No doubt American life in the colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods was inhospitable to fiction. Religious conviction, pragmatic values, and the hardships of settlement life certainly cooperated to make fiction seem a dispensable if not shameful luxury. No doubt, too, American novelists or would-be novelists in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and beyond continued to have a hard time making a living by writing. But for American readers it appears that novels had carried the day long before 1850.

In July 1827 the North American described the times as an “age of novel writing.” Life before novels was hard to imagine. “We of the present generation can hardly estimate our own good fortune,” the reviewer said. “Thrice blessed is the man who first devised these agreeable fictions. The press daily, nay hourly, teems with works of fiction, of no contemptible quality.” Less cheerfully, it observed in April 1831 that “novels have broken upon us in a deluge.” Throughout the period journals testified that a huge number of novels was available. Knickerbocker in January 1836 referred to the “numerous attempts at novel writing with which the American press has of late been burdened,” and it commented the next month that “the press is at this juncture so prolific in novels, romances, \textit{et id genus omne}, that to give each the time it deserves for a perusal, would not only consume the entire day, but take largely from the hours usually devoted to sleep.” In June 1843 it appealed to its readers, “Think, O think, ye great multitudes of novel-readers that no man can number.”

The New York Review (July 1840) mentioned “floods” of novels. The Ladies’ Repository (April 1843) observed that “this age is most
prolific in works of fiction. Scarcely a newspaper falls under the eye that does not announce the forthcoming of a new novel”; it wrote again (May 1847) that novels “swarm America as did the locusts in Egypt”; and it used the same image two months later: novels “drop down by millions all over our land.” The American Review (April 1843) complained about “tens of thousands of miserably written, and worsely printed novels, that have been floating, in pamphlet form, thick as autumn leaves over the country” and referred more matter-of-factly (October 1848) to the “hundreds of novels, published every year.” The Christian Examiner wrote of a “deluge” of novels “poured upon us from all lands” and again of a “tide” of novels (March 1845, May 1845).

Harper’s library of “select” novels issued its 167th volume in April 1852 (the series eventually exceeded 600 titles). The North American in April 1856 described “heaps of fictitious works which load the shelves of booksellers” and in October of that year echoed Knickerbocker of two decades earlier: “the works of novel writers follow one another in such quick succession, that an immense amount of reading is forced upon those who would keep up with the times in this branch of literature.” In September 1859 the Atlantic noted that the British Museum had accumulated more than twenty-seven thousand novels written since the publication of Waverley. The Christian Examiner for January 1860 began a review essay on novels of the previous year with this summary statement: “novel-reading may be misused, but argument for or against it is quite worn-out and superfluous. The great supply which the last year furnished only proved the demand. In Mr. Carlyle’s phrase, the ‘all devouring fact’ itself has eaten up and quite ended the old palaver of fine objections to it, and of fine defences of it.” It went on to observe that 1859 was “emphatically a novel-writing year, and we hold it a good sign of the times that so many of its fictions are of such excellent quality.”

Though much of this commentary expresses enthusiasm, the language of tide, flood, deluge, and inundation also suggests uneasiness. The novel phenomenon caught reviewers by surprise. Not only was it a new form, it was a popular one; and it was an unprecedented cultural event for the masses to be determining the shape of culture. To follow the public instead of leading it, to surrender critical judgment to the extent of permitting a low literary mode to assume cultural significance, involved
critics in new and difficult professional decisions. But the tide, as their language expressed it, really could not be resisted, because successful authorship depended on selling, and novels were what the public was buying.

There are references throughout the reviews to the public appetite for novels. A writer in the North American for October 1823 remarked that “a Waverley novel once or twice a year has grown into such a second nature of our intellectual constitutions, that the rising generation must be at a loss to know what their elder brothers and sisters talked about, before such things existed.” “We live in such a novel-reading age,” Knickerbocker said in September 1838, “that every work of romance, possessing more than ordinary excellence, is seized on with avidity, and made popular at once.” Less generously, the Literary World for June 24, 1848, said that “the great vice of the age in literature is the novel. The whole world is mad for this style of writing.” The Ladies’ Repository complained in April 1843 that novels “are devoured by thousands, nay millions, of men, women, and children” and in January 1845 that “the popular reading of the day consists almost entirely in works of fiction.” The Christian Examiner (July 1843) called novels the “favorite reading of the day,” and the North American (December 1849) described them as “the most popular mode of communication with the public.”

In July 1849 the New York Review asserted that “for every single reader of any work purely didactic, a popular story counts its hundreds.” This hardly surprising public preference for novels over lessons is frequently noted and explains in part the qualified endorsement the genre received from reviewers. Those who read novels might not read anything else. According to the Ladies’ Repository for January 1845, “it is romance reading, more than everything else put together, that has so universally corrupted the taste of the present age. If a man writes a book—a work of profound study and solid merit, no body will read it.” The Southern Literary Messenger for September 1849 described novel readers as “an enormous class, who have neither leisure, nor inclination, for graver and more solid studies.” Harper’s (June 1853) observed that “hundreds of readers who would sleep over a sermon, or drone over an essay, or yield a cold and barren assent to the deductions of an ethical treatise, will be startled into reflection, or won to emulation, or roused into effort, by the delineations
they meet with in a tale which they opened only for the amusement of an hour.” The Christian Examiner (September 1855) observed, with reference to Dickens’s *Hard Times* and Gaskell’s *North and South*, that “it is easier to read a novel than to study political economy or theology, and while there are few who are willing to toil along the hard and difficult path of truth, there are thousands ready to lounge along the broad highway.”

Some reviewers claimed that the novel had lowered the level of public taste, but more commonly they recognized that public taste itself was something new, since in prior ages taste had been the prerogative of an elite. Attributing the rise of the novel to the emergence of a large class of new readers, they tended to approach it, if not as a cultural improvement, at least as a cultural opportunity. *North American*, writing on Dumas in January 1843, attributed the popularity of novels to “the increase of the reading public, consequent on the diffusion of education and the cheapness of paper and print.” Six months later, reviewing novels by Fredrika Bremer, it described novel reading as “the most common recreation in civilized lands.” The Democratic Review in July 1846 characterized novels as “a mark of an advanced state of society, as far as the masses of people are concerned.”

In short, the novel was thought to have originated as the chosen reading of the newly literate masses, and its dominant position represented less a change of taste in an existing audience than a change in the makeup of the audience for the written word. “As we read these records of ministerial life,” a reviewer for the Christian Examiner commented on novels concerning ministers, “the mind naturally reverts to olden times. . . . We see at a glance into what entirely new conditions society has fallen. Then the minister made himself felt; he was a man of power; he was far more erudite than those around him; the means of acquiring knowledge was far less than now. . . . The printing press had not achieved its present miracles of art, and public libraries were unknown” (November 1853). The minister-reviewer looks back nostalgically to a social era when books were out of public reach and the ability to own and read them conferred power and prestige. Now, in contrast, the minister is dependent on a reading public that gets its information about ministers from novels. “No department of literature has more direct bearing upon the popular mind than that of fiction” (Sartain’s, September 1850).
If an educated elite was to reassert its role as arbiter of taste, then it had to establish some control over novels, and this effort was described as an attempt to raise their quality. An early statement of this intention appears in the North American for July 1825, in an essay predicting that a new type of novel, focused on ordinary life, would "become exceedingly numerous. . . . A large proportion of them will have a considerable circulation, and consequent influence upon the public opinion, taste, and morals. It follows, further, that it is the duty of reviewers to exercise a strict surveillance over this department of literature . . . . and endeavor to give a beneficial direction to a force, that they cannot resist if they would." Speaking of and to "the wise and the good," the Christian Examiner (July 1843) said, "there is no case in which they are more bound to use their judgments for the benefit of the unwise, the impetuous, the unthinking, the susceptible, than in the scrutiny of the favorite reading of the day." And a reviewer in the Home Journal (March 24, 1855) said, "it is futile to attempt to prevent the young, and many not young, from the perusal of works of fiction. There is a powerful fascination in such productions which ensures to them multitudinous readers in this reading age. . . . Indeed, I question the utility, while I cannot but mark the utter inefficiency, of the wholesale and indiscriminate proscription of fictitious literature by many well-meaning persons. They meet a natural demand in our intellectual natures which must be gratified. They address the imagination, the most powerful and influential faculty of the mind; and, instead of denouncing everything in this class of literature, we should seek rather to select and provide pure and wholesome aliment in this form for the mental appetite of the young."

Reviewers were joined by novelists in this attempt to make better novels. And by January 1860 the Christian Examiner could record some success: "We doubt if readers now-a-days could be content with fiction which serves merely an idle hour's amusement. . . . It is gratifying to find the class of readers on the increase, who, while seeking genial entertainment and recreation from the novelist, will make still larger demands for wholesome sentiment, free and foodful thought, and good impulse to believing the true and doing the right." We should not mistake this praise from a Unitarian journal as referring only to pious, didactic works of fiction by sentimental American women; the remark
occurs in a general review of novels including *The Virginians* and *Adam Bede* as well as works by Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade—major figures by "our" standards as well as those of the day. The reviewer was describing a perceived development in the novel's form: novel readers were becoming more sophisticated and, rather than moving on to more weighty forms of literature, were either welcoming or being persuaded to welcome a more weighty type of novel.

Along with an access of "wholesomeness," another change noted by reviewers was a diversification of subgenres; as "the novel" extended its hegemony it absorbed other types of literature and hence began to fracture internally. The tendency of the age, Graham's wrote in reviewing Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia* in April 1854, was to present everything in novel form. "We have political novels, representing every variety of political opinion—religious novels, to push the doctrines of every religious sect—philanthropic novels, devoted to the championship of every reform—socialist novels, philosophic novels, metaphysical novels, even railway novels. . . . The opponents of novel writing have turned novelists." The Graham's reviewer was not pleased with this development, considering it the proper function of the novelist "to create or imitate individual character, to invent incident, to represent manners, and to convey the cosmopolitan and comprehensive sympathies of the observer of human life." Even these criteria, however, represent an enlargement of expectations for the novel in comparison to pre-Waverley days. That more and more novels written in these years were "serious" seems certain. Otherwise, no writer who aspired to greatness could have cast ambition in the form of a novel. In effect, however, the "serious novel" developed as a subtype of a popular form, and for this to happen the novel had first to establish itself as *the* form of the times.

"Novels are one of the features of our age," Putnam's wrote in October 1854. "We know not what we would do without them. . . . Do you wish to instruct, to convince, to please? Write a novel! Have you a system of religion or politics or manners or social life to inculcate? Write a novel! Would you have the 'world' split its sides with laughter, or set all the damsel in the land a-breaking their hearts? Write a novel! Would you lay bare the secret workings of your own heart, or have you a friend to
whom you would render that office? Write a novel! . . . And lastly, not least, but loftiest . . . would you make money? Then, in Pluto’s and Mammon’s name! Write a novel!” The reference to the novel as a way to wealth is not merely jocular. Discussions of Sir Walter Scott regularly commented on the amount of money his novels made, and clearly the chance of becoming rich as well as famous as a novelist introduced a new element to authorship. Indeed, the novel was responsible for a new idea of professional authorship, and the aspiring novelist, even a “serious” one, launched a career with expectations that owed much to the possibilities of the novel as a popular form.

Accordingly, though uneasiness about the attractiveness of the novel is expressed in many reviews, and though a great many novels were reviewed unfavorably, most summary statements about the novel as a genre are finally favorable. To fly in the face of a clear public preference would be, in America, to doubt “the people,” and this relatively few reviewers were prepared to do, especially in journals that themselves were aspiring to mass circulation. Among the twenty-one publications that make up my pool, only the Methodist Ladies’ Repository took a theoretical position of hostility to the novel as a form.

This Cincinnati-based magazine announced in its second issue (February 1841) that “in some instances a desire has been expressed for some ‘good moral tales’; but such wishes cannot be granted. This periodical must be the vehicle of truth, and not of tales.” In January 1843 it editorialized, “nothing can be more killing to devotion than the perusal of a book of fiction.” In March 1843 it featured an essay on novel reading that linked the love of novels to original sin: “Our mental constitution is originally and naturally diseased. It loves undue excitement.” The measure of a novel’s pernicious effect was precisely the degree to which it afforded pleasure; that which was popular was necessarily pleasurable and necessarily evil. The habit of novel reading would go far not only “to destroy the taste for useful studies, but also to destroy the power of severe mental application.” By giving false pictures of life, novels made readers, especially young women readers, unfit “for the arduous duties and stern realities of life” and also had a tendency “to weaken the barriers of virtue” by “introducing impure scenes and ideas into pure minds.” As we will see, the general campaign to raise the quality of novels
involved an attempt to make them reflect the stern realities of life and hence in effect to make them less pleasurable, and criticisms like this one frequently occur with respect to particular novels. But only the Ladies' Repository condemned the entire genre.

At the same time, the Ladies' Repository constantly testified to the number of novels published and the popularity of the genre by its complaints as well as the frequency with which it published antinovel essays and editorials. And it is with more than a little amusement that one observes the appearance, in 1849, of a serial written by the editor, Rev. B. F. Tefft. This historical work, called The Shoulder-Knot, was thought by everybody but the editor himself to be a novel. “It is certainly gratifying,” he sputtered in December 1849, “to find that there is such a general hostility to fiction, that history itself, if written with a little less than ordinary dullness, excites suspicion. . . . There seem to be some amongst us, and those of some pretensions to knowledge, who do not appear to know when they are reading facts and when fiction. . . . Because the story is somewhat romantic, they can hardly credit it as a reality.” And so on. “To allay all fears, now and for ever, respecting the historical character of our story, we will here plainly say, that we have gathered our materials, by a very extensive course of reading, from more than one hundred volumes of authentic history. . . . If we know what fiction is, we never wrote a word of it in our life, and we never shall.”

Whatever it was, The Shoulder-Knot did the Ladies' Repository good, as Tefft made clear in July 1852 when he announced his resignation from the editorship: “complaint was raised against my Shoulder-Knot articles, and it was roundly but childishly asserted, sometimes by persons of official consequence, and by a great many of no consequence, that a continuance of the series would infallibly break down the work. Well, reader, it is now enough to say, that the series was continued, in the face of a great deal of shallow but mischievous talk; and the result was, that, while my annual gain had then averaged about eleven hundred a year, the next year’s increase was over five thousand names.”

The journal's no longer pure stand against novels was further weakened in the 1850s by the appearance of numerous so-called religious novels that it felt obliged to notice from time to time and found difficult to condemn. And finally, in January 1859, it reviewed a novel called The Methodist at great length and with a
full critical vocabulary. "It may be thought, however, rather a bold step, and perhaps some will say an ill-advised one, to attempt to use the emotional exercises of religion, and their various manifestations, to give interest to a romance, and to employ Methodist class meeting, love-feasts, and revivals as the machinery of a novel. But this our author has done—with all gravity and good taste—without cant or bombast or sickly sentimentalisms—and done it successfully." The issue is no longer whether religion can accommodate the novel, but whether the novel can accommodate religion.

So much for the Ladies' Repository, to which I have devoted this space in order to give voice to the antinovel faction in reviews of this era. It was joined by other sectarian journals, of smaller circulation; and certainly segments of the populace remained opposed to novel reading throughout the period. But in all the other periodicals in my sample, only a handful of attacks on the novel as a type can be found, and all of them before 1850. In the Unitarian Christian Examiner for March 1845 there is a jab at "that kind of literature of which so large a proportion is worthless, and a larger still detrimental," but this occurs in a favorable review of Fredrika Bremer's novels. Another essay in the Christian Examiner (May 1845) attacks cheap literature, primarily fiction, but insists "it is impossible we should be understood in these remarks as deprecating all works of imagination; pronouncing them all deleterious and immoral; opening a crusade against the whole department of fictitious composition"; rather, the complaint is only against "the abuse of this department." Another essay (January 1847) starts out as a pure attack on novels as such: "it is surprising that so many, even of the influential and conscientious, are apparently insensible to these appalling dangers; surprising, that parents and teachers of the young do not discern the sure process of corruption which goes on, under the ministry of reckless novelists, in the heart of our community." But after this opening, the essay becomes a conscientious review of seventeen current novels, many of which it praises. And though, to be sure, the Christian Examiner always preferred novels full of morality and uplift, this is the last attack on novels as such in its pages.

In the nonsectarian publications, hostility is even sparser. The Southern Literary Messenger wrote in February 1842 of the "pernicious influence of this fascinating species of productions" but
limited its criticism to “highly wrought fictions,” the forerunner of the “sensation novel” of the late 1850s and 1860s. In July 1843, in a review otherwise favorable to novels, the *North American* described the taste for novels as unhealthy. The *American Review* complained in May 1845 that novels “have done more than all other causes combined to corrupt our taste, and degenerate our literature.” The *Literary World* for December 16, 1847, argued that, though the genre had possibilities, when one assigned literary rank by the “ordinary and average products” of a form, then “novel-writing, a field that lies open to all, and whose fruits may be gathered with less of labor and previous tillage than any other kind, is so overrun with the poorer sort of laborers, that it seems impossible to set much store by it.” Note the class implications of this comment. Novels are easier to write than other forms because the genre has fewer rules to learn and master. Thus anybody can write one. Produced by the people as well as for them, the novel’s origins destine it for artistic mediocrity.

Few journals were willing to adopt the antidemocratic view expressed in the *Literary World*. The novel form was much more frequently praised than censured, and it was praised for many accomplishments. The favorable note sounds as early as the second year of the *North American Review*’s publishing history; in July 1816 it wrote that modern novels (in which “fiction is brought home to daily occurrences and observations”) “give the reader more freedom and play, than he is allowed in any other kind of composition.” Reviewing the Waverley novels in April 1831, it rhapsodized that the novel “will embrace all that man ever did, and all that man ever knew; nothing is above it nor beneath it; it includes with perfect ease and gracefulness all varieties of science, information, profession, and character; and as it does not restrain or oppress the writer, it is not likely to change, except by improvement.” In connection with Cooper’s novels (January 1838) it stated simply, “to write a good novel, we hold to be one of the highest efforts of genius.” “The novel, indeed,” it said in a review of *Dombey and Son* (October 1849), “is one of the most effective, if not most perfect forms of composition, through which a comprehensive mind can communicate itself to the world, exhibiting, as it may, through sentiment, incident, and character, a complete philosophy of life, and admitting a dramatic and narrative expression of the abstract principles of ethics,
metaphysics, and theology. Its range is theoretically as wide and deep as man and nature. . . . It is the most difficult of all modes of composition.” “The successful novel of the present day is strictly a work of art” (October 1856); “fiction has become more and more an art” (October 1859).

Other periodicals took the same line. The New York Mirror (April 16, 1836), listing the most eminent contemporary writers in England and America, named eighteen novelists out of a total of thirty writers. On December 28, 1839, it said, “that species of invention which alone could body forth the infinite variety of modern society—the novel—requires much peculiar to its period, and all that the mind has ever possessed of original power.” The association of the novel with the age recurs in other journals. “The novel is the characteristic literary effort of the present age. It is more. It is its creature and impression” (Southern Literary Messenger, May 1854). “The man, who shall build in living literature a monument of this teeming nineteenth century, will find the novel a far fitter form of structure than the poem” (Putnam’s, March 1855).

More universal claims were made for novels and novelists by many critics. “Fiction has exercised an important influence over the public from the earliest ages of the world. . . . It will not do to despise that which is so indestructible, and which everywhere exercises such powerful influence” (Graham’s, May 1848). The Democratic Review in February 1852 described fiction as “a department of literature in which it is as honorable as it is difficult to excell” and referred to the “superiority of prose fictions over all other kinds of literature, in inculcating healthy truths and healthy sentiments. Nowhere else can satire be so well directed, fancies so aptly expressed, observations so effectually presented, and style so happily varied, as in fiction.” Harper’s in June 1853 said that “considered merely as artist productions, we are disposed to place the ablest and finest works of fiction in a very high rank among the achievements of human intellect,” and an Easy Chair for February 1860 said flatly that “the literature of fiction is the only permanent flower of the imagination. . . . No man’s nerves tingle when he hears the name of Aristotle. But to think of Fielding, and Scott, and Dickens, is like grasping a warm hand or leaning against a beating heart. . . . The scope of fiction is as broad as Life and Imagination, and its influence is finer and
profonder than that of all other literature.” Harper’s, of course, was published by the house of Harper and Brothers, whose prosperity was founded on cheap issues of foreign novels. It was not disinterested, but neither was any journal that aimed for a large, general audience.

“Life offers nothing better than a good novel” (Literary World, July 29, 1848). The American Review for December 1849, discussing Jane Austen, commented that “if all literary fiction could be withdrawn and forgotten, and its renovation prohibited, the greatest part of us would be dolts, and what is worse, unfeeling, ungenerous, and under the debasing dominion of the selfishness of simple reason.” In October 1854 Putnam’s ran a major essay called “Novels, Their Meaning and Mission,” which stated that these days “novels are judged as art products. . . . Novels are now, many of them, the productions of men of the highest intellectual and moral worth, and are at present more generally read, and probably exercise a greater influence than any or all other forms of literature together.” The Home Journal (November 10, 1855) praised Dickens and Thackeray as “the two greatest artists of our time.” And Knickerbocker (September 1859) said that novels constitute “the favorite department, at present, with both readers and writers. There are novels in every style, suited to every taste, treating of every topic, revealing all conditions of life, discussing all branches of learning, rambling through every field of speculation, ordaining the principles of Church and State as easily as the rationale of manners, demolishing and reconstructing society, penetrating all mysteries, unfolding, in short, all the facts and all the wonders of the world which have been since creation, and which shall be while destiny be accomplished. The mission of the novelist is to depict society, and when we reflect that the ideas of all thinkers, the visions of all poetic dreamers, the diverse schemes suggested by love, by ambition, by benevolence, and the multiplied hopes and purposes of all classes of persons are combined and work and ravel together in what may be called the mind of the community, it ceases to surprise us that the domain of the novelist embraces every department of human thought.”

This rhetoric sublimates, elevates, or otherwise purifies the basic psychological reality of the human love for fiction, which all critics understood to be the bedrock of the novel’s amazing success. “Fiction,” according to the Christian Examiner for March
1842, “has its origins in man’s dissatisfaction with the present state of things, and his yearning after something higher and better, in effort to realize those innate ideas of the beautiful, the grand, and the good, which have no counterpart in the actual world.” A more secular approach appeared in the March 1850 issue of Sartain’s, which described the love of “narratives of adventure or delineations of character” as a “passion.” It was “in vain to utter general fulminations against so natural a taste. It were as wise to attempt to extinguish love, or hope, or curiosity.” These three earthly passions underlie the novel’s power: love for the characters, hope for their good fortune, curiosity as to the outcome of their story. “The appetite for narrative has a solid foundation in the social nature, and must endure. Works of imagination will ever find hearts eager to be made to throb with sympathy for the joys and woes, the physical and moral struggles, of humanity” (North American, January 1851). “There is nothing more universal than the taste for fiction, nothing in which all persons more universally agree than love for the imaginative, the marvellous, the ideal—for those incidents and traits of character which transcend the common place realities of life, and find their only home in the regions of the fancy and imagination” (New York Ledger, March 19, 1859). “In its essence,” according to Harper’s Easy Chair (February 1860), “story-telling is the earliest desire and the simplest instinct. . . . Fiction is a final fact of human education, and is no more to be explained or defended than the sunset or the rose.”

These accounts of the love of fiction converge from different starting points. In the Home Journal, Christian Examiner, and New York Ledger we see a sort of idealism, where fiction is a corrective to real life; in the other journals we observe something more like realism, where fiction is faithful to real life; but both approaches root the love of fiction in social emotions. Whether these be the desire for connection with the social body or with an ideal world, they are always the yearning of self toward something beyond it.

But this is not the whole story. Throughout these statements of praise we may also note an emphasis on freedom and scope for both writer and reader, in implied contrast to other, more restrictive, literary forms. Even though relatively few of the multitude of novels read and enjoyed might reach the pinnacles of artistry envisioned in some of the reviews, almost all of them
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seemed to gesture toward a kind of personal enhancement. Novels, in some way, attract because they gratify the self. The hostility of the *Ladies' Repository* in this review from April 1843 is founded on such an assumption: “in a well-written fiction there is interwoven so much that is beautiful and fascinating, that young persons often feel themselves bound to the page as by enchantment. The descriptions . . . are so high wrought that they cannot fail to please. And then rare adventures by land and sea, hairbreadth escapes, sudden reverses of fortune, heart-rending separations, and miraculous meetings, in connection with high wrought portraits of peerless beauty, and extravagant delineations of character, all have a tendency to gratify by excitement. . . . The mind becomes ungovernable.”

In gratifying the self, novels foster self-love and a tendency to self-assertion that make the mind ungovernable and thus jeopardize the agencies of social and psychological control. That most readers of novels (and virtually all those who read novels only) were thought to be women and youth made particularly ominous the implications of a novel reading based on self-gratification as opposed to social feelings. Not only in the *Ladies' Repository*, but in other journals as well, reviews of individual novels showed concern about the novel’s potential for creating social and personal disruption. The ideal novel would negotiate the claims of the individual writer and individual reader and of the social order: as *Knickerbocker* said, “the diverse schemes suggested by love, by ambition, by benevolence, and the multiplied hopes and purposes of all classes of persons are combined and work and ravel together in what may be called the mind of the community.” In such a novel, the competing and legitimate claims of individuals and the commonality might be resolved.

Rather clearly, reviewers considered those novels superior that weighted the claims of the commonality higher than those of the individual. The preference led them to favor what would come to be called the realistic novel, the type that enforces the primacy of the social world by presenting it as natural fact. Those novels that frankly catered to individual fantasy were described, and dismissed, as less serious works. But reviewers were not alone in a preference for the socializing over the individualizing potential of novels. Many authors had an interest in seeing that “better” novels according to society’s lights were written, and by no
means were these authors exclusively older males, in whom the existing social structure invested power at all levels of life. It was, after all, George Eliot whose anonymous critique in the Westminster Review attacked “silly novels” by silly women novelists. Her comments were quoted and discussed in several American journals. Godey’s in April 1857 quoted this segment of her essay: the silly novel’s “greatest deficiencies are due hardly more to the want of intellectual power than to the want of those moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence—patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer’s art.” No schoolmaster could have said it better: the religiosity and didacticism of Eliot’s idea for fiction corresponds well with the idea of the better novel held by reviewers. Here is the historical moment at which the novel becomes divided within itself, as a subgenre of inevitably limited appeal seeks to emerge from, and claim the prerogative of, the popular form. This is a trend that has continued unabated into our own time, even to the point where the “serious” novel is now openly intended to be unreadable and exists as the occasion of elite academic and critical commentary, yet anticipates a sale of millions of copies.

Indeed, from the vantage point of the contemporary scene the nineteenth-century American reviewers really appear quite broad-minded, looking favorably on a far greater number and wider range of authors than we have permitted to survive in the canon. They never assumed, though they might have feared, that popularity implied poor novelistic quality, and they were prepared to appreciate novels that fell considerably below their own sense of the highest standard. Further, and more significant, if one attempts to extract from all the varieties of praise those terms that persist, one finds a lexicon for individual novels somewhat different from those propounded in the more self-conscious and generalized descriptions of the ideal work.

The concept behind many different words seems to be something connected to energy. Here are phrases from the Home Journal: “this interesting story will enhance her reputation,” “her books are always deeply interesting,” “a spirited and well-wrought tale, displaying vigor and discrimination,” “deeply interesting,” “one of the most spirited and powerful of female novelists,” “the incidents are of thrilling interest, and the charac-
ters sustained with power,” “the story unfolds itself with absorbing interest.” Arthur’s Home Journal, an exponent of didactic fiction, nevertheless praised books that possessed “uncommon power,” “vigor of intellectual grasp,” or fertility, vigor, power, and vivacity. Godey’s, designed for women and girls, praised Hoffman’s Grayslaer (August 1840) as an exciting, interesting, and vigorous production “full of graphic description and stirring incidents,” and Love’s Progress as “a narrative full of interest.” The phrases “full of interest” and “stirring incidents” recur in its reviews.

The Literary World, reviewing The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (August 12, 1848), saw the secret of the writer’s “power” as “vigor of thought, freshness and naturalness of expression, and remarkable reality of description. No matter how untrue to life her scene or character may be, the vividness and fervor of her imagination is such that she instantly realizes it.” The first issue of Harper’s (June 1850) described Edward Grayson’s Standish the Puritan as a “narrative of very considerable interest and power” and referred to the “vigor” of its satire. In January 1855 one of its reviews said that The Lost Heiress by E. D. E. N. Southworth depicted events with “great power” whose “vigor of conception and brilliancy of description make it one of the most readable novels of the season.” The New York Ledger described the novels of Anne S. Stephens (June 5, 1858) as “of absorbing interest,” containing dramatic fire, intense vitality, and vividness that “enchain the reader’s attention.”

Taking the opposite tack, Putnam’s for November 1856 criticized four morally worthy novels for the absence of interest and power: Household Mysteries was “not highly exciting, and yet agreeable”; The Fashionable Life showed “the strongest religious sensibilities and the kindest intentions in the writer, but [was] quite destitute of originality or power”; Helen Lincoln possessed “few remarkable or striking qualities”; Elmwood was “a sensible story” that displayed “the most respectable talent without calling for much remark either in the way of praise or blame.” Even in the Christian Examiner, the journal most consistently devoted to fiction at once decorous and weighty, these judgments appear. George Sand, it admitted, “writes always with beauty, often with singular power” (March 1847). It preferred The Shady Side because it had “more power and genius” than two other novels.
about ministers: “it seizes upon the feelings with a stronger grasp, and makes much greater demands on the reader’s sympathies” (November 1853). Melville’s Israel Potter was faulted (May 1855) because the main character “lacks those elements which arrest and enchain the reader’s sympathies; and, at the best, it is only a feeble delineation of a very commonplace person.”

Examples of this sort could be greatly multiplied. Whole novels, parts of novels, and novelists were assessed as vigorous or feeble, powerful or tame. Power and vigor were always good, feebleness and tameness always bad, quite independently of any other variables such as the type of novel, the acceptability of its morality, the gender of the author. Domestic fiction was usually not of the first rank because it was difficult to make powerful stories about household routine; but those who succeeded in doing so won high praise. The French novelists were fiercely excoriated because their vicious morality was conveyed in works of extraordinary power, on account of which they were hugely (and deservedly, the reviewers grimly admitted) popular. Women writers were supposed to be less capable of literary artistry because they belonged to the weaker sex. But this theoretical presumption often failed in practice: Ann Stephens, E. D. E. N. Southworth, George Sand, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Brontë were all exceptions, and their works were praised.

What does the concept of power mean here, and why is it so favorably assessed? It was never defined or discussed, but its desirability in novels and its essential relation to their success were taken for granted. It seems to be a property of writers or texts that calls out a complementary response in readers, a response called “interest.” The greater the power of the text, the greater the reader’s interest, which at its height becomes enchantment, absorption, or fascination. Power is thus experienced as power over the reader; but power works by creating interest in the reader, so that the reader too becomes strong. Interest refers less to intellect than emotions; as the dictionary puts it, interest is “excitement of feeling, accompanying special attention to some object.” The objects of interest in the novel are the story and its agents, who by virtue of their resemblance to human events and human beings have the capacity to create an interest beyond that of any other literary genre. Interest in the novel is a kind of excitement.
So the explanation for the success of the novel lies in the inherent power of the form to generate reader excitement. Novels that succeed realize their formal potential. Such a potential, it should be noted, has little to do with the additional capacity of the novel to—as the *North American* had written—embrace all that man ever did, and all that man ever knew; to include with perfect ease and gracefulness all varieties of science, information, profession, and character. Or with its capacity, according to another review in that journal, to exhibit through sentiment, incident, and character a complete philosophy of life, and to admit a dramatic and narrative expression of the abstract principles of ethics, metaphysics, and theology. These undoubted desiderata were always ancillary. And their ancillary status always left a trace of bad faith in reviews that hoped to utilize the immense popularity of the novel for “higher” aims.