allure and rejection, flattery and repudiation, in one erotic and apparently indecisive dance. The deportment of the modern author was to be, from the early Republic on, that of the playful but serious coquette, and even Kani's liberal claim about the nature of modern art—that it is "purposiveness without purpose"—would appear to have some of its origins in this sociological dynamic. (Rice 171–72)

Innertextual tensions do not indicate resistance. They signal compromise and adjustment.³³

The more critics agree—as they do in recent, "post-Davidson" discussions—that, politically speaking, the importance of the early American novel lies in illustrating (or even advancing) a loss of republican values, the more they tend to interpret innertextual tensions mimetically. As supporting actor in a grand historical drama, the novel is part of a discursive system and not primarily of interest as an individual text. This does not mean that critics cease to see several levels and sources of meanings in the text. Since the early American novel is seldom explicitly political, it is still necessary to refer to a second level which carries the actual political meaning. But the relation between textual surface and political subtext is no longer one of tension or contradiction. It is now homologous. Since literary representation parallels political

representation for Ziff, the early American novel can “embody” politically significant meanings. If one knows the political subtext, one also knows the “true” meaning of the textual surface which functions as mere “vehicle” of the political meaning. It is easy to see, then, that seduction really stands for something else, namely the possibility of deception in market relations. For Rice, the “story of Eliza Wharton is the tale of what happens to the interpersonal behavior of individuals when human relations begin to take on the characteristics of commodity exchange” (165). For Gilmore, the new post-republican “aesthetic paradigm” is “congruent with liberal ideology and economic individualism” (555). For Watts,

an inchoate yet pervasive crisis of representation accompanied the rise of market society in early modern Anglo-America. . . . This liquid cultural world, where meanings were there for the making, was clearly reflected in an equally fluid new literary form. . . . As cultural journals of growing social and epistemological fluidity,

early American novels “comprised a ‘liminoid genre . . . enacting the liminal experience of the boundaryless market’” (20–22). Similarly, in Warner’s reading of *Arthur Mervyn*, the inner tensions of the text are now interpreted in terms of homology:

. . . I do not claim that *Arthur Mervyn* is a text unified by the context of republican discourse. What seems most interesting is the way its internal shifts reproduce the contradictions between republican print discourse and a liberal-national imaginary. These contradictions are just what make Brown’s novel illustrative of its contemporaries. The novel as a genre articulated a troubled divide in the culture. (170)³⁴

Despite different political positions, recent political criticism is amazingly alike methodologically. The difference lies in the politics, not in the ways it is represented in literature. Generally speaking, there is a strong tendency toward mimetic readings. For Davidson, even a quixotic satire like Tabitha Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* has “a hard core of realism—and it does not paint a very pretty picture of women’s lives” (*Revolution* 190).³⁵ For Rubin-Dorsky, who wants to prove the insufficiency of the political critique of the early American novel, the inconsistencies of the sentimental novel stand for the lack of a coherent critique of American society, so that literary structure (or rather the lack of it) becomes a form of social analysis. Plots become the main carrier of meaning: “Eliza passively giving herself to her seducer, falling into sin,

and, inevitably, death, only reinforces the codes that Foster has in other ways tried to subvert" (18).³⁶ Endings are read literally: "Thus, if many early novels end unhappily, it may be because they acknowledge the sad reality of marriage for many women" (Davidson, *Revolution* 123). In short, novels are now seen (and judged) as models of right or wrong political behavior. Thus, "the villain's final discomfiture may inoculate [*sic*] the reader against following his course" (Davidson, *Revolution* 236). Consequently, Rubin-Dorsky asks: "If, after everything Montraville has done to disgrace and humiliate Charlotte, she can still declare her love for him, what kind of model has Rowson provided those readers whom she had previously roused to anger and indignation?" (19). Davidson's justification for such mimetic readings is that "the reader of the early national period read mimetically" (*Revolution* 262). Where does this leave later readers? Should they read these novels as nothing but historical documents? Davidson's answer—to claim these novels' "perpetual present" (262)—highlights the premise that underlies all political criticism of the early American novel: the assumption of a systemic link between past and present. Because we still live in the same social system, the early American novel's mode of signification is still meaningful to us today.

The most important methodological consequence of this assumption is that one can take any theme, motif or narrative element at will and declare it to be the signifier of a hidden political subtext. Since literary and political representation are shaped by one systemic logic, one element is sufficient to represent the system as a whole. But the problem with an approach that attempts to justify a novel as truthful representation of reality is that different elements of the novel may present different realities: a female heroine may signal empowerment, her "fall" may confirm the triumph of middle-class conformity, but it may also be read as an indictment of middle-class conformity and so on.³⁷ In this way, any textual aspect can become a metonymy of "reality," depending on the interpreter's political views and convictions. This, in fact, is the reason why political readings can vary so widely in their interpretations. Since the textual surface is considered only as vehicle for the political subtext, detailed innertextual contextualization is theoretically irrelevant. The characteristic mode of substantiation is metonymic. A chosen textual

element "stands for" reality. However, this mode of authorization can work either way. It can be used to make a claim for the subversive function of the early American novel and its "realism," but also for the opposite claim: "A point is soon reached at which almost anything can be praised for its subversiveness or damned for its vulnerability to cooptation, for there is always some discursive frame of reference that will support either description" (Carton and Graff 435). If there seems to be no way to distinguish between more and less plausible versions, however, the consequence is a political voluntarism in which critics project those political meanings into the early American novel that best suit their needs.

Different politics produce different interpretive needs and narratives. While the feminist Davidson wants to affirm a belief in the possibility of political empowerment, the—often vaguely Marxist—co-optation-and-containment critics want to stress the all-pervasive power of the capitalist system by emphasizing that it is always stronger (and more cunning) than any of its individual dissenters, for only in this way can a forceful case be made for the futility of reform and the necessity of fundamental political change. The two approaches stand for the two major options current political criticism has: either to start from an oppressed or marginalized group and to discuss its potential for dissent and empowerment, or to start with an analysis of the power effect of the system in order to point out how it disenfranchises certain groups and co-opts, contains and neutralizes their dissent. The first option is ideally suited to argue for a subversive and empowering function of culture, the second for pointing out the all-embracing power of the system. The first provides a political justification of movement-politics, the second provides reasons why radical political dissent in America has found so little response in the larger political arena.

There is no possibility of arriving at an informed choice between the two positions on the basis of their actual interpretations of the early American novel, because these interpretations are hardly more than the projection of a prior political conviction, so that one and the same phenomenon can stand for entirely different political meanings, depending on the political goals of the interpreter. For Davidson, the sorry fate of the sentimental heroine represents a certain degree of realism, for Watts,

this "realism" is nothing but a clever instrument for neutralizing dissent. For Jordan, a genre like the picaresque novel is conservative, for Davidson it is subversive, for Rubin-Dorsky it hangs somewhere in between and is by far not radical enough, for Rice the prescient Brackenridge is a predecessor of Adorno's critique of the culture industry. For one group, the early novel's adherence to republican values is its ideological problem, because these values are considered "conservative"; for the other group, this adherence to republicanism is the saving element in a genre suspected of being in collusion with liberal individualism.³⁸ But even where critics share similar models of political change, difference is all that counts. Jordan and Davidson, for example, both argue on the basis of a model of individual liberation and should thus be able to agree on the role of a writer like Brackenridge. However, for Jordan real liberation only begins in the Romantic period, while for Davidson, the whole point is that it already manifests itself in the early American novel. It seems that in the current critical climate nobody is interested in solving these disputes. The main interest is in finding yet another opening for another strong claim about the political meaning of the early American novel.

Wherever, in discussions of recent theories of the early American novel, one searches for an answer to the question which one of the theories and interpretations is the more plausible, one is referred back to the different political analyses and politics underlying these approaches. Thus, the solution would seem to be to extend these discussions to the question of how convincing these politics and their political analyses are. At present, this poses a problem, however, since politically speaking, the political analyses anchoring current theories of the early American novel are sketchy at best. They are characterized by rather sweeping claims, operating with broad terms such as republicanism, liberalism, individualism, privatization, market capitalism, bourgeoisie and the nation-state which remain on the level of shorthand assertions about the true nature of American society. There are sweeping theories about the transition of American society to "modernity" implied here, but they are never spelled out. There is no reference to existing theories of modernity (with the exception of an occasional reference to Lukács, Adorno/ Horkheimer and, of course, the Habermas of *The Structural Transformation*

of the Public Sphere). There is no attempt to explain the paradox that a whole society has so willingly accepted modernity, although its meaning and net result seems to be political disenfranchisement.³⁹ Without such a context of discussion, however, it is hard to compare an analysis resting on the term "patriarchy" with one resting on concepts of the market. However, it is also clear that there is presently no interest in such comparisons of political claims and their integration into a more comprehensive theory of social development which would be able to account for the gains and losses of the historical transition to "modernity." The reason, I think, is that such a frame of reference would complicate the grand narrative of loss that underlies current criticism of the early American novel.⁴⁰ Recent theories of the early American novel have created a democratic Eden before the fall into capitalism in order to account for the painful obsolescence of their own political views and to explain their lack of resonance. In this sense, these theories have become hibernating places for a politics of leftist nostalgia.

Current political theories of the early American novel raise an interesting methodological question. For in response to my plea for a theory of modernity as indispensable context for a political criticism of early American literature, one could argue that such a theory of the "whole" is no longer possible under postmodern conditions. There are two possible answers to this "postmodern" objection: 1) The issue of a comprehensive theory may not be openly addressed in recent political theories of the early American novel. But such a theory is nevertheless always implied. Key concepts such as patriarchy or the marketplace are supposed to describe fundamental structural characteristics that shape all aspects of American society in the early republic and beyond. 2) Even if a theory of "the whole" is no longer possible, it would still be necessary to compare one's own political analysis with other claims about the same period in order to evaluate these competing claims in comparison. At present, the two dominant positions, a feminist and an openly or tacitly Marxist one, contradict each other. Because they remain unrelated, however, they can still imply that they provide an analysis of American society as a whole. Thus, current political criticism lives in the best of possible worlds: it can authorize itself by the tacit claim that it provides a representative analysis of American society without actually having to

demonstrate this. There comes a point, however, where a political criticism should justify itself by more than just being the antithesis of aesthetics, where it needs to take its own challenge seriously and go beyond the mere sketch of a political analysis. However, perhaps it is not really the goal of current political criticism to be political. Perhaps, it just wants to be critical of the system, and the word "politics" is only a new term for a familiar anti-bourgeois attitude. At present, at least, it is hardly more.

Notes

1. In most cases, and especially in traditional approaches, discussions of the early American novel do not contain explicit or fully worked-out theories of the genre. However, consciously or unwittingly, they cannot but base their argument on an underlying theory, that is, a body of assumptions about why we should study this material, what its significance is, what methods should be used in order to understand its meaning and so on. For example, statements about the early American novel cannot be made without certain presuppositions about the nature of American society, the role of literature, and the specific potential of the novel.

2. This kind of thinking explains the one exception that is usually made in the contempt shown for the early American novel, a respectful nod to Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (in a few cases, also to Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*). In both cases, the satirical mode is the saving ingredient because it already indicates distance to childish naiveté.

3. Martin's argument presents the flip side of the dominant theories of American literature in the 1950s and 1960s in which rebellion against that official American ideology manifests itself in an indirect, ambiguous mode of literary representation. Since the early American novel is still far removed from that symbolic mode, it cannot, by definition, belong to the camp of nonconformist "nay-sayers" and provides an example of the other side, a culture of conformism.

4. For a comparable approach, see Terence Martin's book *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction*.

5. In typical formalist fashion, the book's meaning is provided by its structure in this essay: "If Brown's book finally means anything, promotes any ultimate moral vision, it is one which derives from the structure and conclusion of his novel. Life's too complex for didactic lessons, too painful for self-flattering sensitivity. Neither suffices" (27). Davidson's argument has the purpose of liberating Brown from the stigma of inartistic moralism and sentimentality: "*The Power of Sympathy* is not so unremittingly moralistic as it at first might appear. And just as Brown undercuts his seeming didacticism, so too does he temper his seeming sentimentality" (18). In an essay on *The Power of Sympathy*, published in 1973, Robert Arner had already tried to show that "the novel is considerably more complex than is commonly thought" and had claimed that "in specific ways—its ambivalent response to passion, its representation of the 'sins of the fathers' theme and the problem of evil, and its Edenic imaginary—it looks forward to the later works of Nathaniel Hawthorne." For Arner, *The Power of Sympathy* "deserves to be linked with Hawthorne's novels as a book that, in testifying to the power of sympathy, also testifies to the even greater power of blackness" (131).

6. The whole passage is worth quoting: "One reason for the ineffectiveness

of many early American novels is their ceaseless dissection of the emotions of immature persons who seem to have no mental life whatever. Novelists wrote as if their whole vocation were endless agitation. Incredible situations were set up by crude and arbitrary methods in order that the 'heart' of the heroine might be studied with cardiographical exactness. Understanding such 'lessons' as they administered called for no greater cerebration than reading the *New England Primer*. Before the novel could grow up it badly needed some development of its intellectual content. This it received particularly at the hands of three writers during the first decade of its growth, Gilbert Imlay, Royall Tyler, and Hugh H. Brackenridge" (Cowie 38).

7. Such views can still be found in Ferguson's study *Law and Letters in American Culture*, which describes Trumbull, Tyler, and Brackenridge as "the first realists in American literature" and praises their "sardonic brand" of social criticism: "If their works stood virtually alone at the end of the eighteenth century, it was because all three writers resisted the prevailing 'school of sensibility.' Novels like Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* and Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* ran counter to the popular story of feeling and susceptibility dominating early American fiction. The lawyer-writer wanted to control passions, not to stimulate them. Moreover, 'diligent observation of all that is passing' encouraged descriptive narrative and anecdotal reportage rather than emotional intricacy or stock romance. In tying his craft so closely to social realities, the lawyer-writer often sacrificed aesthetic considerations, but the same priority made him rummaging through experience with peculiar intensity" (97-98). In the following chapter, Charles Brockden Brown is depicted in the heroic struggle between social respectability and the search for creative expression.

8. Cf. Klaus Hansen's criticism of Davidson's argument: "Davidson's view of his [Worthy's] advice as exaggerated and ineffective does not derive from the novel but from the value system of a twentieth-century interpreter who simply cannot imagine people being that square" (43).

9. There is one problem, though, which Davidson never addresses: if the sentimental novel reflected the reality of women's lives so accurately, why did it disappear so quickly after 1800?

10. See, for example, the following characterization of the importance of *The Power of Sympathy*: "The self-dramatized apologia of men like the Honorable Mr. Harrington who grieve over past failures is juxtaposed with the melodrama of young men and women deranged by grief. We have the whole paraphernalia of sentimental fiction—women who die in health, self-inflicted or mere self-willed death, insanity. This is the focus of the fiction, and it is also precisely what was happening around the corner at one of the best addresses in Boston. That countergrounding in 'truth' makes all the difference. It should make any reader—especially the modern one conditioned by the so-called sexual revolution—question the usual condescending tone with which critics typically deal with seduction novels. *The Power of Sympathy* is not a tale of seduction

telling the women that they should have been more careful. It is more a condemnation of men like Martin/Morton and the Honorable Mr. Harrington and also of those such as Mrs. Holmes or the Reverend Holmes who supported the authority of a Martin or a Mr. Harrington and defended their acts—the low-level Adamases and Bowdoins of the novel" (*Revolution* 105).

11. In her reading of *Charlotte Temple*, Eva Cherniavsky, whose main inspiration is Derrida, puts the emphasis on the melodramatic element and suggests "that melodrama's essentialization of the maternal as origin needs to be read, not only for its contribution to the emergent ideology of the bourgeois nuclear family, but also as the contestation of a specific refusal of history that grounds this liberal order. Thus I propose that *Charlotte Temple* inscribes on Charlotte's material body, (retroactively) conceived as pre-text, as embodied origin(al), the historical contingency that the emergent political order disavows" (36). As Cherniavsky makes clear in several critical comments on Davidson's work, this should not be seen as successful subversion, however, but as reenactment of a systemic limitation that has inscribed itself into Rowson's novel: "*Charlotte Temple* at once assumes and contests a portion of the history that renders women unrepresentative of 'the general interest' by (re)constituting them as a political body—which is to say, by retracing the limits of the representable" (37).

12. Mobility is an important precondition for this turn toward the political: "As we have seen, the circumscription of the female character within the domestic sphere constitutes a defining feature of sentimental fiction. In contrast, the picaresque novel defines itself by its own mobilities—formalistic and on the level of plot and characters, too. The picaresque hero can comment upon slavery, class disturbances, party politics, and different immigrant groups precisely because his travels carry him into encounters with diverse segments of the population and across those dividing lines that mark out the contours of the society" (Davidson, *Revolution* 179).

13. See the following key passage: "Although the American novel would soon become respectable (and perhaps lose some of its oppositional edge with age and respectability), its original, lowly status virtually assured that it would early speak for those also marginalized by American society as a whole" (*Revolution* 258).

14. Rubin-Dorsky, on the other hand, criticizes Davidson's concept of marginalized voices as not radical, that is, multicultural enough: "And the American novel would not truly become 'American' until the politically disenfranchised and culturally dispossessed of American society were finally heard in the pages of our literature" (25).

15. Several feminist critics make similar points. Wendy Martin, for example, claims that early novels "conditioned women to accept this economic reality [their dependence on the husband] by encouraging them to lead the kind of lives which would enable them to make a good marriage—that is, a financially

respectable match. . . . The domestic novel, as Watt indicates, provided women with a strong supporting ideology in their new roles as helpmates and culture-bearers" (6). For Jan Lewis, "tales such as *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette* may be considered as not very subtle warnings to young women without dowries that their value lay in their virginity; if they would be sought after on the marriage market, they must keep that commodity intact. The sentimental tale of seduction thus has been seen as an instrument of bourgeois respectability and middle-class conformity" (715).

16. This view leads to an interesting disagreement between Davidson and Rubin-Dorsky in the reading of a novel like *The Power of Sympathy*. In contrast to Davidson, Rubin-Dorsky insists that, "as much as Brown may have wanted to defend the victimized, helpless woman, virtually powerless in a society where she was viewed as another form of property, he leaves too many unanswered questions about her possible complicity in the unsavory event of seduction. Ophelia may be innocent, even virtuous, yet she is seduced by her *sister's* husband and in her *sister's* house. There are no psychological clues to this puzzle Seduction may well be a subject that points toward the gross abuse of social power by men of privilege and position, but it is also a titillating one, and Brown has not found a way to negotiate this dangerous issue satisfactorily" (16).

17. "Demonstrate" is an ambiguous term in this context, because it leaves open the possibility that sentimental and domestic fiction, with which Samuels is primarily concerned, "reveal" this complicity openly and are thus very much aware of it. But the remainder of the essay leaves no doubt that the novel merely reenacts larger discursive changes: "In a brief essay on the history of government and the family, Michel Foucault argues that the eighteenth century witnessed a major shift from a concept of family as a 'model' or analogue of government to a concept of the family as an 'instrument' of government. The shift from model to instrument, or rather to model *as* instrument, means that the family as separate and private becomes an instrument of governmental measures of social control even as the separateness of the family from these measures is insisted upon. In other words, it is the very difference between public and private, the difference maintained between the institution and the family, that enables the family to function as part of the institution" (388). Consequently, the description of the family as a 'haven' in sentimental and domestic fiction "assists the functioning of the family as a relay of the very social and economic values the family is defined 'against'" (388). See also Samuels's introductory statement: "I want particularly to consider here how the very difference maintained between 'the home' and 'the world' in early nineteenth-century domestic fiction might make the home a functioning part of that sphere to which it seems to be opposed" (381). In order to support such sweeping claims, the categories "domestic fiction" and "sentimental novel" are used almost interchangeably in this essay.

18. For a more detailed analysis of these two basic options of current political criticism, cf. my essay on "Literature, Liberalism, and the Current Cultural

Radicalism."

19. For Ziff, this division "made authorship as profession possible, but it also signaled a turn away from revolutionary, republican idealism" (xi).

20. This claim is illustrated by a reading of *Arthur Mervyn* which has become the major text of Brown in the new revisionism because of its obvious usefulness for social analysis and social commentary: "*Arthur Mervyn* (1799) is that novel of Brown's in which the issue of the truth of self-representation most fully absorbs both the manner and matter of the work" (Ziff 77).

21. See the following key passage of the book: "Through the new constitutionalism, the metapolitics of print discourse became entrenched as an ideology of legitimate power. If this is a way of saying that the modern state commits a kind of fraud in claiming to represent the people and their law, it is no simple fraud. For the fraud is only the pretense that representational democracy derives its legitimacy from the people and their law, when in fact it performs what it claims to describe. A way of representing the people constructs the people" (Warner xiv).

22. Arguing with another view (unless it is criticized as complicit political position) has gone out of fashion in recent American criticism. There are usually a few polite or moderately critical references in order to signal that one is aware of the other critic's existence, but beyond that there is no attempt to integrate or refute other arguments. I have two explanations for this development: one is that in the current academic system influence and power are essentially established by professional networks, so that being too critical can have far-reaching consequences (and is only in order in the power struggle between networks). On the other hand, the decontextualization of one's own argument can make that argument stand out as more "original" and unique.

23. Cf. the following passage: "After all, the republican novel—ambiguous in its emphasis on sentiment, sensation, and anarchy—seemed to have no overt didactic purpose; yet its constitutive parts appeared to be so important and inextricably related that they intimated a moral intent nevertheless. What better precursor for what William Charvat has described as the transformation in critical thought brought about the development of the autonomous category of the 'literary' in the early years of the nineteenth century, whereby injunctions that narrative in print be didactic and political gave way to the more individualistic prescriptions for ambiguity and symbolism made by the proponents of romanticism" (Rice 172).

24. In the case of Rice, this premise is carried to its absurdity when Brackenridge emerges as one of America's greatest social critics, a predecessor, in fact, of Adorno!

25. The problem with this premise does not lie in the assumption that literary texts provide meaning through their form but in the narrow description of formal aspects in terms of contextualist notions of wholeness and organic unity.

26. Several recent critics have pointed out that Davidson's "new perception

of the social relevance of the sentimental novel as a way for women to deal with their own reality is a decisive methodological step" (Hansen 40). But, surely, the sentimental novel also offers a specific mode of dealing with these realities. The term "sentimental novel," after all, points to a particular mode of experience. How do these two aspects affect one another? Does the social relevance cancel the sentimentality? Does the sentimental model reinforce the social relevance?

27. I am using the term "textual inconsistencies" here as shorthand for a variety of terms such as inner tension, inner division, contradiction, incongruity, irresoluteness, disjunction, discrepancies, ruptures, or formal flaws that have all been used to describe shortcomings in the communication of meaning in the early American novel.

28. For Fiedler, this degraded Richardsonianism is to blame for the major shortcoming of American literature, namely the fact "that in the United States, well up into the twentieth century, no novelists, however committed and talented, could treat the relations of the sexes without falling prey to . . . sentimentality and falsehood." Only by bypassing the depiction of "normal heterosexual love as a subject" could American writers escape this unfortunate influence. For Fiedler, as for other critics of the post-War period, this state of things is a symptom of the continuous immaturity of American society.

29. Cf. the characterization of Fiedler's reading of *The Power of Sympathy* by Hansen: "In contrast to the happy world where feeling and reason were in harmony. . . . Brown posited an ambiguous and threatening concept of nature which also contained the destructive magnetism of incest. In Brown's novel as Fiedler sees it, the spiritual desire for order is destroyed by physical drives, and the anarchist Fiedler is thrilled" (42-43).

30. A tamer version of this argument is provided by William Spengemann in *The Adventurous Muse*, in which he discusses some early American novels in terms of subversive "antidomestic forces" at work in them and attributes the inner tension of the texts to a variety of sources, above all, however, to an indecisiveness toward the domestic ethos on the part of the writers.

31. In this context, Davidson's interpretation of *The Coquette* is of special interest to determine the exact nature of the relationship between "realism" and "textual contradiction." In her attempt to claim a politically progressive dimension for the sentimental novel, Davidson argues, as we have seen, for the "social realism" of the genre in which the social situation is represented with surprising accuracy. In the recent critical climate, realism, however, is not automatically equated with subversion. Davidson thus compares the novel's version of the "fall" of Elizabeth Whitman to newspaper versions and praises the novel for being far more complex and non-reductionist. It is one of the merits of the novel, in other words, that it is closer to reality than other sources and discourses: "*The Coquette*, then, is not simply an allegory of seduction. The generic shift from sermon to novel in the Whitman/Wharton narrative entails a concomitant transformation of focus and philosophy. Set within a specific context of limiting mar-

riage laws and restrictive social mores, the novel is less a story of the wages of sin than a study of the wages of marriage. In the realistic world of this fictional account, virtue and virtuous women are not always rewarded" (*Revolution* 143–44). Even Mrs. Richman, "the epitome of republican motherhood in the novel, cannot be permanently happy within her familial sphere. 'I grudge every moment that calls me from the pleasing scenes of domestic life' she writes, soon after the birth of her daughter—who soon afterwards dies, a realistic tempering of the proclaimed cult of domesticity" (144). Yet the term "realistic" is slippery. The novel may present striking cases of "female powerlessness and female constraint" (148) but not always support the interpretation Davidson gives to this fact. Rather, as Davidson has to admit, in its own interpretation the novel is "jumbled" and ultimately conservative. Mrs. Richman, for example, its "progressive," Wollstonecraftian character, advocates Eliza's marriage to Boyer. But it is precisely in this "irresoluteness" that Davidson sees the difference to sermons and tracts. What they prescribe must break down in the novel. This disjunction is the 'opening' that provides the possibility of distance and insight. In its own failure to convincingly represent a conservative message, the novel unwittingly undermines its own ideology and teases the reader "into thought" (148).

32. It seems to be Gilmore's view that this holds especially true for the more daring books of the period, such as *The Coquette*. Thus, "what makes *The Coquette* a compelling reading experience" (632) must also be seen as a token of its politically problematic move toward individualism.

33. In contrast, Cynthia Jordan describes the gradual intrusion of a second level of meaning in *Modern Chivalry* as a breakdown of aesthetic control and, thus, of ideology: "By the end of *Modern Chivalry*, the 'inconvenient data' that were so confidently ridiculed in the opening pages have overridden hero, author, and text alike: the language of social control has failed in its job, and a second story has established itself as an ever-present and ever-growing threat to the revolutionary generation's promotion of a new patriarchal world view" (77).

34. See also the essay on *The Power of Sympathy* by Elizabeth Barnes ("Affecting Relations: Pedagogy, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Sympathy") in which she claims that the novel "locates the conflicts of a newly emerging political body in the individual bodies of its middle-class characters. . . . Thus, put in a cultural context, 'the power of sympathy' refers not only to the power of personal feeling but to the importance of *interpersonal* relations as necessary for the perpetuation of liberal social and political systems" (597–98).

35. See also the following summary by Davidson of her argument: "The ambivalence in the structure and resolution of the early American sentimental novel is not simply a fumbling towards moral and psychological subtlety. These works express a general uncertainty in the larger society of the time" ("Flirting" 24).

36. What seems completely lost in many of these readings is an awareness

of the fact that the reading experience of a novel is not identical with its plot outline.

37. Susan Harris, e.g., sees only an ideology of "obedience to legitimate authority, female passivity, and self-denial" at work in early didactic women's novels such as *Charlotte Temple*. Thus, the formal structures of these novels are not dialogical but "part and parcel of their shifting ideological makeup" (59). Similarly, for McGrath, Rowson, in *Charlotte Temple*, only "reinforces the social *status quo*" (25).

38. The interesting political conflict that opens up at this point is that between feminism on the one hand and tendentially Marxist positions on the other. For the latter, republicanism is a cultural system that is still communal, for the former it is the embodiment of a patriarchal system. See, e.g., Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic."

39. For a more serious discussion of the political premises of recent revisionist theories of the early American novel, it would also be of importance to show an awareness of the pros and cons of the political ideal underlying all analyses of the narrative of loss, that of "participatory democracy."

40. For example, the—unacknowledged—philosophical premises underlying the narrative of loss, the assumption of an "authentic" state before alienation, is, in fact, hard to maintain after the linguistic turn of philosophy and social theory. Another curious consequence of this nostalgia is a sweeping characterization of virtually all post-republican literature as "discourse of imaginative, privatized communication" (Watts 18) which parallels social and economic trends toward individualism, privatization, market ethos, commodification, and the nation-state in its emphasis on imaginary seduction and identification. In view of this division of literary history into periods before and after the "fall," one would like to get a clarification whether the critic really thinks that we have been exposed to nothing but a systemically deformed literature ever since. In striking contrast, Davidson extends the idea of a subversive potential of literature to even "the most 'commoditized' best-seller" at the end of *Revolution and the Word*: "In the intensely personal, secluded world of the imagination even the most 'commoditized' best-seller can assume a special, even intimate, possibly subversive shape" (260).

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Early America Re-Explored

New Readings in Colonial,
Early National,
and Antebellum Culture

Edited by
Klaus H. Schmidt and
Fritz Fleischmann



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