Novels, Readers, and Reviewers

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Bibliographical Note

Books and articles dealing with the "Americanness" of American literature are legion; I think it safe to say that every major general work on our literature as a whole and on our authors incorporates that stance. Books and articles reflecting on the status of the novel as an instrument for producing interpretations are also legion, and the ease with which the approach carries over from a didactic journal like College English to an advanced theoretical statement in Diacritics indicates, to my mind, the continuity of the critical activity. In the list that follows I note only books and articles with a historical focus on the period I study.

Charvat, William. The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870: The Papers of William Charvat. Edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968. (Charvat discusses the beginnings of professionalism, the conditions of authorship, the relation between literary economics and literary history, and other contextualizing matters that are generally ignored in text-centered and major-author-centered literary histories. While he states emphatically that "we err, as historians, in allowing the taste of the modern reader to nullify the taste of the nineteenth-century reader" and complains about the "persistent neglect of the


Jones, Howard Mumford. “American Comment on George Sand, 1837–1848.” *American Literature* 3(1932):389–407. (Jones takes the reviewer reception to equal the reader reception despite the clear evidence that Sand’s popularity was precisely what was calling out the reviewer’s commentary. In addition, Jones’s extracts stress the Victorian American disapproval in the reviews without noting the constant qualifying acknowledgment of her genius.)

Martin, Terence. *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961. (Argues for a distinct American fictional genre, the romance, deriving from the would-be fictionist’s sense of American hostility to fiction. The evidence is taken chiefly from early antifiction statements in orations, graduation addresses, and the like. An invaluable book for the earliest periods of American literary history but one that does not follow the story into the 1830s and after, when fiction triumphed despite this early hostility.)


impossible to accept as adequate the general assertion that American fiction is distinguishable because it veers ‘more freely’ than English fiction, ‘toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms’” [p. 17]. Mills’s analysis, however, is based on thematic rather than formal concerns, taking fiction as constituted by its meaning: the implications of a historical vision, the treatment of a religious dilemma, and so on.


Pritchard, John Paul. *Literary Wise Men of Gotham: Criticism in New York, 1815–1860*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963. (A study of literary criticism in New York City magazines, designed in part as a corrective to Miller. Chapter 3, pp. 61–82, is entitled “The Art and Practice of Fiction.” Pritchard observes that “all reputable fiction was subsumed under the term novel” and that “in discussion it is rarely possible to discover whether the distinction between novel and romance was active in the writer’s mind” [pp. 62, 64]. He writes that reviewers, though showing a “preference for profitable pleasure as the end of literature,” found that in the novel “the pleasurable ends generally dominated,” though there was an increasing stress on profit in the era; he also finds, as a related matter, the novel of character being stressed and increasingly thought of as a higher class of fiction than the novel of pure plot [p. 82]. He identifies and describes individual reviewers.


Spencer, Benjamin T. *The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1957. (Makes clear that the movement peaked in the late 1830s and never centered on the novel. Accepts a distinction between the novel and the romance and observes the role of women authors in fiction, albeit patronizingly: “In their preoccupation with the detail
of their own narrow locales, these female writers undoubtedly contributed to an indigenous domestic realism; yet in their general concern for fashion and sentiment per se they also evolved what was frequently called a ‘milliner’s literature’” [p. 217]. Spencer has a usefully broad sense of the makeup of a nationalist consensus, in contrast to the romance-based theorists, finding groups of novelists including Young Americans, scribbling women, transcendentalists, Knickerbockers, romancers, and incipient realists disagreeing on literary practice but still moving toward “a single objective, a literature consonant with what they believed to be America’s peculiar destiny” [p. 218].

