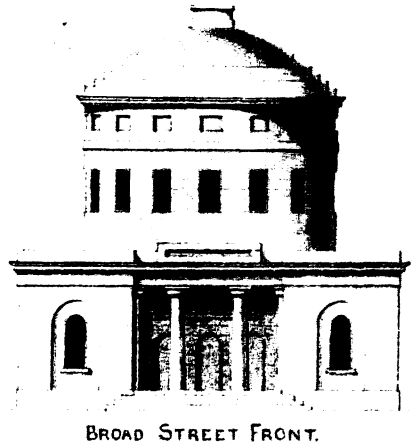


modernized by 1800

**the portrait of urban america,
especially philadelphia, in the
novels of charles brockden brown**



joseph j. feeney, s.j.

Can American cities be called “modernized” before the beginning of the industrial nineteenth century? On this question the closing sentence of Carl Bridenbaugh’s *Cities in Revolt* (1955) implies far more than it says: “The uprising against Great Britain is seen as the culmination of a deeper, more subtle change that encompassed the entire colonial urban experience[,] as the cities . . . silently and persistently revolted against the tyranny of the past and cast their lot with *modern* times.”¹ A later historian, studying Philadelphia’s poor at the end of the eighteenth century, focuses a bit more clearly on the issue and writes, “The Philadelphia we have been examining seems, in many ways, to be a very modern city.”² Though the approach may be oblique, the question itself grows clear: What is the state of modernization in Philadelphia and other cities in the early decades of American independence? In 1800, for example, the metropolis of Philadelphia had a population of about 70,000 people (about the same as Liverpool); New York had 60,000 people, and Baltimore, 27,000.³ Philadelphia enjoyed paved streets, sewers, piped water, public street-lighting and a model market; money was earned in trade and banking, in iron-working, gunpowder, paper and carriage-making.⁴ Can the Philadelphia of 1800, then, as well as other urban centers, be considered “modern” or “modernized” in any proper sense?

An analysis of this question at first seems hampered by the problem of adequate data and by the need for a clear definition of “modernization.” Yet the six novels of Charles Brockden Brown, all published between 1798

FIGURE ONE (above): Benjamin H. Latrobe’s Water Works, Broad Street Front, 1800. From an engraving printed with the permission of the Historical Society of Philadelphia.

and 1801, provide ample (though largely unresearched) material about the condition of Philadelphia and other East-coast cities at the end of the eighteenth century. These novels—*Wieland* (1798), *Ormond* (1799), *Edgar Huntly* (1799), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799-1800), *Clara Howard* (1801) and *Jane Talbot* (1801)—offer a detailed portrait of urban America. The scenes of New York, Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore picture not only the streets, buildings and commerce of the cities but also the values, thoughts and hopes of the people. The data in these novels are rich and varied, offering a more favorable picture of urban America than the one stressed by historians and by critics who treat of Brown's scenes of plague-ridden Philadelphia.⁵ Though Brown has been called, and is, a "minor master of shocking realism,"⁶ a fuller study of his novels shows a portrait of American cities that is broader, more balanced and more optimistic than a reader might expect from the novelist of the yellow-fever epidemic of 1793.

But are Brown's urban scenes historically accurate? It is, of course, potentially dangerous to use literary evidence as the base for historical conclusions. The transforming power of an artist's imagination is inevitably at work on his material, especially in periods of high romanticism. Yet Brown, while partly a romantic and Gothicism, is very much the realist. His critics treat him as a realist⁷ and, far more important and conclusive, several of Brown's near-contemporary reviewers themselves recognize the milieu and settings of his fiction as familiar and accurate. In a *North American Review* essay of 1819 the writer comments that Brown uses native American settings without romantic associations and places his events and characters in circumstances which the reader recognizes as familiar.⁸ Furthermore, in 1827 Richard Henry Dana, Sr., in a broad survey of Brown's novels, treats him as an urban novelist whose scenes of the city have "given such an air of truth to what he is about . . . that perhaps no writer ever made his readers so completely forget that they were not reading a statement of some serious matter of fact."⁹ Such historical testimony—as well as the very specificity of Brown's urban details—indicates a reasonable accuracy in his physical settings and in his human and social milieu.

There still remains, however, the problem of adequately defining "modernization." Though the concept is often defined in social science with an emphasis on industrialization and economics,¹⁰ such an approach is overly restrictive; by stressing business and production it underplays the correlative changes in society and in the individual. A broader and therefore more adequate definition is offered by the historian Richard D. Brown in his book *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600-1865*.¹¹ Here he contrasts modern and traditional societies, and defines modernization both by using abstract categories and by applying these categories to specific areas of American life. This analytic framework, satisfactorily broad but also clear and precise, provides an effective device for studying Charles Brockden Brown's urban portraits. Without entering into a prolonged discussion of R. D. Brown's theory,¹² I shall simply use his framework as a pragmatically helpful tool of analysis and

organization. His categories themselves are sufficiently clear: change, cosmopolitanism, urbanization, secularism and rationality, complexity in government and business, technology and efficiency, society and the individual. No one of these aspects, of course, can itself establish that a society is modern; modernization is confirmed only by the presence of a group of characteristics. But these qualities, as a group, are to be found in the urban societies described in Charles Brockden Brown's novels; new conclusions thus emerge about Brown's view of the city and—the hazards of literary evidence being duly recognized—about the American cities themselves. In such a study, furthermore, R. D. Brown's framework undergoes its own interesting test. Two conclusions, then, gradually appear: that Charles Brockden Brown paints an optimistic and modern picture of urban America in 1800, and that America's major cities and especially Philadelphia, as reflected in Brown's novels, were substantially modernized by the end of the eighteenth century.

* * * * *

“Change,” according to Richard D. Brown, “in all spheres of life, is a characteristic feature of the modern society, and from this reality flow many of its distinctive elements.”¹³ For his part, Charles Brockden Brown saw his novels as prophecies of change. In his preface to *Edgar Huntly* he stresses the newness of American literature, maintaining that American writing should differ from European letters in its motivation (its “springs of action”), its fresh curiosity about things and its American subject matter.¹⁴ To emphasize this difference he chose to set his novels in the cities of the new United States and, in the case of *Edgar Huntly*, he placed his action in “the West”—the upper reaches of the Delaware River—so that he could use Indians in the plot. But perhaps the clearest indication of Brown's interest and confidence in change appears in the words of his character Clithero Edny, a well-educated Irish immigrant, who hungers for independence and justice and confidently asserts that “change is precious for its own sake” (EH, 35, 37, 90).

Together with an interest in change, a modernized society prizes cosmopolitanism and rapidly moves both people and information. In Brown's novels the urban society is cosmopolitan, socially and geographically mobile, and has a well-developed system of postal and newspaper communications. The Wieland family, for example, emigrated from Germany and lived for a time in England before coming to dwell in Philadelphia on the banks of the Schuylkill (W, 6-7). Clara Wieland's uncle invites her to travel with him in Europe and then to establish a home in France or Italy (W, 179, 207, 266-67). Clara knows some Italian, the Wieland family can read and understand German, and their Philadelphia friend Henry Pleyel has spent several years in Europe and is familiar with Germany, Spain and France (W, 27, 41, 47, 77-78, 88). Arthur Mervyn's friend, Clavering, comes from England and looks forward to traveling in Europe (AM, I, 30, 68). And Mervyn's patroness and future wife is English by birth, of Portuguese stock and a recent arrival in Philadelphia;

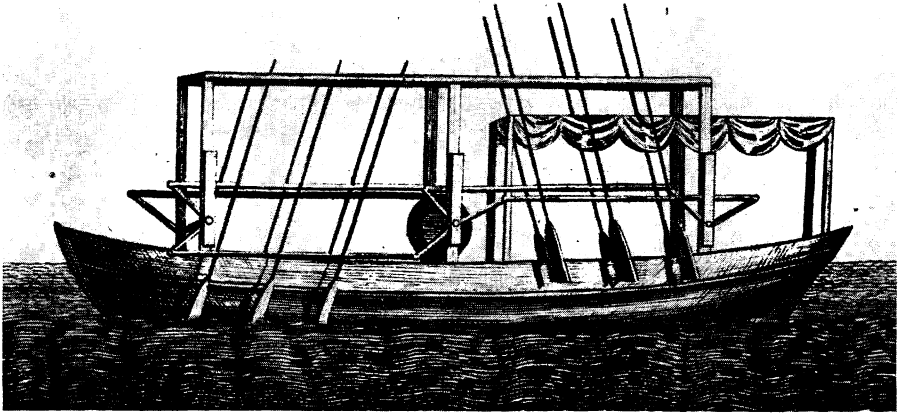


FIGURE TWO: The John Fitch Steamboat, in a cut from the *Columbia Magazine*, 1786. John Fitch (1743-1798), a Philadelphia inventor, built the first boat in America which was successfully propelled by steam. The small craft in the engraving, designed for two men and operated by six paddles on each side powered by steam-driven cranks, represents an early stage in Fitch's work. By 1787, Fitch had designed a steamboat that was 40 feet long and able to carry sixty passengers. His "Thornton" (1788) could go 8 mph, and in 1790 he provided a regular passenger service on the Delaware River, from Philadelphia to Burlington, Bristol, Bordertown, and Trenton. The delegates to the Convention which was drafting the Constitution who took a steam-powered ride in the summer of 1787 were not junketing only: the ride was relevant to their discussions of whether Congress should be given the power to regulate commerce between the states.

The illustration is printed with the permission of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

she and her family have relatives and financial dealings in Liège, Rouen and Frankfurt (AM, II, 197, 199, 201, 206). One American returns to the United States after some years in Europe; a woman tours France and Sicily; a young painter studies in Italy (JT, 47, 119; CH, 359, Or, 27, 205). An English noblewoman visits America and refugees from the French Revolution find asylum in Philadelphia (Or, 192-98, 204). In the same city customers in a music store converse in French and a company of English actors perform comedy in a new theatre (Or, 70, 76). People travel within the United States from Maine to Savannah, Easterners anticipate a visit to the West Coast and a native American comments that "I have seen much of the world" (AM, II, 210; W, 224, 230; CH, 382). And Arthur Mervyn himself is the quintessence of geographic and social mobility: originally a poor farmboy from the country around Philadelphia, he goes to the city, finds work, intends for a while to study medicine, marries a wealthy foreign-born woman and plans to go to Europe after the marriage. In the young United States urban society is quite cosmopolitan and mobile.

Communications in this society are broad, effective and smooth. Mail between Philadelphia and Wilmington is delivered in one day, while letters between Philadelphia and New York take only two days (JT, 51, 53, 57-60). Letters can be posted at any hour, travel by stagecoach and are

“delivered through the medium of the post-office” (AM, I, 119; II, 23-24). Pleyel receives frequent letters from Germany, and Ormond carries on an “epistolary discussion” with learned men “in different parts of the world” (W, 149; Or, 173). Clara Wieland, in fact, goes so far as to assert that “the miscarriage of a letter was hardly within the reach of possibility,” even in international correspondence (W, 45). Newspaper communication, too, is thriving, and newspapers in the American cities cover local news, business affairs and international politics. One Philadelphia sheet treats of local affairs as well as material from “a British paper”; information about stolen bills-of-exchange can be circulated “in all the trading-towns from Portsmouth to Savannah” (W, 147-48; AM, II, 27). Newspaper readers learn about French and English politics, and because of his “newspaper knowledge,” even the young Arthur Mervyn can understand a sophisticated conversation “of fleets and armies, of Robespierre and Pitt” (AM, II, 149).¹⁵

Arthur’s adopted city, Philadelphia, has itself become urbanized and modern. A new arrival enters the city over a toll bridge, to find paved streets and lofty buildings which have high staircases and walls “covered with painted canvas” (AM, I, 35, 47). The city provides public street lighting, with Market Street boasting “a triple row of lamps [which] presented a spectacle enchanting and new” (AM, I, 5, 27, 35). Even at night the city’s buildings, lights and noise impress a boatman on the Delaware River, and Philadelphia is rightly called a “metropolis” (AM, I, 4, 117). But urbanization has not left American cities unscarred. In the novel *Ormond* Constantia Dudley and her father are victims of urban poverty in New York, while Philadelphia offers evil smells, poor food, unwholesome labor, foul discords and irksome companions (AM, I, 24). Young men, coming to the city to make their fortune, find no family there and often do not have even a friend (AM, I, 134). When the yellow-fever epidemic strikes Philadelphia in 1793 the city dwellers grow ill and die while the country folk are untouched and safe; the city hospital at Bush Hill is so crowded and unsanitary that even entering the hospital as a patient comes to mean certain death (AM, I, 135, 159, 172-74). Yet young farm girls still yearn to come to the city, and the country-bred Arthur Mervyn—though he first resolves “to avoid those [urban] seats of depravity and danger”—later affirms that “if cities are the chosen seats of misery and vice, they are likewise the soil of all the laudable and strenuous productions of mind” (AM, I, 154; II, 77, 96).

Charles Brockden Brown’s city dwellers live in a secularized society. Both Theodore and Clara Wieland receive a secular education—their father intentionally avoids a religious college or boarding school¹⁶—and Clara once goes out of her way to assert that “I address no supplication to the Deity” (W, 5, 22). After their father’s death they even turn his sylvan “temple” into a secular shrine of art and learning, ornamenting it with a harpsichord, a bust of Cicero and evenings of intellectual discussion (W, 26). Clara considers an uncle more trustworthy because he is a skeptic and naturalist, another man is “an atheist in morals,” and during an

extraordinary discussion of religion and secularity, Jane Talbot denies that “the belief of a Christian [is] essential to every human excellence” (W, 21, 68, 74; JT, 99, 130-37). For some characters even death does not evoke religious considerations (Or, 57, 210). Not all of Brown’s characters, to be sure, subscribe to these views, but even the believers of 1800 accept religious freedom, pluralism and toleration. Post-Revolutionary Philadelphia includes people of many religions and of no religion, while characters praise “the freedom of religious sentiments” and clearly distinguish between the role of religion and the role of government (W, 12, 42, 82). A cultured Jewish woman thrives in Quaker Philadelphia, and young Arthur Mervyn easily tolerates political and religious diversity; even in the farming country west of the city a certain toleration prevails, for a Quaker family allows Arthur (a non-Quaker) to live with them—though they refuse to permit marriage outside the Quaker community (AM, I, 125; II, 198-200, 217). These men and women of the Enlightenment have created a secular, tolerant culture.

They also enjoy free enquiry and expect rational and objective explanations. In conflict they appeal to abstract rights and laws; in planning for the future they again depend on reason. Clara Wieland, for



FIGURE THREE: “The South East Corner of Third, and Market Streets,” Philadelphia. The large building in the illustration was called “Kooke’s Building,” and was built c. 1792 by Joseph Kooke (also Cooke), a goldsmith and jeweler. It was a commercial emporium, with splendid shops on the ground floor and dwellings above. At the time this was a commercial district, and the building was constructed to emulate, in Philadelphia, the commercial districts of London. It is the sort of “lofty” building that Charles Brockden Brown would have known and that Arthur Mervyn would have seen on his arrival in Philadelphia in 1793.

The illustration, printed with permission of the Library Company of Philadelphia, was engraved in 1799 and published in 1800. It is from the famous series of 28 engravings, titled *The City of Philadelphia, in the State of Pennsylvania North America; as it appeared in the Year 1800*, by William Birch (1755-1834) and his son, Thomas Birch (1779-1851).

example, seeks a scientific explanation for her father's death; her uncle, a medical doctor, is a skeptical reasoner and an expert in medical and psychological case-histories (W, 21, 104, 119, 202). Jane Talbot considers herself "a rational creature" and refuses to change her opinions unless reasons are offered her (JT, 63). Another woman "was unacquainted with religion" and quite indifferent to it; "she formed her estimate of good and evil on nothing but terrestrial and visible consequences" (Or, 175). Ormond's "disbelief was at once unchangeable and strenuous," and he explains the universe as "a series of events connected by an undesigning and inscrutable necessity, and an assemblage of forms to which no beginning or end can be conceived" (Or, 176). And both Henry Pleyel and Clara Wieland, good philosophical disciples of John Locke, appeal often (as they put it) to "the testimony of my senses" (W, *passim*). When being practical or when philosophizing, Brown's city-dwellers are solidly rational. Even the young Mervyn, far less educated and intellectual than the Wieland circle, is a rationalist who considers friendship "more rational" than family affections, who asks scientific questions (whether rustics are exempt from the yellow-fever epidemic because they remain only a few hours in the city) and who carefully tests out his theories and conclusions (AM, I, 135; II, 95, 98).

In cases of conflict—and even with regard to political theory—modern people appeal not to the authority of tradition but to law and to abstract rights and liberties. Mervyn appeals to equity and law when a woman's liberty is restricted, and another woman, trusting in "public office" and government by law, defends her sex's right to equality (AM, II, 80-81, 91, 97). Various characters appeal to "justice" or "right," and even the villainous Welbeck, asking Mervyn to help him bury a body, does not ask that Arthur's "demeanour should conform to any other standard than justice" (JT, 75; Or, *passim*; AM, I, 108). The rule of law is invoked in such diverse practical questions as the capture of a ship, the exhumation of a body, a landlady's right to unpaid rent and discharge from a debtor's prison (AM, I, 103, 123; II, 36, 173). In the abstract, too, Brown's urban dwellers appeal to theoretical, secular principles. When Pleyel praises "the security of civil rights in Saxony," young Wieland patriotically argues that the United States has the world's best security and liberty (W, 42). One man proclaims himself willing to die "for the liberties of mankind" and, with great enthusiasm, a woman praises the French Revolution—her eyes and face lighting up with delight—and she announces herself "an adorer of liberty" (Or, 196, 201-02).

The young republicans in Brown's novels also engage in careful, rational planning for the future. Such planning ("rational manipulation" is Richard Brown's phrase for it¹⁷) is highly individualized in the novels with few examples of government planning. (The novelist himself, though, in his preface to *Arthur Mervyn*, foresees public, civic designing of "schemes of reformation and improvement" in the aftermath of Philadelphia's yellow-fever epidemic [AM, I, 3].) Private individuals, in any case, make plans for their future and expect to control their destinies through reason

and foresight. One woman, with her brother unfairly imprisoned for debt, carefully administers and designs the family business (AM, II, 46-47). Other women clearly analyze their present conditions, construct a future and are ready, if need be, to support themselves by their own labors (JT, 22; Or, 81-82). But Arthur Mervyn is the best planner of them all. In his early years he coolly considers the profit and working-conditions of a farm life, and considers leaving home for the city (AM, II, 125-26). In Philadelphia he determines to avoid the yellow fever not by traditional remedies—smelling gunpowder, vinegar or tar—but through cleanliness, exercise and diet (AM, I, 6). To a young rural woman he recommends a future in the city and even a voyage to Europe, but then calculatingly decides not to marry her (AM, II, 78). As for his own life, he reflects on his circumstances, plans how many years to devote to certain occupations and shows himself a very modern young man as he thinks out and designs his own future:

Competence, fixed property and a settled abode, rural occupations and conjugal pleasures, were justly to be prized; but their value could be known and their benefits fully enjoyed only by those who have tried all scenes; who have mixed with all classes and ranks; who have partaken of all conditions; and who have visited different hemispheres and climates and nations. The next five or eight years of my life should be devoted to activity and change; it should be a period of hardship, danger, and privation. It should be my apprenticeship to fortitude and wisdom, and be employed to fit me for the tranquil pleasures and steadfast exertions of the remainder of my life. (AM, II, 77)

In his life Mervyn did not actually follow these plans, but by doing such planning he clearly shows himself a modern young rationalist.

When a society is modernized, furthermore, it shows a growing complexity and interdependence in government and business. Though government plays a small role in Brown's novels (he is not in any way a political novelist), he quite often includes business and finance. In *Arthur Mervyn*, Philadelphia is presented as a commercial city, with Arthur's sometime patron Welbeck involved in questionable business and maritime enterprises; for a while Arthur serves as his commercial apprentice and even tries to reform his master.¹⁸ In *Edgar Huntly* a wealthy man invests both in international trade (a vessel in the wine trade) and in a \$7500 bill of exchange (EH, 152). Money and complex finance—including stocks and annuities—are important in *Clara Howard*, and the novel *Jane Talbot* deals in savings, quarterly income, bank stocks, store stocks, bonds and public funds (CH & JT, *passim*). Inexperienced young people, thinking money is earned only by the rental of houses and lands, gradually learn the mysteries of mortgages, and loans are offered at a five percent monthly interest (AM, I, 57; II, 28, 94). In Brown's world of commerce, trade is international, finance is sophisticated and moneymaking involves complex, interrelated systems of business and capital.

Though technology was reasonably well-developed in America by 1800,¹⁹ Brown does not write about it in his novels; at best he refers to “machines” and “mechanical employment,” though the meaning of these words is not fully clear (W, 242; EH, 121; AM, I, 23, 47).²⁰ A clearer sign of modernization in labor is the sense of time-thrift and efficiency developed by some of Brown’s working characters. Time-thrift is recognized as a way of making money, and Constantia Dudley learns through financial need to “become an economist of time as well as of money”; she learns this lesson so well that she becomes notable for her “economy of time and money and labour” (Or, 23, 29, 80).

The social groups in these novels—the citizens of New York, Baltimore and Philadelphia—manifest further modern characteristics: relativized social status, success based on performance, personal dynamism rewarded, women laboring outside their homes, children who are independent and migratory and the development of national and even international interests. In *Arthur Mervyn* both Welbeck and Mrs. Fielding are important because they are wealthy; in *Ormond* Stephen Dudley, once a wealthy New York apothecary and painter, loses his status when he loses his money and “in a moment . . . [is] thrown from the summit of affluence to the lowest indigence” (Or, 17). Mervyn, on the other hand, rises from farmboy to prospective medical doctor and finally marries a wealthy widow. In the society of 1800, furthermore, success is largely based on performance. People set the highest value on competence, and a Baltimore woman owes her subsistence to her personal industry as a music-teacher (EH, 148; AM, II, 168). This woman, Fanny Maurice, is rewarded for her own dynamism. And, on almost every page, Arthur Mervyn shows how to make or take advantage of diverse opportunities for self-advancement. Another young woman, driven to poverty by her father’s reverses in business, moves the family home from New York to Philadelphia and prepares herself “with address and despatch” for a new career in teaching; an onlooker “marking her deportment would have perceived nothing but dignity and courage” (Or, 30-33). And a young Miss Carlton, with her brother indisposed, resourcefully takes control of the family business—though some consider it “strange employment for a lady”—and learns to support herself “by binding fast the bargains which others made” (AM, II, 45-46). As these examples indicate, personal dynamism is rewarded and a number of women begin to labor in the larger world outside the domestic cares of their own homes. There is, though, a correlative decay in the sense of family as children become independent and migratory. Young people—Mervyn, his friend Wallace and his once-beloved Eliza Hadwin—migrate from farm to city and grow independent of their families. The Brown novels also have a whole cast of national and international wanderers: Carwin, Clithero Edny, Sarsefield, Jane Talbot’s cruel brother Frank. And though marriage is treated as a bliss in Brown’s novels, family life is rarely pleasant. Finally, even as the interests and conversations range, as we have seen, over international business, politics and news, this modernized society has lost some of the stability of tradition.

The role of the individual in this society has also changed. Instead of being multicompetent, the American of 1800 plays specialized roles. Arthur Mervyn, in his young dreams, pictures himself in certain specialized occupations—ploughman, mercantile or government copyist, carpenter, cabinetmaker, mechanic—and at one point plans to study medicine and join the group of physicians, surgeons and nurses in Brown’s fictional world (AM, I, 3, 7, 10-11, 22-23, 134, 163; W, 15, 179, 197, 264; EH, 72; Or, 49). Other characters function as printers, magistrates, judges, lawyers, economists, moral philosophers, policemen, merchants, tailors, schoolmasters, apothecaries, bankers, actors, goldsmiths, night-watchmen and booksellers. And an individual in this newly republican society is, in the modernized fashion, no longer a subject but an independent “citizen” (W, 175; AM, I, 129; EH, 37). These individuals, furthermore, feel a strong autonomy and sense of self. Clara Wieland, for example, prefers to live in her own cottage and administer her own household; she also travels into the city by herself, opposes the traditional feminine stereotype (“No effeminate weakness in me”) and spends the novel self-consciously analyzing her own reactions (W, 128, 177). Arthur Mervyn, too, perhaps the most self-confident person in all these novels,²¹ refuses to accept the limitations of conventional manners or behavior and even wishes to tell people everything about himself since he “felt no scruple on any occasion to disclose every feeling and every event”; “any one who could listen,” he continues, “found me willing to talk” (AM, II, 179). He wants to observe and think for himself, enjoys independence and command, intends to make his own decisions about the future and argues that *his own* happiness will be the motive for his moral decisions (AM, I, 10-11,

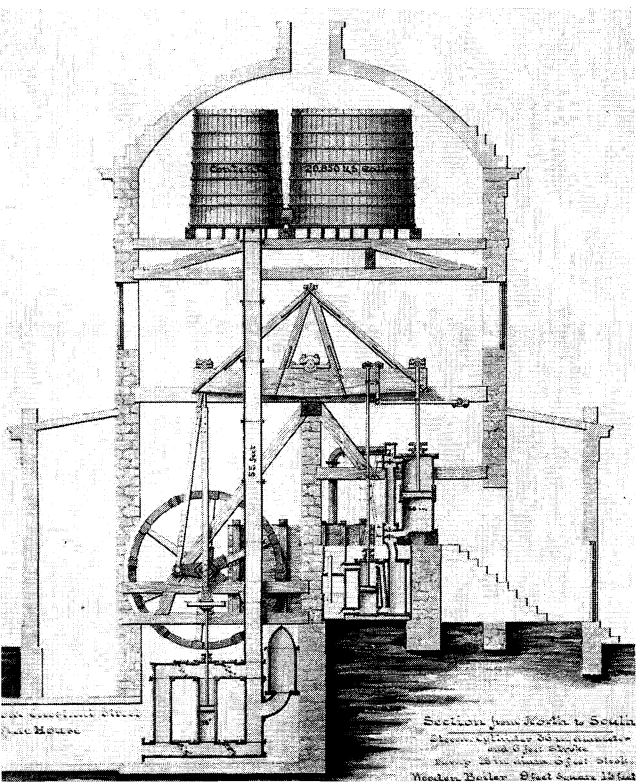


FIGURE FOUR: Benjamin H. Latrobe’s Water Works, Interior View. Benjamin H. Latrobe (1764-1820) was selected in 1799 by a new municipal Watering Committee to design a pumping system that would bring pure water from the Schuylkill River, thus replacing shallow wells which Philadelphians thought were a possible source of the city’s yellow fever epidemics. The system’s intake was at Chestnut Street and the Schuylkill. By means of two steam-engine pumps, tunnels and wooden pipes, the water was brought over a mile to the upper story of the Water Works (also called the Pump House), from here to be distributed through various wooden pipes to subscribers and hydrants. The Water Works interior is pictured in an engraving from the Historical Society of Philadelphia.

FIGURE FIVE: Latrobe's Water Works, Exterior View. The Water Works was built in 1800 and used until 1815; it was demolished in 1827-28. The building was faced in white marble, and became popularly known as "The Pepper Box." With dimensions of 60' x 60' x 60', it consisted of a round central pump room surrounded by offices. A harbinger of the Greek Revival in American architecture, the Water Works became, because of its location, the focus for civic occasions and public service. The engraving is from the Historical Society of Philadelphia.



16, 21-23). And this former farmboy, hardly feeling limited by his past, simply expects *every* good quality in his future wife (AM II, 190).

For Brown's Americans, living confidently in their new country, the future holds boundless hope and optimism. Even in the midst of the 1793 yellow-fever epidemic Dr. Stevens has confidence "in the vincibility of this disease" (AM, I, 3, 8). Young people expect to improve themselves through education, and their elders provide both country schools for farm children and free schools for Blacks (AM, I, 126-27; II, 17, 182-83; EH, 148). Individual expectations are high, with young men hoping to rise into wealth (AM, I, 171; II, 26). Arthur Mervyn—once the farmboy—dedicates his life to his own happiness and to the happiness of those he loves (once he even mentions his desire also to help the poor and hungry), and he lives in the conviction that "the future [is] within my power" (AM, II, 109-10, 122, 175). He maintains a continuing "spirit of improvement," and carefully (to use his words) "set about carrying my plan of life into effect." He always holds firmly to his "assurance that I was no insignificant and worthless being; that I was destined to be *something* in this scene of existence, and might some day lay claim to the gratitude and homage of my fellow men" (AM, II, 75, 178).

This brash young Arthur Mervyn is perhaps the most obvious example of individualism and future-orientation in these six novels, but Brown's full set of characters customarily look to the future with confidence. Whether they plan to improve society or, more commonly, to improve themselves, Brown's self-assured city-dwellers firmly expect both to design and to conquer the future.

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Between 1798 and 1800, while Brown was writing his first four novels, the artists William Birch and his son Thomas drew, engraved and

published a famous series of twenty-eight views of Philadelphia. The Birches quite consciously desired to portray and record a whole city, the metropolitan capital of the new nation, and they considered Philadelphia “raised, as it were, by magic power, to the eminence of an opulent city.” Their engravings portray a number of modern features: ships in the international trade, great banks, public street-lighting, many-storied buildings, noisy carts and sledges. Specialization is indicated by the signs on different shops and by such buildings as “Surgeons’ Hall,” “New Theatre,” “Congress Hall” and “Pennsylvania Hospital.” Pictures of Lutheran, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches indicate religious tolerance. The city’s Water Works in Centre Square show an interest in technology; the public clock on the State House perhaps suggests a concern for time and efficiency.²² These Birch engravings celebrate Philadelphia’s success and urbanization in 1800 and imply a clear modernity.

Charles Brockden Brown’s novels, though, offer even more detailed a picture of America’s cities and of their citizens and show an urban society substantially modernized by 1800. Newspaper and postal communications among East-coast cities are wide and efficient. People customarily travel from city to city, and to Europe and the West Coast; Philadelphia itself, already 118 years old, is a cosmopolitan and secular city whose merchants and financiers join in a complex, international system of business and investment. Society, though not classless, demonstrates its willingness to have people move from class to class if they are ambitious and competent. Individuals show themselves specialized and independent, accustomed to personal rights and employing reason both to analyze the past and plan for the future. Ever open to new experiences, the young enjoy great self-confidence and a sure hope for the future.

The most striking single picture of modernization, finally, appears in the two volumes of *Arthur Mervyn* and in its brash young hero. The novel itself is urban, and portrays a society in the midst of change: farm families breaking up, class structures grown fluid, the yellow-fever epidemic generating public improvements, individuals moving far both socially and geographically. And the novel’s hero is Brown’s most modern character. Never satisfied and nervously ambitious, Mervyn shows an early willingness to leave home and easily changes occupations from farmhand to business aide to medical student to moneyed husband. He prefers city to country and gladly travels for work or pleasure. A rational man, he analyzes himself, plans how to conduct his life and is willing to ask any question whatever. He is tolerant of others, furthermore, and has vague religious beliefs and a willingness to accept other sects and tenets. In his self-confidence he holds back no secrets about himself and possesses a near-boundless ambition. This modern man of a modern society welcomes change with his indomitable “spirit of improvement” and confidently proclaims that “the future [is] in my power.”

St. Joseph’s University

notes

This study has grown out of, and gratefully acknowledges, an NEH Summer Seminar, "Literature and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America," directed by Stuart Levine at the University of Kansas, June 19-August 11, 1978.

The author is also grateful for the comments and suggestions of Randall M. Miller of the History Department of Saint Joseph's University.

1. *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York, 1955), 425. Emphasis mine.
2. John K. Alexander, "The City of Brotherly Fear: The Poor in Late-Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," in Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz, eds., *Cities in American History* (New York, 1972), 89. In a revision of this essay the author shaded his statement: "The Philadelphia we have been examining was still a preindustrial city. Many of the elements we associate with the modern city had yet to make their appearance. Still, Philadelphia of the late eighteenth century seems, in many ways, to be similar to modern cities" ("Poverty, Fear, and Continuity: An Analysis of the Poor in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," in Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller, eds., *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940* [Philadelphia, 1973], 26).
3. Allen F. Davis, "Introduction," in Davis and Haller, 8; Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (Cambridge, 1962), 7; Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America During the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1909), I, 28.
4. White and White, 8-9.
5. White and White, for example, offer a negative view of the city; so does Leslie A. Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York, 1966), 482-85. More balanced views appear in Charles N. Glaab and A. Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York, 1967), 53-81, and David R. Weimer, *The City as Metaphor* (New York, 1966), 1-13. Among commentators on Brown's work, many argue that he presents an unpleasant view of the city: George Arthur Dunlap, *The City in the American Novel, 1789-1900* (1934, rpt. New York, 1965), *passim*; R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1958), 97; Janis P. Stout, *Sodoms in Eden: The City in American Fiction Before 1860* (Westport, Connecticut, 1976), 47; and W. B. Berthoff, "Adventures of the Young Man: An Approach to Charles Brockden Brown," *American Quarterly*, 9 (1957), 426-29.
6. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, New York, 1957), 30, 37.
7. For discussions of Brown's realism, see Lillie Deming Loshe, *The Early American Novel* (New York, 1907), 50; Harry R. Warfel, *Charles Brockden Brown: American Gothic Novelist* (Gainesville, 1949), 5, 12, 144; David Lee Clark, *Charles Brockden Brown: Pioneer Voice of America* (Durham, North Carolina, 1952), 191-92; Donald A. Ringe, *Charles Brockden Brown* (New York, 1966), 63-67, 83-87, 107; Henri Petter, *The Early American Novel* (Columbus, 1971), 233; Alexander Cowie, "Historical Essay," in Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland, or the Transformation: An American Tale and Memoirs of Carwin, the Biloquist*, Bicentennial Edition, ed. Sydney J. Krause et al. (Kent, Ohio, 1977), 318; Norman S. Grabo, "Historical Essay," in Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793*, Bicentennial Edition, ed. Sydney J. Krause et al. (Kent, Ohio, 1980), 449, 463, 473; and James H. Justus, "Arthur Mervyn, American," *American Literature*, 42 (November, 1970), 314-15.
8. Anon., "The Life of Charles Brockden Brown . . . (1815). By William Dunlap," in *North American Review*, 9 (1819), reprinted in Bernard Rosenthal, ed., *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown* (Boston, 1981), 30-31, 34-35.
9. "The Novels of Charles Brockden Brown," in *The United States Review and Literary Gazette*, 2 (August, 1827), reprinted in Rosenthal, 50.
10. See, e.g., W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1971), or Alex Inkeles and David Horton Smith, *Becoming Modern: Individual Change in Six Developing Countries* (Cambridge, 1974).
11. New York, 1976. R. D. Brown also discusses this concept in his earlier articles, "Modernization and the Modern Personality in Early America, 1600-1685: A Sketch of a Synthesis," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2 (1971-72), 201-28, and "Modernization: A Victorian Climax," *American Quarterly*, 27 (1975), 533-48.
12. This study devoted to Charles Brockden Brown is not the appropriate place, in the author's opinion, for a full discussion or justification of R. D. Brown's modernization theory; it uses R. D. Brown's work more as a helpful definition and analytic tool than as a general theory of history. Brown's book and its reviewers amply debate his methodology, intellectual assumptions, "idealist" epistemology, utility and interrelationship of categories, creative insight and choice of synthetic model. See Rowland Berthoff, *Journal of American History*, 65 (June, 1978), 125-27; Richard Harvey Brown, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (October, 1977), 656-57; Robert J. Cottrol, *New England Quarterly*, 51 (June, 1978), 273-75; Richard N. Current, *Journal of Southern History*, 44 (May, 1978), 279-80; James J. Farrell, *Journal of Social History*, 11 (Summer, 1978), 580-82; and James A. Henretta, *Reviews in American History*, 5 (December, 1977), 445-52.

13. *Modernization*, 12.

14. David Lee Clark, ed., *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (New York, 1928), xxiii. For the other Brown novels I use the following editions: Fred Lewis Pattee, ed., *Wieland, or The Transformation* (New York, 1958); *Ormond, or The Secret Witness and Clara Howard, or The Enthusiasm of Love* (Philadelphia, 1887); *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (Philadelphia, 1887); and *Jane Talbot* (Philadelphia, 1887). Further references will be placed in the text, using the following abbreviations: EH, W, Or, CH, AM and JT.

15. For the historians' view of Philadelphia's cosmopolitanism see, e.g., Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1962), 5-9, 55, 75, 77, 138-40, 157-59, 171-72, 194-95, 208-11, 240, 267, 318, 367-68, and Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia, 1682-1763* (Chapel Hill, 1948), 90, 94, 139, 227.

16. See Larzer Ziff, "A Reading of *Wieland*," *PMLA*, 77 (1962), 55.

17. *Modernization*, 14-15.

18. Tolles (p. 93) describes the customary practice: "The normal introduction to a mercantile career was an apprenticeship to an established merchant. The apprentice lived in the merchant's home, learned to keep accounts and write business letters, and performed routine tasks around the counting house, the store, or the wharf." Sam Bass Warner, Jr., studies Philadelphia capitalism in *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968); see also his definition of "privatism" in Bruce M. Stave, ed., "A Conversation with Sam Bass Warner, Jr.," *Journal of Urban History*, 1 (Nov., 1974), 93.

19. In his 1791 *Report on the Subject of Manufactures* Alexander Hamilton listed seventeen categories of "manufacturing establishments" already in operation independent of household production (Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 10 [New York, 1966], 283-84). In 1790 the factory system had been introduced in Providence, in 1793 Congress had to rewrite its three-year-old patent law because of the heavy rush for patents, and by 1798 Eli Whitney had invented the cotton gin and had instituted the "American system" in manufacturing firearms with interchangeable parts (John W. Oliver, *History of American Technology* [New York, 1956], 126-27, 131-32, 137). See also Thomas C. Cochran, *Frontiers of Change: Early Industrialism in America* (Oxford, 1981).

20. In the eighteenth century, for example, labor in general was referred to as "the mechanic arts" (Glaab and Brown, 18).

21. Ringe offers an excellent commentary on the novel and on Mervyn's character in his *Charles Brockden Brown*, 65-85.

22. Martin P. Snyder, *City of Independence: Views of Philadelphia Before 1800* (New York, 1965), 224-48.

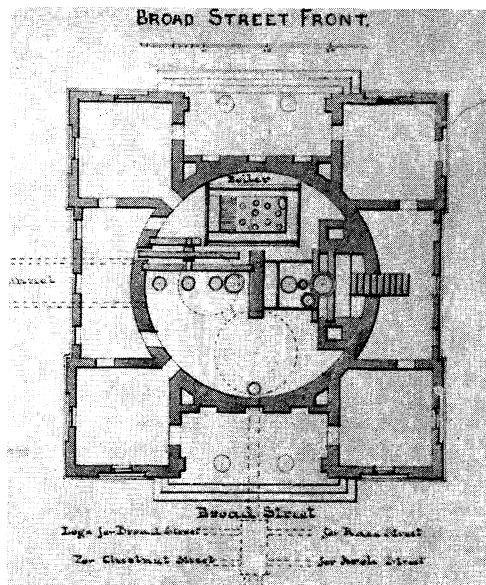


FIGURE SIX: Latrobe's Water Works. From an engraving of the floor plan, the Historical Society of Philadelphia.