

INTRODUCTION



Charles Brockden Brown

(1771-1810)

Called the “Father of American literature,” Charles Brockden Brown of Philadelphia read for the law, then became the first American to try to make a living as a literary novelist. Although he succeeded for awhile, eventually he had to give up because the American audience was too small in the 1790s and early 1800s. James Fenimore Cooper at first attacked Brown, then imitated him in his saga of Natty Bumppo. Much as Benjamin Franklin bridged the Calvinistic Puritanism dominant in the 17th century and the secular Neoclassicism dominant in the 18th century, Brown is a bridge from Neoclassicism to Romanticism, in *Wieland* (1798). There is a dynamic tension in his work between reason and transrational intuition: “Ideas exist in our minds that can be accounted for by no established laws,” says Clara in *Wieland*, contrary to John Locke. Brown began as a radical utopian and ended as a realistic conservative.

LEGACY

1. Brown wrote *Alcuin* (1797), the first feminist tract in American history, a dialogue advocating equal rights for women
2. Wrote the first notable literary American novel in *Wieland* (1798)
3. Wrote the first American detective novel in *Edgar Huntley* (1799)
4. Introduced the Indian into American fiction without idealization
5. Was the first novelist to make his fiction natively American
6. Initiated the Romantic Movement in American literature
7. Established the literary Gothic tradition in America
8. Pioneered the psychological novel
9. Influenced Cooper, Hawthorne and Poe
10. Became one of the first Americans to gain an audience in Europe

“He was an innovator in a revolutionary age, a literary genius in a land barren of literary men, a pioneer with courage to stand against even his own family and the ideals of his own generation.... Brown chose for his profession *fiction*, a literary form almost untried in America, and one attacked by prejudice, denounced in every pulpit, and thundered against by all the moralists. With Brown began not only a native American literature, but a literature created for the first time in America for mere literature's sake. With him began a literary period.”

Fred Lewis Pattee
Introduction, *Wieland*
(Hafner 1967) ix-x

BIOGRAPHY

Brown was born frail in a Quaker family in Philadelphia, inheriting a liberal, meditative disposition. Growing up in the midst of the American Revolution, he became a rebel in adolescence, influenced by French deism, Godwinian radicalism, feminism and utopianism. For five years, until age sixteen, he studied Greek and Latin in a Quaker school. The influence of this schooling determined his prose style: formal, conventional, abstract, rationalistic, stilted, bare of concrete details and Neoclassical. These traits contribute to his stark Gothic atmospheres and scenes of horror, like an early black and white silent movie, while reducing sensory effects, plausibility and richness of texture. In large measure his defects are due to his having written books simultaneously at top speed, without revision. At one point he had five novels in progress. *Arthur Mervyn* was begun during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 in Philadelphia that killed his roommate and almost killed him.

The poet Shelley was fond of Brown's novels and named one of his poems after one of Brown's characters; Sir Walter Scott took from Brown the names of two characters in one of his romances; Brown may also have influenced Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* (1818); and Hawthorne honored him with a place in his "Hall of Fantasy" (1843). Brown's intention was first "to mix human feelings and passions with incredible situations, and thus render them impressive and interesting." At the same time, the first four of his six novels were serious intellectual explorations:

Unlike the Gothic novel in Europe, Brown's Gothicism is a serious outlook. As a rationalist he scorned pop Gothicism as "puerile superstition and exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras." In *Wieland* (1798), a decent man is convinced he hears the voice of God tell him to kill his family; in *Ormond* (1799), the heroine is pursued by a sex maniac and kills him; in *Arthur Mervyn* (1799-1800) seduction, murder and the horrors of an urban epidemic are dramatized; and in *Edgar Huntley* (1799) sleepwalking and madness are studied in the form of a detective novel, with Indians introduced. In the first two novels he blends four traditions in fiction:

1. Empirical tone of Realism as in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)
2. Seduction plot dating from *Pamela* (1740)
3. Tale of terror in the popular Gothic mode of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)
4. Didactic moral purpose as exemplified by the influential *Caleb Williams* (1794)

Brown wrote to his brother in 1800, "Book-making, as you observe, is the dullest of all trades, and the utmost any American can look for, in his native country, is to be reimbursed his unavoidable expenses." Trying to appeal to the predominantly female audience, he finally turned from Gothicism to conventional domestic fiction in *Clara Howard* (1801) and *Jane Talbot* (1801), both studies in frustrated marriages. According to his earliest biographer, Dunlap, "From the regions of poetry and romance, from visionary schemes of Utopian systems of government and manners, Mr. Brown, like many others, became a sober recorder of things as they are."

AESTHETICS

“To excite and baffle curiosity, without shocking belief, is the end to be contemplated. I have endeavored to wind up the reader’s passions to the highest pitch, and to make the catastrophe, in the highest degree, unexpected and momentous.” Brown quoted by Pattee (xxvii)

Charles Brockden Brown died of tuberculosis in 1810 at age 39.

Michael Hollister (2015)

