The idea that Cooper's *The Pioneers* could be seen as an American case study of the ethnographic impulse in literature came to me because, as a student of American Studies presently living in Canada, I think I see a comparable current in Canadian letters—the concern these days for a distinctive national identity. It reminds me forcibly of the feelings of the first generation of self-conscious American novelists.

James Fenimore Cooper was the first American novelist to be much concerned with the adequate recording of local life in the novel. He clearly found the obligations of the ethnographer implicit in the terms, particularly the term "manners," which were gaining currency in efforts to distinguish the emerging form of the novel itself from the traditional romance. For example, Clara Reeve, an early historian of English narrative, made the following distinction in 1785: "The Romance is a heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. . . . the Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written."1

It was of course easy to specify the novelist's mimetic duty as a faithful depiction of contemporary manners and customs, but Cooper quickly discovered the difficulties in translating duty into practice. In his first attempt to use native material in *The Spy* (1821), he complained to his publisher that "the task of making American Manners and American scenes interesting to an American reader is an arduous one. . . ."2 After *The Spy*’s great success, he modestly replied to praise from Richard Henry Dana: "I cannot conceal from myself that I owe much, if not most of my success to the desire that is now so prevalent in the Country to see our manners exhibited on paper. . . ."3 But fourteen years later, he was still stressing the difficulty of the task: "No one but an original thinker can ever write well, or very usefully, of America, since the world has never before furnished an example of a people who have been placed under circumstances so peculiarly their own, both political and social."4
the patriot's boast here is also the craftsman's lament. While the peculiarities of the American experience might be significant because unprecedented, the very lack of precedent means that the novelist must contrive new means by which that experience can be represented. The novelist is further handicapped because, while the unique qualities of American life might be signaled by spectacular historical or public movements, such qualities require a more minute attention to the commonplace for their genuine realization in narrative fiction. Cooper, in his review of Miss Catharine Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale*, clearly articulates this necessity: "Our political institutions, the state of learning among us, and the influence of religion upon the national character, have been often discussed and displayed; but our domestic manners, the social and moral influences, which operate in retirement, and in common intercourse, and the multitude of local peculiarities, which form our distinctive features upon the many peopled earth, have very seldom been happily exhibited in our literature." The ground most favorable for examining his own efforts to create such an exhibition is his third novel, *The Pioneers* (1823).

In writing *The Pioneers*, Cooper stepped squarely into the middle of an American debate about ethnography in fiction which *The Spy* had done much to promote. The most substantial American review of *The Spy*, by a Boston lawyer, W. H. Gardiner, appeared in the *North American Review*. Gardiner's essay, together with one which appeared in the same journal three years earlier on the life and works of Charles Brockden Brown, by the influential Harvard professor of rhetoric, E. T. Channing, are worth some detailed consideration here because they clearly illustrate the limiting ethnographic conceptions within which Cooper was constrained to work.

Channing had suggested that the kind of romance practiced by Brown was bootless in America because native materials would not provide the romantic associations evoked by their European counterparts. The alternative for the American writer is the novel of manners.

But there is another and an extremely popular kind of fictitious writing, which makes the fable subservient to the developing of national character, or of the manners, usages, prejudices and condition of particular classes. . . . These sketches are not caricatures, merely grotesque delineations of strange individuals, such as amuse or distress us chiefly for their total separation from the crowd to which we belong. They represent classes; they shew us some peculiar operation of familiar principles, in men who received their natures from our common author, and their distinctive characters from limited external influence.

Channing might be talking about a new form, but he clearly sets forth the 18th century neoclassical aesthetic which dictated that manners are most properly definitive, not of individual idiosyncrasies, but of class and social station. Such an aesthetic assumes a sociology as well, and Channing then
goes on to illustrate the failure of tradition-derived class divisions as a measure of new American conditions. "If we admit that there is here a lower class, its peculiarity would not be found in character so much as in vulgarity of manners and narrowness of opinion." Depictions of characters from this stratum would be both inaccurate and misleading: "it would be only of individuals, whose influence is scarcely felt amongst ourselves, and whose peculiarities would give strangers very little knowledge of the effect of our institutions or pursuits upon our opinions and character." The middle class is similarly disqualified; it is "composed of sensible, industrious, upright men, whose whole experience seems at war with adventure." And the upper classes? "If we should look for what are called the higher classes of society, the wealthy, fashionable and ostentatious, whose manners, parade, and intrigues in the older countries have given birth to some of the finest modern tales; we might be in great measure disappointed." The rudiments of an upper class are detectable in America, but "more years, practice and affluence might be necessary to render the class more distinct, character more various, peculiarities more graceful and easy, vice and folly more finished and creditable." The last phrase points Channing's dilemma. For the patriotic moralist, the invidious comparison with hardened old Europe is favorable to the new republic, but for the American novelist, insufficient vice and folly must be seen as a handicap. Clearly, the imposition of the neoclassical principle of propriety—drawing character to type or class—combined with sociological distinctions derived from European experience severely restricts the native novelist. The country is too new for distinct features to have confirmed or replaced the traditional terms of class status, and its ordinary pursuits are simply too mundane to be interesting.

W. H. Gardiner uses his review of The Spy to join issue with Channing's conclusions, although he does not allude to his colleague directly, nor does he challenge his aesthetic assumptions.

We are told, it is true, that there is among us a cold uniformity and sobriety of character; a sad reality and utility in our manners, and institutions; that our citizens are a down-right, plain-dealing, inflexible, matter-of-fact sort of people; in short that our country and its inhabitants are equally and utterly destitute of all sorts of romantic association.

If these are indeed the facts about American life, then according to the principle of propriety in characterization, which he shares with Channing, American manners are hopeless for the novelist.

We are not so foolhardy as to deny the truth of the theory on which these objections rest. . . . The characters of fiction should be descriptive of classes, and not of individuals, or they will seem to want the touch of nature, and fail in that dramatic interest which results from a familiarity with the feelings and passions pourtrayed, and a consciousness of their truth.
But, continues Gardiner, the detractors are wrong in their estimation of the facts; “in no one country on the face of the globe can there be found a greater variety of specific character than is at this moment developed in these United States of America.” To prove his point, Gardiner musters a list, the last part of which follows:

Is there nothing of the Dutch burgomaster yet sleeping in the blood of his descendents; no trace of the prim settler of Pennsylvania in her rectangular cities and trim farms? Are all the remnants of her ancient puritanism swept out of the corners of New England? Is there no bold peculiarity in the white savage who roams over the remote hunting tracts of the West; and none in the red native of the wilderness that crosses him in his path?

This list is virtually a casting call for *The Pioneers*; Cooper includes each of these types. But before turning to that novel, let me briefly summarize the limits set to Cooper’s freedom as an ethnographer by these essays. Neither critic denies that America contained particular individuals in plenty, but, if the neoclassical principle of propriety is to govern, this becomes irrelevant for the novelist. Borrowing another term from formal ethnography, one might say that both critics insist that a character, to be a proper informant, behave in manners clearly recognizable as representative of some larger social grouping, and that, conversely, he loses value as an informant insofar as he is unique, eccentric or simply personal. The major difference between the two critics is in their gradation of national manners. By arguing the inapplicability of European categories, Channing raises the doubt that American groupings are not yet distinctive enough even to be recognizable. Gardiner, on the other hand, by reference to regional differences, professional roles and the vestiges of national origins, affirms distinctive and recognizable manners in such variety as to save the American novelist from descent to the unique individual for his characters. Despite some initial grumbling, Cooper clearly accepted Gardiner’s slightly more spacious version of this delimiting ethnographic principle in *The Pioneers*.

In the preface to the first American edition of *The Pioneers*, Cooper had attacked such critical theorizing, castigating the reviewers for ideas clothed in “a language so obscure and metaphysical” as to be incomprehensible. Petulantly he insists that he had written the novel “exclusively to please myself,” but ironically this reveals itself as a kind of creative chafing at imperatives which finally are felt as stronger. His second thoughts about *The Pioneers*, expressed in a new preface dated 1832 in Paris, revert to the same theoretical issues, stated with almost the same phrasing, that Channing and Gardiner had argued. The first preface had been defiant; the new one is apologetic. Calling his novel a “descriptive tale,” Cooper now undertakes to explain to his readers “how much of its contents is literal fact, and how much is intended to represent a general picture.” He then confesses that he probably erred in the direction of too
much literal fact, excited as he was by memories of the actual Cooperstown. This confession is prompted by his belated agreement, however grudging, with the principle of ethnographic delimitation articulated by Gardiner and now seen as the governing aesthetic for *The Pioneers*: “this rigid adhesion to truth, an indispensable requisite in history and travels, destroys the charm of fiction; for all that is necessary to be conveyed to the mind by the latter had better be done by delineations of principles, and of characters in their classes, than by a too fastidious attention to originals.”

What is fascinating about Cooper’s decision that “characters in their classes” are to be preferred to “originals” is that there exists evidence which allows us to track and review the force of that judgment rather precisely. In the 1832 preface, Cooper correctly disassociates his characters from actual counterparts in the Cooperstown of his youth. “It may be well to say here, a little more explicitly, that there was no intention to describe with particular accuracy any real characters in this book” (vii). Yet that he was initially working from models is made clear by his parallel accounts of many of the figures from *The Pioneers* in his factual *Chronicles of Cooperstown* (1838). Several commentators have remarked the parallels between the two works, but no one, I think, has yet argued that what is most significant in this comparison is not the parallels, but the differences between the portraits of the same individuals.

In the *Chronicles*, Cooper gives the history of a local merchant, Le Quoy, who appears in extremely thin disguise in *The Pioneers* as Le Quoi. According to Cooper, the actual Le Quoy “excited a good deal of interest during his stay in the place, as he was a man altogether superior to his occupation, which was little more than a country grocer.”* This initially mysterious discrepancy was later resolved when the villagers discovered the Frenchman to be the former governor of Martinique, deposed and forced to flee by the French Revolution. In translating the intriguing case of Le Quoy from fact to fiction, Cooper underplayed most of its colorful elements. As he is introduced in *The Pioneers*, there is no initial mystery about the Frenchman, his adaptability to his new role of frontier storekeeper is stressed and his former status is reduced from governor to an ordinary planter of the sugar island. Because Le Quoi plays a typal role in the narrative, he is stripped of those elements of high adventure that might have made his case unique or unusual. Another instance of Cooper’s muting of facts that might be overly eccentric is the fictional transformation of Cooperstown’s first physician. In *The Pioneers*, Dr. Todd is a comic but respectable doctor. His factual counterpart, Dr. Powers, was also comic but hardly respectable. Dr. Powers arrived in Cooperstown in the spring of 1791.

In the course of the year, Dr. Powers was accused of mixing tartar emetic with the beverage of a ball given at the Red Lion. He was tried, convicted, put in the stocks, and ban-
ished for the offense; this sentence, as a matter of course, terminating his career in this spot.\textsuperscript{11}

This choice individual was sacrificed in \textit{The Pioneers} to what Cooper seems to have felt was a more representative standard of medical propriety.

But one figure that Cooper left out of \textit{The Pioneers} is perhaps just as significant as those he altered. Cooper completely omits from the novel a fascinating individual from the Cooperstown described in the \textit{Chronicles}. In that account, Cooper mentions one Esaias Hausman who appeared in the village “out of nowhere,” purchased a sizeable plot of land from Judge Cooper for which he paid gold sovereigns, and thereafter provided much mystery for the villagers. “He spoke five or six of the living languages and had a tolerable knowledge of the classics.” Often away from the village on prolonged, mysterious errands, Hausman was once discovered to have been “teaching Hebrew to the president of an eastern college.”\textsuperscript{12} Cooper closes his account by speculating that this intriguing figure was probably a Jew. That Hausman is completely absent from \textit{The Pioneers} suggests Cooper’s belief that his exotic presence would have been too extravagantly atypical for any recognizable portrait of an American frontier community. The fascinating individuals reported in the \textit{Chronicles} are, quite simply, more interesting than their character counterparts in \textit{The Pioneers}, but this suggests, I believe, what Cooper sacrificed in yielding to the ethnographic pressure, as articulated by contemporary critical authority, for “characters in their classes.”

But if the contrast between the \textit{Chronicles} and \textit{The Pioneers} precisely illustrates both what is needed and what is lost in changing the historically unique individual into the ethnographically representative character—in transforming the actual into the typical—other evidence in \textit{The Pioneers} displays a related kind of transformation, one in which a figure, originally conceived as an ethnographic informant, becomes a mythic hero. In short, Cooper’s procedures in \textit{The Pioneers} show both how the ethnographic impulse is bounded at one extreme by the individuality of the actual and at the other by the universality of the mythic.

Since Twain’s tabulation of Cooper’s literary offenses, it has been no news to anybody that Leatherstocking undergoes some odd metamorphoses, sometimes within a single paragraph, but tracking changes in his character over the course of \textit{The Pioneers} is useful here because it permits us, again with some precision, to measure the upper limits of Cooper’s ethnographic impulse. From his initial appearance in the novel to his departure, Natty is consistent in his expression of the same kind of tenacious equalitarianism typical of the lower class characters in Templeton, but during the same interval, Cooper’s depiction of Natty’s character undergoes a marked change. In his first speech Natty, undeterred by Judge Temple’s rank, disputes with him over whose bullet actually felled a buck. Here Natty taunts the Judge:
"you burnt your powder only to warm your nose this cold
evening. Did ye think to stop a full grown buck, with
Hector and the slut open upon him within sound, with that
pop-gun in your hand. . . ."

As the speaker concluded, he drew his bare hand across
the bottom of his nose, and again opened his enormous
mouth with a kind of inward laugh. (8)

In further defending his right to the buck, Natty says, in a manner which
Cooper labels "sullen dissatisfaction," "I don't love to give up my lawful
dues in a free country. Though, for the matter of that, might often makes
right here, as well as in the old country, for what I can see" (8). This is an
inelegant introduction to the famous Natty, but compare both the manner
and the substance of these speeches with the last speech of Leatherstocking
from The Pioneers. This is a part of his final farewell as he leaves the
Otsego valley for the west.

"Trust in God, Madam, and your honorable husband, and
thoughts for an old man like me can never be long nor
bitter. I pray that the Lord will keep you in mind—the
Lord that lives in clearings as well as in the wilderness—
and bless you, and all that belongs to you, from this time till
the great day when the right shall be the law and not
power." (476)

Although the same criticism of power is made in both speeches, the
marked difference in gesture, manner and tone reflects Natty's elevation
in The Pioneers.

In the first, expository section of the novel, Natty is seen as a coarse,
ill-educated, irascible, sometimes garrulous, sometimes stubbornly proud
old hunter who grumbles about the invasion of his privacy by the settlers
and about civilized ways in general. These qualities classify Natty as a
distinct type familiar in the early novels of manners. This is the social
eccentric, a figure whose behavior stems not from personal idiosyncrasies,
but from an uncompromising persistence in a set of manners altogether
inappropriate within a new social setting—the crusty seadog ashore and
the rustic in the drawing room are frequent examples. Such figures are
comic, less so than affected social climbers who ineptly ape manners not
naturally their own, but still comic because they are unwilling or unable
to conform to a new norm in manners. Natty's stubborn adherence to
frontier ways thus makes him incongruous, yet still typical, within a com-
community in the process of defining itself. In this respect, Natty is simply a
typal extension of Cooper's portraits from the actual Cooperstown—the
ethnographic counterpart of Shipman the hunter as it was first sanctioned
by an item in Gardiner's list.

In the last two sections of the novel, however, the character changes
radically as increasing stress is put upon his firm self-reliance, his in-
credible skills, his almost mystic sympathy with nature and his moral
wisdom. These new qualities transform his private grumbling into criti-
cism based on principles that transcend his personal complaints. In this changed aspect, Natty approaches the dignity and sweep of an Old Testament prophet, Nathan to Judge Temple's David. His charges against the community alternate between predictions of terrible retribution for social evil and laments over the suffering of the innocent at the hands of the powerful. During the pigeon hunt, for instance, he cries: "the Lord won't see the waste of his creatures for nothing, and right will be done to the pigeons, as well as others, by and by" (251). Under the pressure of exemplifying qualities which will make such charges both dramatically effective and universally resonant, Cooper has transformed Natty from a social eccentric whose frontier manners are inappropriate even in the nascent community of Templeton into a fiercely didactic embodiment of the free individual's struggle with the demands of organized society. This transformation is accomplished in part by moving from a depiction of Natty's ordinary or ingrained manners to manipulation of the action in order to display Natty's heroism. As a result of this movement, the texture of the narrative changes completely in the last section of the novel. The first two sections are largely expository and descriptive, the action and dialogue arising from and in turn illuminating the typical activities of frontier community life. The final section, crowded with extraordinary feats of heroism and adventure, makes no pretense of continuing Cooper's original purpose in writing a "descriptive tale." That this change is deliberate is indicated by Cooper's remarks in a letter to The Pioneers' English publisher, John Murray.

I had announced the work as a "descriptive tale" but perhaps have confined myself too much to describing the scenes of my own youth ... I know that the present taste is for action and strong excitement, and in this respect am compelled to acknowledge that the two first volumes are deficient, I however am not without hopes that the third will be thought to make some amends. . . .

Cooper's instruction to Murray were that the third volume was to begin with the twenty-sixth chapter, and it is in that chapter that the sequence of heroic action and "strong excitement" begins with the hairbreadth rescue of the heroine from the panther by Leatherstocking. It is just here that Natty's promotion to mythic hero becomes official, and, as Cooper's comments above indicate, the texture of the narrative must change to accommodate this new dimension. In the process the ethnographic impulse which had originally governed the book reaches its upper limit.

Characters functioning as ethnographic informants, squeezed as they are in The Pioneers between historical individuals and mythic heroes, may prefigure a larger fate for the ethnographic impulse in subsequent American fiction. The genre of the novel had itself been born out of and was continually responsive to new cultural assumptions about social mobility and the worth of the individual. Among Cooper's contemporaries, such assumptions were increasingly inimical to the presentation of "char-
acters in their classes," particularly those assumptions which Quentin Anderson has recently traced in *The Imperial Self* (1971). When Thoreau calmly announced at the beginning of *Walden* that "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well," the gap between the individual's unique voice and the mythic self, the gap which had accommodated Cooper's representative figures, virtually disappeared. The job begun by Thoreau may have been completed by Hemingway; Anderson puts it well in a 1972 essay: Hemingway "had separated *writing* from the business of being a member of anything, and that was a sweet and terrifying relief to the Americans who read him."

The force of this legacy makes it an open question whether the deracinated, alienated, disaffiliated, rootless, declasse drop-outs and odd-balls of recent American fiction are mythic anti-heroes embodying some universal condition of existential adventure, or whether they are simply unique eccentrics meant to move us by their defining quirks within an increasingly homogeneous society. Whichever—they are certainly not "characters in their classes."

The neo-classical rules which governed the practice of the earliest English novelists, and which still had authority for Cooper, contained a potential contradiction which made the relationship between the depiction of individuals and the types they might represent an uneasy one. In chapter fifteen of *The Poetics*, Aristotle had outlined four requirements for creating the agent's "mores," the concept eighteenth century translators rendered as "manners." The second of these is "propriety," the principle of being "true to type"; the third was translated by Thomas Twining in the eighteenth century as "resemblance," and by Lane Cooper in the twentieth as "true to life." The early novelists were fully aware of the difficulty in obeying both injunctions in the same characterization; in *Tom Jones*, for example, Fielding warned that "there are certain characteristics in which most individuals of every profession and occupation agree. To be able to preserve these characteristics, and at the same time to diversify their operations, is one talent of a good writer." And Francis Bowen, whose *North American Review* essay (1838) on Cooper is virtually a last ditch defense of neo-classical rules in the face of actual practice in the novel, found it necessary to again command simultaneous adherence to both of the contradictory rules: "The personages of a novel must be individualized sufficiently to command the sympathy of the beholders with their actions and feelings, while they must have common traits enough to stand as the representative of a class." But Bowen's commands were already more archaic than he knew; in 1814, John Croker, reviewing Scott's *Waverly* in the *Quarterly Review*, understood what had happened in the novel. He divides the development of the genre into three stages. The earliest novelists drew figures which were "an embodying of their own conceptions of the 'beau ideal.'" In the second stage, "the characters in Gil Blas and Tom Jones are not individuals so much as specimens of the human race. . . ." The third stage, typified by Scott,
shows "a more particular classification—a copying not of man in general, but of men of a particular nation, profession, or temper, or, to go a step further—of individuals." 17

The ethnographic impulse in American fiction following Cooper surfaced again strongly in the post-Civil War work of realists like John DeForest, Howells, Garland and the local colorists, but even here one has to note that the leading proponents took pains to disassociate the movement from the depiction of the typical. Howells' familiar scorn for the artificial grasshopper in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891) made the point: "I've got a grasshopper here, which has been evolved at considerable pains and expense out of the grasshopper in general; in fact, it's a type." 18 And Garland insisted that "the veritist sees the individual rather than the type. If the individual chances to be a widely recognized type, well and good—but the individual comes first." 19

The growing attention of American novelists to the individual rather than to the typal is only one ingredient in the complex of evidence which has permitted critics to characterize American fiction in ways which recognize the subordination of the ethnographic impulse to other concerns. Lionel Trilling, for example, asserts that "the novel in America diverges from its classic intention, which, as I have said, is the investigation of the problem of reality beginning in the social field." 20 Some, like Richard Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), have celebrated this divergence. More recently others, like Edwin Cady in *The Light of Common Day* (1971), have lamented it and sought to reestablish writers who have most clearly practiced ethnography. James W. Tuttleton, who in *The Novel of Manners in America* (1972) shares Cady's concern, offers a defense that sounds curiously reminiscent of the ethnographic injunctions by W. H. Gardiner back in Cooper's day: "The necessity of arguing for the viability of the form—against the notion that the novel (and particularly the novel of manners) is dead—has led me to defend the proposition that America as a nation is marked by a significant cultural diversity." 21 Tuttleton's work is largely descriptive, but insofar as he tries to establish Marquand, O'Hara, Cozzens and Auchincloss as representative of a major tradition in recent American fiction, he is less than convincing. One reason for this may be that readers have tended to turn to competing genres for the kinds of ethnographic satisfactions once met by the novel.

Recent work by social scientists may have indeed reclaimed imaginative ethnography from the novelist. In 1952, praising David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd*, Trilling judged that contemporary social science was fast developing an acute "sense of social actuality" which contemporary literature sadly lacked. In 1972, Marshall Berman took the cue and suggested, his tongue only mid-way in cheek, that "thus we might imagine Erik Erikson as our Tolstoy; Oscar Lewis could be our D. H. Lawrence, Margaret Mead might be our George Eliot . . . David Reisman could be our Thackeray"; 22 all this leading to a defense of Erving Goffman as even

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more successful than the novelists in vivid renderings of the minute social rituals which condition and even govern everyday life. But there are other competitors in the wings. The New Journalism now supplies ethno-graphic reports of fugitive American sub-cultures run to earth. Hunter Thompson's bikers, Tom Wolfe's customized car enthusiasts or Gay Talese's high steel men may be more akin to Melville's exotic informants in *Typee* than to Cooper's efforts to record nationally significant types, but they are, with the aid of techniques freely borrowed from fiction, definitely "characters in their classes." There are even those who rejoice that, in the face of such competition, the novel is finally free to ignore its ethnographic responsibilities. Richard Poirier, for one, scorns "those critics who now celebrate the fact, as did Zola in his novels about the various industries and occupations, that a new book has at last 'made available' some aspect of reality hitherto sequestered." Poirier adds, "the novel has been called many things, but is it at last only a procurer?" This low esteem for the ethnographic impulse may well mean that those who still seek it in fiction may want to turn to the recent novels of our Canadian neighbors.

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footnotes

3. Ibid., I, 94.
11. Ibid., 32.
12. Ibid., 56-57.