

3 CRITICS DISCUSS

CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN

(1771-1810)

"American fiction was lucky to have had so richly endowed a writer appear so early. Brown had few models to go by; he was a sick man, and he died young. Whether, under more favorable conditions, he might have developed the sanity of outlook indispensable to a great writer, it would be difficult to say; that he would have achieved a greater technical competence seems unquestionable. What he had nobody could have taught him. His fictions were brilliant, imperfect productions of a very brief period of his life... When life brought him first rate materials, he used them with great power, and there is something to be said for his Indians....

He has been lauded for his intensity, his ability to explore abnormal states of consciousness, and his gift for breathless episode. His lack of unity and his complete failure to master the architectronics of fiction, his interpolated narratives within interpolated narratives (making his novels difficult to follow and impossible to remember), his ineptitude in dialogue, his frantic unmotivated villainies, and his penchant for creating characters who thrust themselves deliberately into adventures which no sane person would embark upon--these things, though admitted, are generally viewed with a charitable eye."

Edward Wagenknecht

Cavalcade of the American Novel (Holt 1952) 12, 9

"In *Wieland* (1798), his best novel... [Wieland] becomes the victim of a religious melancholia and hears a mysterious 'voice.' Actually this voice is at first the voice of a wandering, experimental ventriloquist, Carwin, who uses his special powers some eight times altogether in situations ranging from the trivial to the tragic. Finally Wieland, far gone in a religious psychosis (for which Carwin's experiments are only partially responsible), hears a heavenly 'voice' (not Carwin's this time) which commands him to slay his wife and children. This he does. He is prevented from extending his dubious benevolence to his sister Clara only by the intervention of reality; but his realization of his deed converts him into a 'monument of woe,' to be delivered from ineffable remorse only by death.

The story, despite serious structural defects, is intrinsically as well as historically important. On the derivative level, it is obviously Richardsonian in its presentation of a persecuted heroine (Clara) carrying on in the face of incredible difficulties. Gothic terrors beset her, for she lives in seclusion in a house architecturally ideal for nocturnal terrors. Yet these horrors take on a degree of reality because of the seriousness with which Brown treated--apparently for the first time in American fiction--a case of dementia. In addition there is a Faustian motif: the ventriloquist's chief trait is his appetite for knowledge, and he pleads that his 'only crime' is 'curiosity.' His dismay in contemplating the tragedy that he in part induced may have given Mary Shelley the idea for her *Frankenstein*. Says Carwin: 'Had I not rashly set in motion a machine, over whose progress I had no control, and which experience had shewn me was infinite in power?' *Wieland* derives its strength not merely from the exploitation of sensation, but from the blending of the Gothic method with philosophical, psychological, and moral implications to create a powerful, even if unbalanced book.

Like his own Carwin, Brown had a vast curiosity. In *Ormond* (1799), as chaotic a book as he ever wrote, he presented a glamorous, superman-like villain with a high intelligence and a low opinion of bourgeois conceptions of good and evil. His principles he has absorbed in part through contact with the secret society of the Illuminati on the Continent. He scoffs at the conventions of marriage, religion, and private property. His conduct is commensurably extravagant and violent. Yet opposite this almost caricatured villain Brown placed Constantia Dudley, who seemed to Shelley 'a perfect combination of the purely ideal and possibly real.'

In *Arthur Mervyn* (1799-1800) there is a serious study (with emphasis on civic responsibility) of the problem of yellow fever, which Brown had observed in epidemic proportions in Philadelphia. In *Edgar*

Huntley (1799) he provided his country with its first detective novel. The story has thrilling moments, but its action is finally bungled. At the same time it reflects Brown's interest in the Godwinian theme of morbid curiosity and its relationship to crime. Its 'cave scene' may have inspired Edgar Allan Poe as a source for 'The Pit and the Pendulum,' and Cooper, who at first scoffed at *Edgar Huntley*, later imitated its author.

Clara Howard (1801), Brown's next novel, is relatively free from the violence of the preceding stories, being mainly a love story told with emphasis upon an ethical dilemma. *Jane Talbot* (1801) treats of the problems of a sensitive young lady who makes a loveless marriage although she has met her real affinity before the wedding. The problem is handled with a finesse that surprisingly adumbrates certain stories of Henry James. The relative quietness of these last two novels reflects Brown's awareness of the relationship between a writer and his public. He was a conscious craftsman. His first three novels had made him a reputation, but they had not sold well.... When his brother suggested that perhaps the public would find more interest in novels less devoted to 'the prodigious or the singular,' he gloomily agreed, and he promised less extravagance and more emphasis on 'daily incidents' of the sort that the public presumably cared for. Yet he never succeeded in becoming a popular writer...

A late eighteenth century novelist, Brown was inevitably influenced by foreign models, for American models were almost nonexistent. Yet he was keenly aware of his position as an American writer. Even as the author of Gothic fiction, he bravely attempted to use native materials.... Europe's example was to him by no means an unmixed blessing, for, he said in *Clara Howard*, 'Our books are almost wholly the productions of Europe, and the prejudices which infect us are derived chiefly from this source.' A substream of American democratic thinking underlay his romantic theorizing and his moral speculation.

Without being overtly doctrinaire, Brown was unquestionably a moralist in his fiction: idea and scene coalesced to form art. His most sensational narrative episodes were the artistic counterparts of his philosophic probings into the causes of man's unrest. Even those of his characters who (like the protagonist in *Ormond*) were antisocial in act and creed revealed the basic problems of humanity. Final remedies Brown did not in most cases propose: he was not a 'didactic' writer. He merely described the human tragedy with a skill great enough to enable him to produce many memorable scenes of high seriousness and compelling interest. Constantly interrupted by illness and the exigencies of business, he wrote rapidly during the time available to him, and he revised little. He rose brilliantly to heights of eloquence and as suddenly bogged down in bombast, bathos, or incoherence. Had he been able to sustain his flights, he might have been a great tragic novelist."

Alexander Cowie

Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition (Macmillan 1963) 182-84

"Clara's neurotic tendencies are exhibited well before her brother's come to a head, and well before Carwin's intrigues... Singularly, it was she who first found herself unaccountably attracted to him, instead of--as in the sentimental formula--his initially having designs on her, which on being frustrated inspire schemes of seduction.... When Clara rushes to the door on Carwin's leaving, the figure she beholds is anything but the predictable type of the Richardsonian gentleman-scoundrel..."

The complexities of Clara's character are really a rather original contribution on Brown's part to both examples of genre-females. For Pamela and Clarissa, no less than Walpole's Isabella, Lewis's Antonia, or Radcliffe's Emily, are uniformly and tiresomely known for being passive, put-upon, pursued and patronized personages, with very little in the way of individuality or initiative, and acting mostly by reaction. What eighteenth-century heroine--those prototypes of sensibility--would register intellectual confusion, instead of being dissolved in fright, on learning of disembodied voices?... Clara Wieland, to her time, was probably one of the strongest--if not the strongest--female character in the history of romantic fiction."

Sydney J. Krause & S.W. Reid

Introduction, *Wieland* (Kent State 1977, 78) xxi-xxiii

Michael Hollister (2014)