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Robert Lawson-Peebles

*Fenimore Cooper's First
Novel, Family Property and
the Battle of Waterloo*

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Robert Lawson-Peebles

Fenimore Cooper's First Novel, Family Property and the Battle of Waterloo

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Gertrude Stein ‘first felt a desire to express the rhythm of the visible world’ during a summer visit to Granada, not long before the First World War. Some ninety years earlier, James Fenimore Cooper felt that desire too. For Stein, that rhythm was ‘the problem of the external and the internal’; it drove her to experiment with descriptions of the relations of ‘objects’ and ‘people.’ For Cooper, the rhythm of the visible world is the expression of morality in material forms. The virtue of the novel, as he remarked in an 1822 review, is that it ‘addresses our love of truth—not the mere love of facts expressed by true names and dates, but the love of that higher truth, the truth of nature and of principles, which is a primitive law of the human mind, and only to be effaced by the most deplorable perversion.’ A properly ‘inventive talent’ therefore ‘employs itself in the province of daily life, which delineates what we have all felt and observed, which detects the vices that poison domestic peace, and corrupt social virtue, or which displays the opinions and passions that dignify and sweeten, or debase and embitter our earthly existence.’¹

From the very beginning of his career, Cooper sought to understand the relation of the moral and the material. As befits an apprentice work, Cooper’s

1. Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 119. Cooper, review of Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *A New England Tale* in James Fenimore Cooper, *Early Critical Essays (1820–1822)*, ed. James F. Beard, Jr. (Delmar, NY: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), 99–101. I would like to thank my colleagues at the School of English, University of Exeter; members of the STAR/Symbiosis Conference, Edinburgh University, July 2003; and particularly Chantal Stebbings, Marion Gibson, Richard Grivil and Susan Manning, for valuable feedback during and after the presentations that led to this essay.