



PROJECT MUSE®

The Oxford Handbook of Charles Brockden Brown ed. by Philip Barnard, Hilary Emmett, and Stephen Shapiro (review)

Evert Jan Van Leeuwen

Early American Literature, Volume 55, Number 2, 2020, pp. 565-570 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/759498>

her writing, readers are reminded of Webb's intense desire to connect with others, whether her children or fellow Quakers, and to share her stories and unique experiences.

Webb's less public work includes her travel diary; her "Short Memorial," which is a narrative prepared for her children; and a brief letter to her children. Her travel narrative describes her eighteen-month visit in North America, which included forays into North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire with fellow companion Mary Rogers in 1697. In literature and history classrooms, Webb's travel narrative will work nicely with any narratives by her contemporaries, such as Knight, Rowlandson, and even Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards, as she recounts meetings with slaves and Ranters, explains revelatory dreams, and describes her bodily exhaustion. Her essays and letters to her children, of course, bring to mind Bradstreet's poetry and her letter to her children. Both women clearly wanted to serve as spiritual mentors to their children. Webb's letters also importantly foreshadow Quaker women diarists Hannah Callendar Samson and Elizabeth Drinker, since both women use their diaries to communicate with their children at the end of the eighteenth century. *The Writings of Elizabeth Webb* is a fascinating addition to early American and transatlantic literature and will enhance classroom discussions and scholarship on early American history and literature, women's studies, and religious studies.

JENNIFER DESIDERIO *Canisius College*

The Oxford Handbook of Charles Brockden Brown

PHILIP BARNARD, HILARY EMMETT, and STEPHEN SHAPIRO, eds.
Oxford University Press, 2019
584 pp.

Twenty years ago the Charles Brockden Brown Society (CBBS) was founded "to stimulate interest in the life and writings of Charles Brockden Brown (1770–1810) as well as other writers from this period and to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and information among Brown scholars and other interested persons" (CBBS website). Since its incep-

tion the members of the society have developed (among other things) the *Brown Electronic Archive and Scholarly Edition* and have published newly annotated editions of Brown's principal literary works, as well as monographs and collections of essays on Brown and his circum-Atlantic world. *The Oxford Handbook of Charles Brockden Brown* stands as the society's crowning achievement to date. It is a tribute to the ideals of collaborative international scholarship and, in these increasingly digital times, underscores the worth of real-life productive debate within an international conference setting.

At around \$120 (£80 in the UK; €130 in the Netherlands) and nearly six hundred pages, the hardback edition of *The Oxford Handbook of Charles Brockden Brown* is not so much a classroom textbook as a perfect university library resource that offers students and professional scholars alike accessible, scholarly discussion and analysis of all aspects of this major early American author's life and work. It features a comprehensive critical overview of the extant scholarship, presents readers with important historical contexts, and contains clear signposts to new critical routes for the adventurous academic traveler to follow. Barnard, Emmett, and Shapiro have produced a wonderful addition to the Oxford Handbook series that does exactly what such a handbook should do. When read from cover to cover, it also contains a clear thesis arguing for the relevance of Brown's writings to contemporary American and wider circum-Atlantic culture and society.

The handbook is divided into eight parts, each of which contains multiple essays, thirty-five in total (excluding the introduction). While each section stands on its own and is clearly titled to highlight the content of the essays, the sections also complement each other. Readers will be richly rewarded by studying part 5, "Politics and the World System," immediately following part 1, "Biography." Together these parts make up a detailed portrait of the writer in his world, so to speak, with cogent discussions of the intellectual, political, and religious contexts in which the young author's mind developed. Similarly, part 2, "Romances," is complemented by part 4, "Writings in Other Genres," and part 7, "Literary Forms, Aesthetics, and Culture." Together these sections offer an exhaustive study of the development of Brown's literary techniques, thematic preoccupations, and ideas on the potential agency of fiction. Part 3, "The History-Fiction Nexus," and part 6, "The Body and Medical Knowledge," explore the territories of early American scientific and philosophical discourse, revealing that Brown was

not just a novelist but a public intellectual engaging in critical debate on complex aesthetic, social, political, and scientific problems in his era.

The reader of the complete handbook will learn that the multifaceted nature of Brown's professional writing career stems from his familial origins and the tumultuous era in which he grew up. In the opening biographical section, Lisa West explains how the original "inner light" concept of the Quaker community of the seventeenth century "must have seemed positively anarchical to their contemporaries" (8). In an essay further exploring the Quaker milieu, Robert Battistini explains that "Quaker allegiance was to a universal realm of religious practice, and thus they would not swear allegiance to a political state" (319). As such, Brown's mind was from the outset one that looked at America, if not from the margins, at least from a position outside the ideological mainstream.

The handbook further details how the young Brown joined both a legal and a literary society (13) and was influenced by and seriously discussed the fiction and politics of "Woldwinite" (181) writers such as the British radicals Godwin and Wollstonecraft. This further stimulated his independence of thought (I believe the term *Woldwinite* is a neologism coined by the members of the Charles Brockden Brown Society that conflates the names Wollstonecraft and Godwin). While these observations are not new—it is after all a handbook presenting in part an overview of Brown scholarship to new as well as more informed readers—what the handbook does so well is connect and intertwine Brown's biographical contexts to the formal and thematic characteristics of his many and diverse writings.

Brown was a young intellectual of Quaker background raised in a socially, politically, and intellectually revolutionary era. The combined essays in the handbook make clear that through engaging directly with current debates, Brown became deeply interested in "the workings of the mind" (13). He was devoted to writing about communal as well as subjective experience in the young Republic, not only in novels but also for the periodicals of the day, which disseminated public debate on current topics through philosophical articles, dialogues, letters, and short fictions. The early essays of the handbook show Brown first and foremost as a writer of "speculative narrative[s]" (19) and "philosophical fiction" (26) with a "utilitarian rationale" (26). Brown sought not merely to entertain, but to awaken, enlighten, and educate his readers. As such, he takes a central position within the transatlantic "Woldwinite" school.

While the handbook emphasizes that Brown was much more than an early American novelist, it is understandable that many of the essays do discuss his major prose fictions. These remain the texts mostly taught at university level now, but I am sure that the impact of the handbook will change this. What makes the critical explorations of the novels in the handbook so valuable is that they do not just outline the scholarship extant on *Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Edgar Huntly*, and *Arthur Mervyn*. They distill from the published scholarship and the new research conducted for this volume a coherent literary-theoretical model from which Brown's novelistic output can be understood as a unified body of work. Formally, his fictional output shows a focus on "dramatic language" and "invented dialogue" (15), developed from the eighteenth-century epistolary genre. The dialogic nature of Brown's fiction underscores its speculative tendencies. What Andy Doolen describes as "the ambivalences, ambiguities, and elusiveness of Brown's novels" (359) makes them candidly polyphonic, rather than merely dialogic. What is foregrounded in Brown's fiction is the existence of a multiplicity of competing voices in any society. Dialogue, while crucial to the well-being of any community, does not necessarily have to lead to closure. Debates are not necessarily won or lost, as many current politicians in America, Britain, and my own country—the Netherlands—seem to demand. Debate can and possibly should be ever ongoing in a never-ending process of open communication between individual minds belonging to different social groups and schools of thought.

While Brown has been a canonical author since the last quarter of the twentieth century, his popular reputation is still that of America's first Gothic writer. In what can be considered one of the foundational texts of Gothic Studies, *The Literature of Terror* (Routledge, 1980/1996), David Punter points out that "the Gothic is revealed as not an escape from the real but a deconstruction and dismemberment of it" (85). In light of Brown's interest in polyphony, it is not surprising that he turned to the Gothic tradition in fiction, with its characteristic multivoiced narratives of stories within stories and labyrinthine plots. In his essay on Brown's brand of Gothic, Robert Miles poignantly highlights a remarkable moment of synchronicity that foregrounds the extent to which Brown's literary enterprise was thoroughly Gothic if not specifically American at the outset. He shows that "Charles Brockden Brown and Francisco Goya . . . in the very same year produce[d] exactly the same trope for post-Enlightenment dystopia"

(412). He is referring to Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* and Brown's *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, both of 1799. Miles's essay is significant in drawing Brown's Gothic away from the critical narrative that stresses its difference to British models and toward a more thoroughly transatlantic perspective of the genre: "American Gothic lies not in the Western content (Native Americans, panthers, wilderness) but in the doubling between Clithero and Edgar, Europe and America" (420). Miles convincingly argues that Brown did not so much invent American Gothic as he, borrowing the Gothic's focus on "the tendency of history's unfinished business to haunt the present," developed "a variation on a theme" (422).

One of the central themes in Brown's writing—fictional, historical, and philosophical—that the handbook foregrounds is what Duncan Faherty calls "the dangers of disingenuous speech" (53). Many essays in the handbook reveal that Brown was deeply concerned with obscurantism and obfuscation in all forms of discourse. In *Wieland*, he speculated on the pernicious effects of "mysterious plans to unsettle domestic harmony" (55) and allegorically "emphasize[d] the implausibility of total isolation" (57). If only the current American president had read *Wieland*. Nicholas E. Miller shows that Brown's novels were not only polyphonic but also overtly political: "*Ormond* became a sprawling narrative of conspiracy and contagion, an experiment in deconstructing the bonds that hold us together as a society" (66). Not only national but also international politics was on Brown's mind when he wrote *Edgar Huntly*, which reveals how "acts of discovery forge paths not only to enlightenment but also to madness and colonial violence" (98). The essays on Brown's romances not only foreground the current political relevance of Brown's Gothic mode. They also explain convincingly how his later so-called sentimental novels are natural formal and thematic progressions from his earlier dark-Romantic writings. In this light, Brown's career as a novelist shows a marked parallel with that of his early idol William Godwin, whose later novels also turned away from the Gothic toward a more ironic, self-reflexive, and self-critical sentimental mode.

What makes Brown an early American author directly relevant to the contemporary American scene is his continued epistemological exploration of historical and fictional writing. As such, he is a clear forebear of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who developed his theory of the dissident potential of prose romance about half a century later. Philip Barnard's discussion of

“Brown’s evolving model of romance as conjectural history” (173) places Brown at the center of current debates on the trustworthiness and believability of written discourse. It is well-known that George Lippard invented American Revolutionary myths that became folk truths within popular culture through their wide dissemination in print. Long before Lippard wielded his historical wand, Brown was concerned with “how difficult it is to make distinctions between the writing of history and fiction” (207). This epistemological conundrum gives much of Brown’s writing the “slyly metatextual” (230) quality that Elizabeth Hewitt discovered in his “Henrietta Letters.” Brown is acutely aware of “the difficulties of determining the truth and the role of public or official documents in doing so” (211). Again, my mind turns to the current political turmoil in America and the concerns around the current president’s rhetorical style in speech and writing. Just today the news in the Netherlands reported on the way in which Trump’s assistant Peter Navarro made up a fictional expert on Chinese politics and culture, Ron Vara, whom he quotes to underscore his own arguments concerning American-Chinese relations. This is not “fake news,” but “news of faking.” It is a case of intellectual fraud for which any student at a university department would risk being expelled. Mark Kamrath emphasizes that Brown was “acutely conscious of competing claims and the unreliability of sources” (216), which makes his body of work uniquely rich source material for interdisciplinary and diachronic research into the intertextual relations between literary, historical, political, and even scientific discourses. If Brown’s first novel, “of violence in the Pennsylvania back-country[,] provided an alternative view of the American Revolution” (356), the experimental and inherently polyphonic nature of his fictional and nonfictional writings confirm Oliver Scheiding’s argument that “Brown’s writings contribute to the democratization of mind in the early national period” (456). The democratization of mind is an intellectual project that the current political rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic has revealed to be still very much ongoing. Read Charles Brockden Brown—or this wonderful and most timely handbook—today, better to understand the complexities, paradoxes, and ambiguities of polyphonic social, cultural, and political discourse tomorrow.

EVERT JAN VAN LEEUWEN *Leiden University, the Netherlands*