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The Novel and the Market in the Early Republic

As a young man in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia, Charles Brockden Brown loved to take long, solitary walks. A sickly childhood had prompted concerned parents and teachers to prescribe a regimen of more exercise and less study for the boy, and he began a routine of daily journeys on foot. As one observer noted, "so great were the benefits he received, that he continued his pedestrian exercises ever after." Although sometimes losing himself in abstraction and dreaming on these "solitary rambles," Brown also was invigorated by the physical activity and "his mind was constantly on the alert," according to family members. As the son of a Quaker merchant and land conveyancer, the youth undoubtedly wandered the streets near his family's South Second Street home or those near his father's office in the rear of St. Paul's church. This area lay in the heart of the booming commercial district of post-Revolutionary Philadelphia, a scant few hundred feet from the busy docks along a two-mile stretch of the Delaware River. Brown must often have viewed the ships filled with sugar and rum from the West Indies, indigo and rice from South Carolina, and mackerel and cod from New England lining the wharfs. When he ventured into the nearby countryside, young Brown also must have seen wagons rolling into the Philadelphia port from Delaware Valley farms, loaded with wheat and other foodstuffs bound for European markets. The influence of this enterprising milieu became evident in the mature Brown, as eventually he was drawn into the world of ledger sheets and commodities—first as the manager of several journalistic enterprises, then as a partner with his brothers in a mercantile company, and finally as an aspiring commercial lawyer.¹

However much Brown loved his daily sojourns on foot, he relished even
more the act of writing. In fact, writing transcended mere enjoyment and instruction to become something of an obsession for the young Philadelphian. As an adolescent schoolboy he scribbled poetry and essays; later, as a law student, he would stay up late into the night composing journal entries, letters, and fiction. By age twenty, Brown described his writing fervor as a "magician" and "enchanter" so powerful that it threatened to lure him "a greater distance from the tract of common sense than I am at present desirous of being." Then, in the mid-1790s, this literary compulsion exploded in a burst of creativity. By the turn of the century the youthful author would publish some six novels, numerous shorter pieces of fiction, and dozens of literary essays and book reviews. In the early 1800s he would become not only editor of three influential journals but also a political polemicist, translator, and historical novelist. Brown emerged as probably the leading literary figure in the early American republic. In his own words, writing dominated his life as both an expression of "soaring passion and intellectual energy" and a method to "enchain the attention and ravish the souls of those who study and reflect."²

These twin images—the solitary individual traversing the streets of an expanding commercial city and the emotive and pioneering writer struggling with ideas and sentiments, pen and paper—broadly suggest the enormously fluid and formative period that framed the career of Charles Brockden Brown. More particularly, they reveal in tantalizing fashion two massive trends at work in the post-Revolutionary republic. First, the young man wandering about Philadelphia in the 1780s and 1790s was witnessing part of a remarkable socioeconomic transformation. The decades between independence from Great Britain and the Panic of 1819 framed the consolidation of a market economy and market society in the United States. The ascendancy of "liberal capitalism," as this process has been defined, entangled growing numbers of citizens in complex webs of commodification and profit seeking that enshrined the competing individual as a social ideal.³ Second, Brown's frenetic writing activity clearly illustrated the gradual, simultaneous emergence of an American culture during the same period. In concert with the burgeoning efforts of other literati and artists, his novels, essays, and magazines served to usher in a distinctively American mode of cultural discourse and also to help formulate the modern notion of culture itself—an elevated, aesthetic search for beauty and truth separated from the tawdry material concerns of a utilitarian society.⁴

Thus, an aspiring young author in the late eighteenth century faced a situation of enormous change and uncertainty. Historical development had
raised important issues but resolved them only slowly and partially. The social and economic landscape was shifting in significant ways, while political perceptions of authority, obligation, and citizenship were assuming new forms. At the same time, pressure mounted from a number of directions for the reformulation of cultural values and moral commitments in the new context of market endeavor. For writers, this emergence of a “liberal America” brought in its wake troubling questions about the meaning and nature of intellectual activity, and about the meaning and nature of selfhood. The Revolution and its aftermath had shaped a new arena for literature and letters in the young American republic. Its parameters, however, became visible only gradually in light of several broad and complex trends.

In the three or four decades after the War for Independence, a social and economic revolution of massive proportions slowly gathered momentum to transform American life. The severing of political ties with Great Britain, it seemed, had intensified an erosion of long-standing restraints on the scope of individual action. Traditional colonial ideals of paternalism in social organization, moral economy and mercantilism in economic activity, and a virtuous republicanism in public affairs began to wither under the intense heat of a historical “release of energy.” Trends that had been only dimly evident earlier in the eighteenth century—geographic mobility, challenges to social deference, the search for profit in the marketplace, popular political participation—flourished and intermingled in the hot-house atmosphere of the early republic. Benjamin Franklin, a prophet before his time in the mid-1770s with his message of personal ambition, thrift, investment, and utilitarian work, became by the 1790s the prototype of the American citizen in the early republic.

Several dramatic developments gave glimpses of this shift. By the mid-1790s, with British imperial restraints abolished, Americans had begun to flood into the trans-Appalachian west. Kentucky and Tennessee entered the republic as states before the turn of the century and Ohio followed shortly thereafter. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 extended the young nation’s territorial claims across the North American continent to the Rocky Mountains, and over the next decade and a half practically all territory east of the Mississippi River became part of the United States. If the explosion of land-hungry, ambitious American expansion into the interior offered one sign of profound change, the unprecedented overseas commercial
boom of 1793–1808 constituted another. With the advent of the Napoleonic Wars on the Continent during these years, the economic energy and resources of the combatants—not only England and France but also their numerous allies—increasingly flowed into military channels. Beginning in the early 1790s and lasting some fifteen years, the imposition of blockades and naval warfare by the hostile fleets drastically impeded normal commercial routes and carriers. American merchants took full advantage of the situation. Moving quickly into this vacuum in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, South American, and West Indies markets, U.S. ships became the leading commercial carriers and re-exporters in the Western world by the turn of the century. An unprecedented flow of wealth flooded the young republic and raised the general level of prosperity, promoted an entrepreneurial spirit, and created large accumulations of capital for further reinvestment by wealthy merchants. In this business bonanza figures like Stephen Girard of Philadelphia, Robert Oliver of Baltimore, and John Jacob Astor of New York City became millionaires. They also became living symbols of an emerging new world of profit, commodities, and personal ambition in this expanding and energetic society.

Other subtle but far-reaching trends further cemented such economic development in the early republic. Growing European demand for foodstuffs, for example, encouraged the commercialization of agriculture in a great commodity-producing belt stretching from Virginia northward to New York. The old “household economy” of colonial America began a precipitous decline as regional markets spread their tentacles outward from eastern port cities ever farther into the interior. Moreover, after 1790 the steady development of both “household” and “extensive” manufactures slowly systematized the broad social thrust toward efficiency, productivity, and profit. This broad, multifaceted commercialization of American life prompted a “business revolution” that gave rise to swelling incorporation, complex bookkeeping techniques, and growing numbers of banks, insurance companies, and commission houses in the decades after American independence had been won. Overall, these changing patterns of economic endeavor comprised the consolidation of a market economy in the early American republic.

The political culture of the young nation also reverberated and shifted in concert with this rapid market development. In the older world of eighteenth-century politics, an ideology of “republicanism” had shaped political discourse and practice. According to this tradition several principles guided and defined political life. “Civic virtue,” or the notion of subordi-
nating personal self-interest to the greater good of the commonwealth, comprised perhaps the highest ideal of republican citizenship. A widespread commitment to "independence"—the ability to be self-sustaining economically and hence to avoid a corrupting social and political dependence on the wealthy—also provided a key support for a republican edifice. Finally, an organic vision of society in which common farmers and laborers deferred to the political leadership of an educated, prosperous aristocracy of talent helped animate republican politics. This ideal polity, of course, never existed in pristine form. Nonetheless, the idealization of civic values and a concomitant, constant fear of their corruption helped apotheosize republicanism in eighteenth-century American life and fuel the revolt against Great Britain.8

Within a decade of independence, however, older categories of American republicanism were becoming ambiguous, even inchoate under the pressures of historical change. A "contagion of liberty," for instance, emerged from the turmoil of the Revolution to gradually overwhelm the restraints of deferential politics. This ethic of popular participation, in concert with geographical expansion over the Appalachians and swelling market involvement, created by the late 1700s a destructive tension within republican political culture. This struggle of "virtue and commerce," as one historian described it, pitted an older ideal of self-sacrifice and civic community against a growing instinct for individual ambition, advancement, and expression. Thus, by the 1790s—a decade that put political flesh on the skeletal framework constructed by the Constitution—a new kind of politics had emerged with the well-known clashes of Jeffersonians and Federalists. Modes of economic growth increasingly defined the agenda for debate while party competition provided the means. And a pluralist mind-set, which held that the sifting of many private interests created the public good, increasingly shaped its discourse. A republican model of politics, in other words, subtly became a liberal one in the early national period as "independence" gave way to "self-interest." In this mercurial atmosphere a market politics was born.9

Perhaps even more significant than shifting political and social structures, however, was an underlying transformation of cultural values and assumptions. To use the terminology of recent cultural analysis, the American mentalité steadily assumed a different shape and color in the decades after the Revolutionary struggle. In concert with sweeping social and economic changes, traditional cultural definitions of human perception, volition, and acceptable boundaries of behavior began to take on unfamiliar
new meanings. At a broad social level, what one historian has termed a “vigorous spirit of enterprise” seemed to emerge in late eighteenth-century America. Rising from the wreckage of colonial paternalism, with its traditional reliance on the authority of ministers and magistrates, courthouse and church, an invigorating sense of ambition detonated an explosion of entrepreneurialism in the economic arena, massive geographical movement in the social one, and participation in the political one. The crumbling of deferential restraints encouraged a growing attachment to the advancement and profit accruing to achieved status.  

If ambition became the tonic for a social “crisis of authority” by the late eighteenth century, a related epistemological crisis at elite levels of culture raised other difficulties. The demise of patriarchal authority in early modern Anglo-American culture affected political, theological, literary, and pedagogical endeavor as well as social relationships. Questions of how we know and learn, of how we understand and internalize morality became paramount issues in an age of growing personal independence and increasing self-sufficiency. By the mid to late 1700s, for example, many American intellectuals were wrestling with the implications of John Locke’s “sensationalist” psychology. Best expressed in his famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), this theory posited the mind as a tabula rasa and contended that knowledge was based on the individual processing of sensory perceptions, not on innate ideas. Even the Enlightenment itself, that great eighteenth-century upheaval in the Western life of the mind, could be largely traced to a demise of traditional frameworks of intellectual authority. As Immanuel Kant had briskly announced in his definitive essay, *What Is Enlightenment?* (1784), “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance... ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding,’ is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.”

From this swirling maelstrom of ambition and sensation, mobility and self-reliance, gradually emerged a broad thrust toward individualism in the culture of the early American republic. It became clearly evident in several ways. Post-1790 secular advice literature, for example, gained greatly in popularity as it promoted an ethic of self-made success. With titles such as *The Way to Grow Rich, The Youth's Guide to Wisdom... for the Rising Generation*, and *An Instructive History of Industry and Sloth*, these didactic tracts promoted a social creed of hard work, thrift, shrewd investment, and social advancement. The pursuit of self-interest became the centerpiece of this emerging liberal ideology. The sacrifice of personal advantage to the
commonwealth, a long-standing republican ideal, slowly receded before
the notion that personal enterprise created productivity and prosperity and
thereby produced the public good. As a newspaper essayist enthusiastically
explained,

While the physical and intellectual powers of man are left free to employ them­selves as the judgement of their possessor may direct, everything valuable finds
its proper level and its due value. . . . An active industry and lively competition
constantly tend to equalize, and consequently to distribute among the greatest
numbers the good things of this life. . . . The condition of every individual as
well as that of the nation is in a progressive state. 12

Such paeans to individual striving also contained a careful cultural
modifier. Unrestrained ambition, as countless writers and speakers re­minded citizens of the young republic, contained the seeds of vicious com­petition and, ultimately, social anarchy. Thus affirmations of self-interest
were almost invariably accompanied by warnings about the necessity for
instinctual repression and self-control. The Second Great Awakening, for
example, served as one vehicle transporting this double cultural message
outward into society. Welling up by the late 1790s, this massive movement
of evangelical Protestantism would spread its influence throughout the re­public over the next four decades. “Moral free agency,” a notion eloquently
and emotionally enunciated by Charles Grandison Finney, Lyman Beech­er, and countless less famous ministers, lay at the heart of the revival im­pulse. Individual sinners had a God-given choice—in terms of volition
this was not unlike the situation of individuals in the marketplace—
regarding their moral destiny. They could repent, seek Christ's blessing,
and pursue salvation or they could continue sinning and slide into damna­tion. A genuine decision for salvation, as preachers and moralists sternly
noted, also involved a self-denial of sensual indulgences and passion. For
followers of the evangelical Protestant crusade, virtuous individualism
meant a repudiation of the temptations of liquor, violent anger, and illicit
pleasures of the flesh. 13

Scottish Moral Philosophy, like the revivals, promoted an ethic of indi­vidual expression and restraint but did so in the more elevated realms of
education and moral theory. Reacting to the potential ethical and episte­mological chaos of Lockean sensationalism—after all, the impulses of
physical sensation seemingly ignored the confines of religion and moral
codes, and it even eroded certainty of association between appearance and
reality—Scottish thinkers like Adam Ferguson and David Reid rather des
perately insisted on the existence of an innate moral sense. Implanted by God and subject to cultivation through reason and science, this supposed faculty allowed, even demanded, that the individual nurture and follow the dictates of conscience. By the late 1700s this "common sense" philosophy had begun to filter down into every aspect of American culture. Comprising a "Didactic Enlightenment," it became the bedrock of American pedagogy and moralism for nearly a century. As the culmination of a myriad of developments, common sense doctrine signaled the central cultural development of the early American republic: the emergence of a bourgeois creed of self-control. With an important double meaning, this culture simultaneously asserted the freedom of self-control over one's own destiny and demanded the restraint of self-control over one's passions.14

The gradual decline of republican, paternal traditions and the convergence of Protestant moralism, capitalist acquisitiveness, and possessive individualism around the dawn of the nineteenth century had significant implications for aspiring American writers. This liminal market culture, with its commingled liberations and restrictions, offered uncertain guidelines for the pursuit of literature. Ambiguity seemed to rule the day.

On the one hand, political independence from Great Britain had sown the seeds of cultural nationalism. From a self-defined cultural backwater before the Revolution, the late eighteenth-century republic increasingly appeared to many visionary enthusiasts as a potential "American Athens." Vibrant achievements in arts and letters seemed a likely accompaniment to the establishment of virtuous and enlightened republican government. As Philip Freneau and Hugh Henry Brackenridge predicted in their 1771 poem, "The Rising Glory of America," this new society would have its own Homers and Miltons and its own achievements "not less in fame than Greece and Rome of old."

On the other hand, this sense of cultural opportunity gave way to frequent bouts with despair. For aspiring authors and literati, the period from 1790 to 1820 was one of wrenching tension. Writers seemed caught between the millstones of a dying republican culture and a rapidly maturing liberal one. Artistic endeavor had always been somewhat suspect in republican thought, primarily because of its long-standing association with aristocratic patronage and sensual indulgence. These qualities, in the eyes of many theorists, tended toward the "corruption" of the civic virtue and rational moderation at the heart of republicanism. At the same time, the
artist also faced a difficult situation with emerging liberal values. In the context of an ambitious society of individualist and materialist striving, artists felt tremendous pressures to commodify their work. A spreading market ethos demanded that authors conceptualize their creations as products in a competitive arena, that they respond to a social calculus of supply and demand. A deep-seated ambivalence about marketplace success versus creative integrity took root and grew within many authors. Thus, American men of letters confronted a perilous situation of shifting contexts and meanings in the late 1700s. Large, abstract issues concerning the worth, mission, and definition of artistic work proved terribly burdensome and perhaps even intractable.15

A number of practical problems weighed equally heavily. For literary aspirants, the paramount difficulty in a growing culture of capitalism was immediate material survival. Aristocratic patronage, the mainstay of traditional European culture, was both unavailable and unacceptable in a republic. Other models, like the gentleman scholar of colonial tradition or the dilettante artist of elitist societies, seemed ill-suited to the creation of a vital and rational culture. What proved most appealing was the historically new role of professional writer, a figure who wrote to live and lived to write. This type of author, whose specialized function partly reflected the rationalizations of market life, persisted and prospered by wits and popularity. The thorny problem for such a writer, of course, was the connection to one’s audience. On one level this directly involved writer and reader in the cash matrix of buying and selling. Beyond that, however, producers and consumers of creative writing in the early republic became enmeshed in more tangled relationships. As literary scholars have made clear in recent years, authorship was shifting toward professionalization at the same time that the reading audience was transforming dramatically. By the late 1700s literacy and education were spreading rapidly through the middling ranks of American society. Moreover, changing reading standards—the growing popularity of journalism, didactic tracts, and sentimental stories—were molding the taste of a growing bourgeois public. Writers faced the prospect of pleasing a rising middle-class audience increasingly attuned to a social ethic of self-made individualism and a cultural creed of sentimental self-control.16

From this highly charged and volatile cultural atmosphere arose a storm of troubled literary responses. Writers of the early republic, in both their formal work and their reflections on it, evinced an attitude that was part optimism, part anguished confusion, and part alienation. The “Hartford
Wits” and “Augustans” of New England, for instance, presented one kind of response in the late 1700s and the early 1800s. Rising from the Calvinist, socially deferential traditions of the “Standing Order” in Connecticut and the bulwark of Boston culture, such authors as Timothy Dwight and Joel Barlow, Fisher Ames and young John Quincy Adams, shaped a ponderous literary classicism directly modeled on the English Augustan era of Pope and Addison, and more remotely on classical writers of the Roman Augustan age, such as Virgil and Ovid. Dwight’s “Greenfield Hill,” Barlow’s “Rising Glory of America” and “Columbiad,” Ames’ “Dangers of American Liberty,” and Adams’ “Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory” unfolded a republican vision of classical symmetry. To their literary eyes America appeared a polity of organic community, sacrifice to the public good, and deference to paternal social leadership. Hand in hand with this cultural optimism, however, went stern, sometimes shrill denunciations of liberalizing trends toward profit seeking and social mobility in the young nation. Attacks on “mobocracy,” chastisements of money grubbing, and warnings about the degeneracy of republican standards under such corrosive influences became commonplace in this literary tradition. For these New World Horaces and Swifts, literature became a republican purification rite that upheld the old and denounced the new.17

At the other extreme, some authors eagerly embraced the ambitious energy of the liberalizing republic and sought to channel it into an appropriate literary mode. “Parson” Mason Weems provided one memorable case. Combining an enthusiasm for the market ethic with a compulsion to restrain its more brutal excesses, this clever Virginian emerged by 1800 as the prototypically “popular” author in early American culture. The basis for his reputation, of course, was the single best-selling book of the early republic, The Life of Washington. This hagiography, full of fictional tales about Washington and the cherry tree or Washington throwing the silver dollar across the Potomac, was first published in 1799 and enjoyed numerous reprintings throughout the nineteenth century. In this text Weems molded republican patriotism, capitalist social ideology, and Protestant moralism into a compelling cultural whole. “The Father of His Country” became the centerpiece of a sentimental success tract, part self-sacrificing republican hero and part iron-willed self-made man. Weems followed hard on the heels of this effort with other popular biographies of legendary Americans (William Penn, Benjamin Franklin, the “Swamp Fox” Francis Marion) and a steady flow of didactic moral tracts illuminating the evils of
alcohol, gambling, and illicit sex. Moreover, as a commission bookseller and roving minister, the Virginian scoured the roads and communities of the young republic for over two decades personally hawking his cultural wares. For figures like Parson Weems, the literary marketplace created vast opportunities for the writer as schemer, moralist, and popular wordsmith.18

Between the alienated Augustans and the literary entrepreneurs, however, stood a substantial group of profoundly ambivalent authors who struggled to come to terms with their shifting cultural milieu. Noah Webster, the New England essayist, polemicist, and lexicographer, combined a fierce social traditionalism with a spirit of nationalist cultural innovation. From the late 1780s through the early 1800s he produced dozens of essays defending paternalism and elite political control in the new republic. At the same time he labored prodigiously to compile his famous Webster's Dictionary, a self-conscious attempt to break away from British restraints and to create an American language through the spelling and definition of words themselves. Hugh Henry Brackenridge offered another variation. This self-made Pennsylvanian journalist, jurist, and author achieved a literary reputation with the gigantic picaresque tale Modern Chivalry. Originally serialized in newspapers from 1793 to 1815, this extended story humorously skewered both the stultifying traditionalism of republicanism (represented by the stodgy character Captain Farrago) and the dangerous ambition of liberalizing values (represented by the licentious Teague O'Regan).

Other authors, like the benevolent satirists Washington Irving and James Kirke Paulding, followed parallel paths. In works like Irving's Salmagundi, and Paulding's Diverting History of John Bull and Brother Jonathan, American values and manners were subjected to both illumination and ridicule. While sympathizing with the openness and opportunity characteristic of the changing young republic, Irving and Paulding delighted in taking jovial swipes at American materialism, provincial complacency, and unscrupulous ambition. Salmagundi, for example, once described with great glee the manipulative qualities necessary for social advancement in this fluid society: “To be concise, our great men are those who are most expert at crawling on all fours, and have the happiest facility in dragging and winding themselves along in the dirt like the very reptiles.” For figures like Webster, Brackenridge, and Irving, the early American cultural landscape simultaneously offered inviting terrain for explo-
ration and uncertain, sometimes even treacherous, footing.\textsuperscript{19}

Above and beyond this array of writers rose two overarching developments that gradually began to transform the literary culture of the new republic nearly beyond recognition. First, the proliferation of American newspaper publishing by the late 1700s slowly redefined the context of literary discourse. Second, the unprecedented stream of novels pouring forth after the Revolution not only enlarged the pool of available texts but also carved out a new sensibility for large portions of a growing reading public. The changes wrought by these trends were perceptible. In colonial America, the world of literature and belles lettres had been a small one. Few texts circulated, and they did so almost exclusively within the domain of educated gentlemen. Reading was a genteel, cultivated, masculine activity of ministers and merchants, gentry farmers and professional men. Among the lower classes literacy remained at low or rudimentary levels, especially in the South. The classics, poetry, essays on law and morality, political rhetoric, and especially sermons comprised the currency of serious literary discussion. This pervasion of sacred themes, combined with a self-conscious awareness of London's cultural dominance, made colonial literature intensely provincial and religious. The growing popularity of newspapers and novels by the late 1700s, however, created a veritable "reading revolution" that began to overturn many traditional expectations and assumptions. Evidence for the dramatic development of popular readership appeared everywhere.\textsuperscript{20}

Before the Revolution, it has been estimated that newspapers in America numbered fewer than 100. By 1800 there were 230, and ten years later the total had climbed to 376, publishing some 22 million copies annually. Americans had become, in the words of one commentator, "a nation of newspaper readers," and indeed these aggregate figures surpassed those of any other nation. This explosion of newspapers was accompanied by a similar burst of growth for magazines and journals. The three decades after the Revolution saw the appearance of scores of monthly and quarterly periodicals like Francis Hopkinson's and Mathew Carey's \textit{Columbian Magazine}, Hugh Henry Brackenridge's \textit{United States Magazine}, and Joseph Dennie's \textit{Port-Folio}. In varying degrees these magazines presented a potpourri of offerings. They ranged from learned essays to popular book reviews, pirated European articles to native American poetry, natural history to travel narratives, moral tracts to technological reports. The growing popularity of journalism in the early republic, of course, partly reflected a
participatory ethic stemming from the Revolutionary struggle. This trend did more, however, than merely popularize and widen networks of public writing and reading. The vogue of journalism also assaulted the traditional literary authority of educated elites in several ways. It displaced the sophisticated art of rhetoric with cruder styles of expression, replaced a genteel code of conversation and contemplation with an ethic of accessibility and commodification, and substituted interest seeking for truth seeking, sensationalism for aesthetics. In early national America, the tremendous growth of journalism was part of a broad “crisis of authority” in the realm of culture.21

In many ways the appearance of a new genre—the American novel—generated an even greater cultural impact. Shortly after the end of the Revolution, an increasing array of novels began to assault the reading public, with striking results. Middle- and lower-class readers, especially women, began to devour accessible, cheap editions of fiction with avid enthusiasm. The fluid and engaging prose, vivid depictions of individual characters and social settings, and sentimental moral didacticism of the novel made it enormously attractive both to an educated readership weaned on religious and political discourse and to a barely literate readership having little previous engagement at all with books. The growing popularity of fiction helped promote what one scholar has termed a “democratization of the written word” in this transformative period. The earlier decades of the eighteenth century, of course, had seen European imports like Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* garner the lion’s share of readership. By the end of the century, however, native products like Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), Royall Tyler’s *The Algerian Captive* (1797), Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), Enos Hitchcock’s *Memoirs of the Bloomsgrove Family* (1790), and William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) were generating considerable appeal as well. With such growth during the era of the early republic, the novel was well on its way to becoming “the chapbook of nineteenth century America,” providing common readers unprecedented access to the written word.22

Beyond mere entertainment and popular sales figures, however, the novel had a striking effect on American social and cultural life. Like the ripples from a stone tossed into a calm lake, its influence spread outward in sweeping concentric circles to alter the shape of values, perceptions, and
assumptions in the young republic. In an era of consolidating liberal capitalism, the novel seemed to express the instincts of a new society struggling for maturity. In fact, modern theorists who agree on little else concur that the novel was a powerful expression of ascending bourgeois culture in early modern Western life. Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, argued that the novel empowered individual readers to judge and assess social situations and character in unprecedented ways. As a fluid literary form for a fluid world of competition, mobility, and individualism, the novel “has no canon of its own. It is, by nature, not canonic. It is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review.” Lionel Trilling suggested that the novel expressed the individualist and pluralist sensibility of modern life. As he noted, “For our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred years. . . . It taught us, as no other genre ever did, the extent of human vanity and the value of this vanity.” For early twentieth century thinker Georg Lukacs, the novel was simply the genre of modern bourgeois life. It expressed, as no other form quite did, the intellectual, spiritual, and psychological conditions of modern capitalist culture.23

Within this broad consensus about its bourgeois affiliation, however, the emergence of the novel has prompted somewhat discordant assessments. In particular, questions about how and why it became central to bourgeois culture, about the exact nature of the connection between novelistic expression and the vagaries of a market society have evoked rather different answers from students of this developing literary form. In the realm of early Anglo-American fiction in particular, two schools of thought have predominated.

First, a tradition prevailing since at least the 1950s has held that the vast social transformations remaking early modern England set the stage for the emergence of this new genre. The overturning of traditional feudal economic relationships, the ascendancy of a growing and educated middle class, the emergence of an ethic of individualism, and the rejection of “universals” in intellectual life nourished the growth of the novel. According to one scholar, both the novel and its “philosophical realism”—it posited that truth is discovered by the individuals through their senses—

must be seen as parallel manifestations of a larger change—the vast transformation of Western civilization since the Renaissance which has replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one—one
which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places.

Several features of the novel clearly reflected this new cultural orientation. Its "formal realism"—a narrative presentation of life that self-consciously renders details and particularities of characters and their actions—moved literary attention away from legends, types, and universals to specific people and situations. This focus on personal interaction, private experience, and concrete social relations tended to promote secularization by eroding the religious matrix of human volition. Its overall evocation of the individual tended to ratify the agenda of market society by simply demonstrating the assumption that "society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature." In this view then, the novel emerged as the logical vehicle for modern liberal capitalism because it carried into public consciousness the picture of "a whole society mainly governed by the idea of every individual's intrinsic independence both from other individuals and from that multifarious allegiance to past modes of thought and action denoted by the word 'tradition.'" 24

More recently, an alternative interpretive picture has emerged. In one sense, there is agreement that the novel was an important agent of social transformation. The first American novels appearing from the 1780s to 1820, newer scholarship has agreed, were an integral part of a widespread crisis of authority in the early modern West. In the young republic, where this situation became especially evident, the crisis involved political revolt against Great Britain, a steady undermining of patriarchal social authority, and an unprecedented commercialization of economic endeavor. Even more pertinent, it involved a popular "reading revolution" in American culture, which invaded the traditional "gentleman's sphere" of literary discourse and public discussion. It is at this point, however, that interpretations diverge. Some scholars insist that the novel played a critical role in the heady atmosphere of the post-Revolutionary republic by appealing to the least privileged in American society—women, the lower classes, the barely literate. Fictional texts were denounced consistently during the eighteenth century by ministers, educators, political figures, and the culturally powerful as immoral, socially anarchic, and intellectually contemptible. By extending literary participation to socially marginal readers with Gothic tales, picaresque adventures, and sentimental stories the novel offered "a means of access to social and political events from which many
readers . . . would have been otherwise excluded in hierarchical colonial culture.” In this view, the novel in its various forms comprised a socially defiant and politically subversive genre for a young and restless audience. So if the first interpretation portrays an accommodating literary form closely attuned to emerging bourgeois capitalism, the second position depicts a democratizing one that subverted the imposition of privilege, social authority, and power.25

These two broad views of the emerging novel—an older one stressing “accommodation” and a newer one “resistance”—may not be as mutually exclusive, or even as divergent, as they initially appear. A different theoretical context, that of “cultural hegemony,” suggests a way to explain the novel’s power and also to reconcile different interpretations of this new fictional form. As defined and elaborated by a number of thinkers, particularly Raymond Williams, this theory suggests that the dominant values, perceptions, and ideology of a given society are not simply imposed by brute political power or social authority, but instead become compelling through a process of cultural definition and legitimation. Authoritative social groups, in other words, promote their own status and worldview by successfully prescribing the conventional wisdom of society, defining its criteria of success, and staking out acceptable boundaries of discourse. As Williams and others carefully note, however, it would be a mistake to envision a simple, crude situation of ruling-class domination with ideas taking the place of guns in the hands of the powerful. In fact, cultural hegemony constitutes an ongoing, dialectical series of events in which “dominant” values and perceptions constantly confront, evade, or integrate the dissent of both traditional “residual” cultures and avant-garde “emergent” ones. Cultural hegemony is as much a “process” as a structure.26

From this theoretical angle of vision, the first appearance of American novels in the late 1700s takes on a more coherent significance. Much evidence suggests that fictional texts played a key role in the hegemonic shift toward liberal capitalism in the era 1790–1820. The novel itself, as a fresh genre that helped define cultural discourse in this transformative age, uniquely explored and articulated the fluid new market relationships of a liberalizing society. The fact that it incorporated elements of accommodation and of resistance to the rising new order merely reveals the complexity, at times even ambiguity, of the process itself.

Through its language, form, and sensibility the early American novel indeed performed a complicated, multidimensional role in the drama of ascending capitalist culture. Four functions in particular stand out. First, in
a number of ways novelistic narratives cogently expressed the instincts and nuances of life in a marketplace milieu. In part, this involved both a "formal realism" that particularized character, temporality, environment, and causation and an underlying "philosophical realism" that promoted the internalization of knowledge. The novel also moved forward along these lines as one of the great vehicles of "antipatriarchal ideology." Undermining the traditional social emphasis on paternal authority, precept, and static community, these new texts promoted an ethic of private character, nurture and growth, affection and education. Moreover, the novel appeared as the first great popularizer of issues raised by the sensationalist psychology of the Lockean and Scottish traditions. Both in the subjects it treated (a central character's struggles to come to terms with his or her social milieu) and in its own narrative strategies (the use of imaginative writing to create an emotional impact on the reader), this genre dramatically illustrated the effect of sensation on individual understanding and action. In a larger structural sense, the novel also emerged as the literature of the marketplace by virtue of its precipitating role in the great transition from "oral" to "print" tradition in the popular consciousness of the early modern West. Unlike speech, the written word does not depend on the immediate presence of others. Hence the novel's surging popularity helped erode personal community interaction while promoting a cultural dynamic based on solitude, impersonal exchange, and silent thought. Thus, in all of these ways—ideological, psychological, technological—the novel took shape as a chronicle of liberal life exploring the vagaries of individual existence: perception, volition, and achievement. Nothing better illustrates this fact than the appellations of the first novels to circulate in eighteenth-century America. Almost without fail they offered the name or description of an individual character as the title: *Robinson Crusoe, Pamela, Clarissa* with the earliest English imports, then *Charlotte Temple, Wieland, The Coquette, The Algerian Captive* for slightly later indigenous American efforts.27

The novel's second major function in the ascendency of American liberal capitalism appeared dialectically connected to the first. These early fictions proclaimed the individualism of marketplace life, but then moved quickly to restrain its excesses. Novels constantly sounded the alarm about the dangers of unregulated self-interest degenerating into licentiousness, shallow materialism, and social chaos. Such dangers threatened liberal society from within, and authors frequently manipulated plots and employed moral didacticism to delineate the necessity of personal self-control. In a society in which traditional authority was vanishing, responsibility for
governance and stability reverted to the individual and fiction became a popular signboard for this cultural imperative. Sentimental novels particularly served this cultural purpose. Popular works like *Charlotte Temple* and *The Power of Sympathy* illustrated for late eighteenth-century American audiences the moral and social dangers of self-indulgence. In each book overwrought scenarios of passion, seduction, and guilt culminated in social disarray and personal disgrace. Such sentimental texts, as scholars have pointed out, frequently deployed socially displaced figures like orphans, adventurers, or prostitutes as protagonists. By either showing their destruction or integrating them into a larger community, these narratives tried to harness a "socially unstabilized energy" that threatened society. Gothic novels often moved in a parallel direction by depicting individuals whose aberrant processing of the physical world led them into dissipation and doom. In other words, these early sentimental and Gothic novels performed a social function by responding to the central problem of sensationalist psychology: the fact that individual sensation could corrupt as well as educate made the practice of inner moral regulation a crucial necessity. Writers of the first American fiction, by offering their texts as paeans to self-control, played a critical role in popularizing a bourgeois discourse of genteel self-restraint.  

Third, novelistic expression of this period emerged as a powerful but highly diffuse conduit for dissent. On the one hand, various forms of the early American novel clearly criticized social and political tenets of the ascending liberal order. "Picaresque" tales like *Modern Chivalry*, for example, explicitly lampooned the unscrupulous ambition of men on the make. Gothic texts like *The Asylum; or Alonzo and Melissa* challenged confident liberal individualism by showing isolated characters confronting the brutality of the modern world as well as the hidden monsters of human nature. Even sentimental novels such as Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* partially subverted an ethic of male competition and authority by rendering the female sphere significant and counterposing the moral superiority of its affectionate and benevolent values. At the same time, however, these fictional efforts worked indirectly, perhaps even unconsciously, to diffuse and neutralize dissent. By sublimating social distress and public criticism into the language and structure of the novel, writers steered them into a relatively harmless channel. A potential discourse of political perception and power became depoliticized as it was translated into a literary discourse of imaginative, privatized communication. Collective issues of social class, gender relations, and cultural authority translated into dramas
of individual confrontation and adjustment, and over the whole there de-
scended a didactic or sentimental blanket that provided the reassuring
warmth of human decency and conflict resolution. As cultural vehicles for
social dissent, most fiction of this era ultimately followed an evasive, up-
wardly spiraling trajectory of genteel optimism. Gathering elements of
discontent with liberalizing change, novels transported them into a rarified
atmosphere of abstraction far removed from the social and political sources
from which they sprang. 29

Finally, the young republic's first novels functioned as important agents
of class formation and cohesion in an era of social transformation. Reach-
ing out to a wider reading audience as republican, paternal traditions were
succumbing to the ethic of market individualism, early fiction writers
shaped and popularized a body of cultural assumption that defined success,
morality, and common sense according to an increasingly competitive mi-
lieu. In terms of process, the novel performed an inclusionary role here by
joining in common discourse not only prosperous and powerful entrepre-
neurial groups but also women, educated workers and provincials, the
barely literate, and other previously excluded social types. This latter group
of marginal figures in the late 1700s and early 1800s became the biggest
consumers of early novels, a genre that was to become a bulwark of Victo-
rian gentility by the mid-nineteenth century. In terms of ideology, fictional
texts reinforced this process. Although dismissed and disparaged as moral-
ly corrupting by ministers, educators, and moralists with its first appear-
ance in the eighteenth century, the novel rather quickly emerged as an ef-
fective instrument of "rationalist pedagogy." Reflecting a preoccupation
with self-controlled individualism, these fictions explored the achievement
of rational self-sufficiency, and explained both how to bolster virtue amidst
the corruptions of experience and how to consolidate personal authority in
a fluid social environment. By the early 1800s growing numbers of Ameri-
cans would agree, in the words of one scholar, that the novel served an im-
portant pedagogical purpose by morally uniting readers:

for in the first place, a just and powerful picture of human life in which the
connection between vice and misery, and between facility and virtue is vividly
portrayed, is the most solid and useful reading that a moral and social being . . .
can read; and in the second place, the most trivial and trite of these perfor-
mannes are, to readers of certain ages and intellects, the only books which they
will read. If they were not thus employed, they could be employed in a way still
more trivial or pernicious.
This rationalist pedagogy of the novel not only promoted rational self-sufficiency but also strengthened other pillars of bourgeois life. The early novel was preoccupied with the genteel, middle-class family, for instance, because marriage in bourgeois society comprised "a means by which society attempts to bring into harmonious alignment patterns of passion and patterns of property. . . . [It] is the all-subsuming, all organizing, all-containing contract."30

In these salient ways, then—as an expression of market individualism, as a restraint on self-indulgence, as a ventilator for dissent, as a catalyst for class coherence—the early American novel helped create values and sensibility that permeated nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. These fictions were much more than a collection of intertextual sign-systems. They were part of an active process of cultural and class formation that was part and parcel of the American shift toward liberal capitalism from 1790 to 1820.

III

America's first novels ultimately probed to a deeper level as they explored the murky, subterranean tunnels of early capitalist culture. With literary lanterns of narrative, characterization, and social description held aloft, authors fleetingly illuminated the dark psychological corners and deep internal tensions of a restless society of self-made men. Analyzing the submerged social and psychological constructions of liberal America with varying levels of awareness, novels gradually brought to the surface issues that were both revealing and subversive. In one sense, these fictions suggested that the rationalizing, "scientific" aura of the market model—the competition of self-interests mechanically produces the public good—was in fact a kind of haze that obscured a system fraught with irrationalities, confusions, and alienations. In another sense, they divulged that beneath the confident, assertive individualism of the spreading liberal legend there often existed an isolated, fragmented creature for whom liberation often meant insecurity and fear. Early novels especially reflected such volatile psychosocial dynamics through their connection with two cultural traumas of early liberal society: a "crisis of representation" and a "crisis of self."31

An inchoate yet pervasive crisis of representation accompanied the rise of market society in early modern Anglo-America. This defined the permanent sense of transition that seemed to mark social existence within an ascending structure of competition, mobility, and profit seeking. For struggling individuals life had come to resemble, in the words of one scholar,
“an infinite series of thresholds, a profusion of potential passages . . . running alongside experience.” In a climate of contingency the traditional symbols, and definitions that had anchored personal perception in a cultural harbor of shared understanding now seemed increasingly cut adrift and dispersed. This liquid cultural world, where meanings were there for the making, was clearly reflected in an equally fluid new literary form. In a variety of ways, the novel embodied, grappled with, or desperately refuted the fragmented representations of a mercurial market culture. 32

The novel genre itself arose from the instabilities of seventeenth-century English life. Amidst the rapid commercialization, political revolution, and religious turmoil of the tumultuous 1600s, the earliest narrative fictions came into existence to formulate and explain unfamiliar problems regarding the nature of “truth” and “virtue.” These crucial texts mediated emerging cultural problems of signification which one scholar has posed in these terms: “What kind of authority or evidence is required of narrative to permit it to signify truth to its readers? What kind of social existence or behavior signifies an individual’s virtue to others?” In trying to answer such questions and thereby stabilize notions of character, morality, and social institutions, however, the early novel paradoxically depended on deception. Its tales and characters may have resembled real life and real people, but they did not actually constitute those things. The novelist muddied the distinction between imagination and reality by in fact practicing a kind of literary artifice—shaping, inventing, selecting, omitting to create an illusion of reality. 33

Such cultural conundrums appeared in other dimensions of the early novel as well. Adopting a “keyhole view of life,” authors peered into the domain of private experience to exploit it for literary purposes. Getting inside both the houses and the heads of their characters, novelists nurtured among readers the notion that private life was the most genuine and the most valid part of existence. Yet once again paradoxes mounted. The presentation of minute-by-minute details of personal experience in a public forum actually violated the integrity of privacy. At the same time, by using illusion to illuminate inner life these texts promoted the deception “that what is fundamentally an unreal flattery of the reader’s dreams appears to be the literal truth.” As one literary critic has noted wryly, this novelistic obsession with imagination, illusion, artifice—especially in light of its ostensible commitment to “realism”—created a literary situation where “what does not exist is felt to be more attractive than what does.” Caught up in
the broad, murky crisis of representation of nascent bourgeois culture, early American novels thus took shape as highly equivocal factual fictions. As cultural journals of growing social and epistemological fluidity, they comprised a “liminoid genre . . . enacting the liminal experience of the boundaryless market.”

The novel dug even deeper to unearth a related quandary of developing market culture: a crisis of self that threatened to explode an exuberant individualism even as it was sweeping over post-Revolutionary America. This problem appeared in many guises. In an expanding republic increasingly given over to the pursuit of ambition, the paramount social dilemma addressed duplicity: On what basis can anyone be trusted so that life will not degenerate into a war of all against all? A parallel cultural dilemma involved representation and understanding: On what basis can common perceptions and values be established so that personal experience will not wither into solipsism? Yet another dilemma, this one political in nature, concerned authority and cohesion: On what basis can expressions of self-interest be harmonized so as to make government a virtuous instrument of the commonweal? At the convergence of these massive predicaments arose a deep-seated psychological dilemma that would perplex liberal man perhaps most of all: Who and what am I? With demands for individual achievement escalating at the very historical moment when traditional social and cultural supports were crumbling, enormous pressures for definition and performance threatened the very coherence of the autonomous self. These threats to the self appeared mainly in two forms.

First, the pressing issue of “identity” promoted psychological disarray in liberal society. At an elevated level of discourse and culture, for example, philosophers from the late 1600s on had been engaged in a major debate about the nature of individual identity in the postfeudal West. The issue appeared deceptively simple: What constituted identity and was it the same for everyone? Some thinkers, such as John Locke and George Berkeley, contended that all individuals had an intuitive knowledge of their own existence. By the mid-1700s, however, a skeptical David Hume had looked inward and found only private perception, thereby concluding that self-hood really existed only in the imagination. Around the same time Scottish common sense philosopher Thomas Reid added a more desperate note to the discussion by insisting that every individual could be secure in his or her identity as part of the “natural order of things.” At a more popular level of culture—here evidence appeared in genres like advice literature,
moralizing sermons, and newspaper essays—metaphysical discussion de­
scended rapidly to earth to confront a trauma of social psychology. In an
ambitious liberal society in which individuals were increasingly cut adrift
from geographical place, community values, and ties of mutual obligation,
how could isolated individuals essentially create and anchor a stable, con­
sistent self? Early Anglo-American novels were immersed in these prob­
lematic issues of individual identity. Not just titles offering an individual
character's name but frequent use of first-person narrative suggested the
novelistic preoccupation with exploration and revelation of personal iden­
tity. In a certain fashion, fiction writers tried to escape the snare of mere
subjective existence by literally “objectifying” people, thereby securing and
solidifying their identity, as physical words on a page.36

In addition to problems of identity, a second psychological threat
emerged from exhausting demands for social performance. In a society in
which achievement and status increasingly depended on buying and selling
in the marketplace, success for the liberal individual involved not only ob­
jective calculations of risk and gain but also subjective calculations of per­
sonal interaction in this transactionary world. The growing market mental­
ité of early capitalist culture commanded a commodification of self in
which one became “a speculative fiction of joint manufacture: a venture, a
text, a performance in which all spectators, investors, and consumers were
invited, albeit obliquely, to subscribe.” In other words, the calculus of indi­
vidual attainment produced social equations based on role playing and
masks. This nascent trend had attracted the notice of even the earliest an­
alysts of liberalizing change. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, had written in
his mid-seventeenth-century Leviathan of the predominance of “artificial
persons” in modern society. Removed from nature and self-manufactured,
their every act was a studied representation of themselves or of others. A
century later Adam Smith embroidered upon this notion in The Theory of
Moral Sentiments and The Wealth of Nations by presupposing that modern
individuals constantly calculate both economic and psychological returns
in their relations with others. In so doing they negotiate, shape, and sell
themselves according to the claims of a commodified world. Novels, as an
emerging literary form in the eighteenth century, helped provide a stage
for the appearance of this elusive, performative self. “Seduction” novels like
William Hill Brown's Power of Sympathy, for example, focused on the
masks of duplicity used by defilers of virtue. “Picaresque” narratives like
Royall Tyler's The Algerian Captive depicted footloose, marginal individu-
als confronting a society of kaleidoscopic settings and situations to which they responded by altering, often in chameleon-like fashion, their values and sensibility. Such characters on the novelistic stage represented a burgeoning social type in liberalizing America rather different from the rocklike autonomous self. These masked figures comprised an unsettled and unfirm "serial self, not a cumulative self—that is to say, a self composed in, of, and for successive performances." 

Ultimately, pressures generated by the frantic search for identity and the demands for continuous social performance produced not only a dramatic psychological tendency toward fragmentation within the liberal individual, but a psychological model of personality. Donning a series of self-manipulative disguises while desperately seeking social connection, the autonomous self constantly seemed to dissolve into a volatile, internally divided, and unintegrated state. With unprecedented pressures for individual success and self-control growing by 1800—in combination with social changes that separated individuals from one another, from traditions, and from frameworks of authority—the personality structure of liberal man seemed to splinter into warring elements. The ultimate result was, ironically, a psychological structure based on incoherence. As Frankfurt School critic Max Horkheimer has argued, the development of modern capitalist culture has created a cognate psychological type: the "personae." The personae, as a kind of pluralistic self, represented to the outside world "a set of masks rather than a coherent, integrated personality." 

As the "modal personality type" of capitalist society, this figure made many vivid appearances in the earliest Anglo-American novels. This genre, for example, usually focused on an exhaustive examination of human character. The influence of a heretofore obscure psychic life was asserted against the claims of society as the novel juxtaposed "the relative power and validity of inner vs. outer reality." Moreover, much early fiction—Gothic tales and seduction stories loom largest here—graphically illustrated the dark, hidden dimensions of selfhood which sporadically burst forth to create consternation and chaos in the public world. Many early novels became in part a kind of collective cultural diary of painful struggles with identity, performance, and internal fragmentation by newly isolated and internally riven liberal individuals.

Thus, the novel played a fascinating and multifaceted role in the shaping of capitalist culture in America. It promoted the consolidation of liberal hegemony not only in class and cultural terms, but in psychological terms as well. By constructing and disseminating what Raymond Williams
has aptly called “structures of feeling,” American fictional texts helped establish the growing dominance of bourgeois values by the late 1700s and early 1800s. They did so in part, of course, by promoting values of individualism, material ambition, self-control, and privatization. In a deeper, more complex, and ultimately more powerful way, however, the early American novel became an active agent in the process of cultural hegemony by defining key parameters of discourse itself in a bourgeois society. Under its auspices literature steadily narrowed into a specialized category of “imaginative” writing, an abstraction to be ratified by taste and criticism. A notion of “culture” emerged from the writing, reading, and content of novels as the embodiment of creative, intellectual, and moral activity set above the materialism and utilitarianism of daily social life; it became a symbolic abstraction for a whole type of human experience increasingly rationalized out of market society. Finally, narrative fiction defined the “self” as a self-created entity, malleable yet elusive, an autonomous pillar of strength nonetheless threatened by internal stresses and fractures. The novel, in other words, played a major role from 1790 to 1820 in creating American liberal society, the liberal culture that sustained it, and the “liberal ego” that inhabited it.40

IV

Charles Brockden Brown launched his career in these choppy cultural waters. Born and bred in an urban commercial milieu, he wrestled with the demands of a growing market society from his earliest days until his death. Politically inclined, he followed a convulsive ideological evolution from youthful utopian radical to stodgy middle-age conservative. Given to an intensely agitated private life, he suffered from a recurring crisis of identity and a struggle with meaningful vocation that lasted nearly his entire life.

It was in the literary arena, however, that Brown sustained his greatest involvement with the forces of liberalizing change. His earliest fictional forays explored the traumas of personal liberation in a revolutionary age. His famous Gothic novels of the 1790s delved deeply into questions of social obligation and human motivation as their outlandishly theatrical style belied their probing sensibility. His turn toward historical fiction, sentimental romance, and social criticism in late life presented a final confrontation with bourgeois values and perceptions. Throughout this cycle of literary endeavor, however, Brown consistently engaged questions raised by the emergence of liberal capitalism: What exactly was the nature of free
agency, the basis of social cohesion, the meaning of labor, the obligations of citizenship in a market society? His literary and ideological answers were sometimes inconsistent, often convoluted, and usually inconclusive. The struggle itself, however, proved to be both fascinating and highly complex. The tale demands a gradual and nuanced telling, one that must begin with Charles Brockden Brown's earliest days in Philadelphia.