

Review Essay

Charles Brockden Brown as Metaphor

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THE APPARITION IN THE GLASS: Charles Brockden Brown's American Gothic. By Bill Christophersen. Athens: The University of Georgia Press. 1993.

THE ROMANCE OF REAL LIFE: Charles Brockden Brown and the Origins of American Culture. By Steven Watts. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1994.

Critical interest in Charles Brockden Brown has increased during the last decade or so, despite the fact that his claims to "firstness" (i.e., the first American author to attempt to make a living as a fiction writer) have been undermined by postmodern skepticism about how "firsts" are constructed. Brown's continued popularity is due, in part, to the fact that his writings can be successfully and fruitfully plied by various and sometimes conflicting methodologies. Brown's web-like plots that resist closure, his unreliable narrators, his explorations of gender roles, and his deconstruction of social, political, and cultural power have made him an attractive figure for formalists, feminists, and cultural critics alike. Lately, Brown seems to have become a metaphor for the early republic itself, personifying the fragmented, chaotic, awkward period of transition between the "old world" of republican values and the "modern world" of liberalism. In their books, both Christophersen and Watts go a long way toward constructing Brown not as an artist somehow working "above" history, but rather as a man whose works engaged, often subtly, the most volative issues of his day.

Watts's book, which he refers to as a "cultural biography" (xv), aims to provide "a close reading of all Brown's writings" in order to uncover "broader connections between literature and society, longer trajectories of intellectual development, and more coherent patterns of development in his life" (xvi). For the most part, Watts is able to do this; indeed, his book skillfully and admirably explores Brown as a writer whose "biography" can be interpreted not only by specific personal events in his life (such as his wooing of his future wife, Elizabeth Linn), but also by larger social and cultural events (such as conflicts over the Louisiana Territory). More significantly, with few exceptions (Watts does not examine much of Brown's revealing short fiction, such as "Thessalonica: A Roman Story"), Watts's book provides much-needed analysis of some of Brown's critically neglected prose, such as his enigmatic *Historical Sketches*. Brown, for Watts, is an author of contradictions, at once yearning for cultural stability yet also energized and excited by the chaos of an American culture in transition. Anticipating the critiques of "the early modern West" by authors like Melville, Marx, Freud, and Emerson, Watts concludes, Brown strove to "penetrate the ideology of liberal capitalist culture with its mask of rational, calculating self-interest, to reach the instinctual heart pulsating deep within, and to somehow reconcile the two" (199-200).

While Watts probably wouldn't find many cultural critics willing to quarrel with his assumptions about the "dark side" of emergent capitalism (at one point Watts writes that "by the early nineteenth century, he [Brown] was helping validate the hegemony of liberal capitalism by clothing it in the sober, respectable garb of bourgeois civilization" [163]), Watts sometimes too readily assumes that market society encouraged the worst human impulses. Although Watts does persuasively, and often eloquently, explore Brown's writings in light of social, economic, and political issues, greater attention to relevant material artifacts (such as, for instance, some evidence of the corrosive effects of capitalism on public life) would help situate Watts's overall discussion of Brown's engagement with these issues.

Christophersen's book, like Watts's, takes a turn for the historical, contending that Brown "believed that capitalism was transforming the nation's values, threatening to reduce her conduct to the Old World common denominator of narrow self-interest" (10). Unlike Watts, however, Christophersen, while briefly mentioning some of Brown's lesser-known works, focuses on Brown's "four romances"—*Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Arthur*, *Mervyn*, and *Edgar Huntly*. Christophersen reads Brown through a somewhat darker lens than Watts, contending that "Brown's Gothic romances. . . are *post*revolutionary fictions about the dangers of freedom, individualism, rationalism, and self-assertion" (25). While Christophersen's overall reading of Brown as a skeptic is not new, his close readings do often provide fresh and provocative insights about Brown. Reading Brown's thematic concerns about ventriloquism, somnambulism, and yellow fever as larger cultural metaphors allows Christophersen to treat Brown's writing

as discourse. Indeed, at its best, Christophersen's book conflates "literary" concerns with "cultural" concerns easily and gracefully, as in his discussion of slavery and eighteenth-century fears about "black insurrection" (104-11).

One wishes that Christophersen had not limited his study to Brown's major novels. Although Christophersen explains that he is most interested in what Brown's Gothic writings reveal, his analyses do not grow out of any special features of the Gothic novel, since he does not argue for any connection between genre and content. Indeed, Christophersen's book would have been even richer were it to have explored some of Brown's less canonical works. His chapter "*Edgar Huntly*: Somnambulism vs. Self-Knowledge," for instance, does not even mention Brown's provocative short story, "Somnambulism: A Fragment." But this caveat is more a reflection of the reviewer's desire to see how Christophersen would have explored Brown's story than any disaffection with the book.

In short, both of these books make original and significant contributions to Brown studies. Situating Brown as a man trying to make sense of both the rich possibilities and dark consequences of life in the fledgling republic, they signal new and invigorating critical approaches to Brown.