The Romance of Real Life

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The Brown family had established a quiet and moderately prosperous enclave for itself. Part of the Quaker migration to North America in the mid-seventeenth century, they had settled originally in New Jersey and northern Pennsylvania before putting down roots in the city of Philadelphia. When Charles Brockden Brown was born on January 17, 1771, his father, Elijah Brown, Sr., made a comfortable living running a small mercantile business. As the Revolutionary struggle with Britain escalated over the next several years, however, Elijah's Quaker faith led him to refuse to bear arms. This action prompted persecution of his family and plunder of his business by zealous non-Quaker patriots. So he quietly turned to an equally lucrative career as a real estate conveyancer and landbroker. Charles' mother, Mary Armitt, was the daughter of a prosperous, prestigious Quaker merchant family that originally had migrated with William Penn. Thus, the future writer, along with three older brothers and one younger sister and brother, grew up firmly ensconced in what eighteenth-century observers often called the “middling orders”—the broad array of laboring groups suspended in the social order midway between aristocratic luxury and struggling poverty. There, hard work, upright character, and material comfort were natural expectations, as Charles would discover to his dismay some years later.

The Brown clan did not exactly fit the standard Quaker mold. While attached to the pious, plain living and philanthropy characteristic of the Society of Friends, the family's interests and activities extended far beyond these traditions. Elijah Brown, Sr., for instance, maintained a lively correspondence with friends and relatives in England and recorded in his jour-
nal extracts from newspapers in London, Ireland, Paris, Spain, and New York. Moreover, he read widely in the contemporary literature of politics, science, and philosophy and copied extracts from radical tracts like William Godwin’s *Political Justice* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*. One of Charles’ older brothers, Elijah, Jr., became a merchant of cosmopolitan taste who traveled and sampled widely among the artistic treasures—the opera, cathedrals, art galleries, the theater—that he found in Europe. All of the male Brown children received a classical and literary education usually reserved for the offspring of wealthy Philadelphia merchant “Grandees.” Charles’ family might be described as “Quaker modernists”: Friends who melded traditional moral and religious values with an impulse toward modest worldly success, social reform, technological innovation, and “useful” personal enterprise. For such Quakers, religion became a justification for promoting business and science, building canals and banks, constructing hospitals and prisons, ending slavery and disseminating Bibles.2

Within this conscientious yet progressive atmosphere young Charles experienced a rather singular childhood. While his brothers enjoyed robust health and slowly carved out business and commercial careers for themselves among the Philadelphia merchant classes, the younger son suffered from a sickly constitution and exhibited quite different inclinations. From a very young age Charles was infatuated with books. Pampered and sheltered by concerned parents, subject to numerous ailments, yet precociously intelligent, he avoided the games and amusements of other children to bury himself in texts of history, geography, and literature. His parents reported that while barely out of infancy the boy “required nothing but a book to divert him” and that after school they often would find him in the parlor “mounted on a table, and deeply engaged in the consultation of a map suspended on the side of the wall.” Such bookish habits apparently fostered an overweening arrogance. In 1781, around the age of ten, young Brown became intensely indignant when a visitor to his father called him “boy.” Charles angrily asked his father, “Why does he call me boy...? Does he not know that it is neither size nor age, but understanding that makes the man? I could ask him a hundred questions none of which he could answer.”3

The studious, delicate child began his formal education at age eleven by entering the Friends’ Latin School. There he came under the tutelage of Robert Proud, a highly respected teacher of ancient languages and future
The Lawyer and the Rhapsodist

author of *The History of Pennsylvania*. Over the next four years Brown absorbed Latin and a smattering of Greek, studied the Bible and the classics, acquired a working knowledge of French, developed a fondness for rhetoric, and began to formulate his own method of shorthand. At the urging of Proud and his parents, who were worried that obsessional study was further eroding his health, the boy also began a regimen of daily walks in the outdoors. Nearer to his heart, however, were several literary projects. By age twelve he had composed a poem entitled “The Pleasures of Solitude,” a didactic polemic chastising drinking and smoking called “The Grape and Tobacco Plant,” and a number of brief, juvenile essays on practical morality, business, and Christmas. Around his sixteenth year, and inspired by his love of Shakespeare, Milton, and Cicero, Brown concocted a grand scheme for three epic poems on the early history of the New World: one on Columbus’ voyage of discovery, one on Pizarro’s expedition to Peru, and one on Cortez’s conquest of Mexico.

The clearest indicator of the boy’s omnivorous intellectual appetite, however, appeared shortly after his departure from the Latin School. In 1787 he helped found with eight other friends the “Belles-Lettres Club,” an organization of young men devoted to the exchange of ideas and the advancement of knowledge. Brown was selected to give the keynote address, and he somewhat breathlessly revealed the massive topic for his speech in a journal entry: “The relations, dependencies, and connections of several parts of knowledge.” Full of confidence and saturated with the Enlightenment’s faith in human capacity, he insisted in his speech that “Reason is the authority which exerts over obedience.” For young Brown it was a reason tempered with “the invigorating influence of the fancy.” As they prepared to step upon “the theatre of life, supported only by our own talents and address,” youthful Americans must realize that “the whole circle of human knowledge is indeed bound together by a strong and indissoluble chain” emanating from the human mind. For the orator, intellectual advancement meant exploration of both the “provinces of imagination and reason,” and using language—“the one happy faculty [by which] man is capable of giving form to spirit”—to convey the results. In a rhetorical flight of enthusiasm, the young speaker described the ideal intellectual, and probably betrayed an idealized self-image as well: “He gives his imagination full liberty to range without control through the whole circle of human knowledge, in the belief that whatever calls for the execution of his mental faculties is already within his reach, and may reasonably be appropriated to his own use.” For Brown, the goal was clear if rather
immodest: to know everything, and to integrate it into a coherent system.\textsuperscript{5}

By late adolescence, this youthful Quaker intellectual approached the first crucial juncture in his life. In the bustling commercial atmosphere of late-eighteenth-century Philadelphia, the male child of a respectable merchant family was expected to make a career decision as he left childhood for the adult world. Around age sixteen Charles Brockden Brown began to feel the pressure. His natural proclivities led to the world of letters, and in his late teens a small stream of literary creations began to trickle from his pen. Brown's earliest attraction was to poetry, and in 1787 he described himself in verse: "His unskilled hand had touched the lyre, And he felt filled with Celestial Fire." Over the next couple of years he composed poems like "Epistle the First," a set of verses devoted to his merchant brother James, who would "the joys of Poesy with Business blend." Nature poems like "In Praise of Schuykill" lauded the natural beauties of his native region, while love poems such as "To Estrina" lauded the virtues of a young female acquaintance. A versified epitaph for Benjamin Franklin in 1788 revealed the young poet's hero worship of a man "Whose soul for the want of due room, Has left us to range in the skies."\textsuperscript{6}

The writing of fiction, however, rather quickly emerged to overshadow Brown's other modes of composition. In the late 1780s he quite self-consciously began to keep a journal to develop his skills and sensibility as a writer. Rather fancifully entitling his efforts "The Journal of a Visionary," Brown explained to a friend that, given his aspirations as a writer, "I thought it incumbent upon me to form some regular and analytical system which should furnish the materials of reflection and which should serve as my lode star." The journal contained a wide variety of items: bits and pieces of stories, observations on ideas and people, a long explication of a utopian commonwealth, religious meditations, and many pages of architectural drawings. Such musings helped lay the foundation for several more serious efforts. In 1788 Brown produced a short piece of fiction entitled "The Story of Cooke," a gloomy and moralistic tale describing a drunken Irish immigrant who terrorizes his wife and three daughters. In the same year he wrote a dark, melodramatic, and rather stilted narrative called "The Story of Julius." This effort detailed the life of a noble young man to illustrate "the triumph of virtue over the most lawless and impetuous passions, of duty over inclination." Admitting his great identification with the heroic young protagonist, Brown revealed to a correspondent the autobiographical character of the tale:
I was . . . much delighted with the prospect of describing the meditations of a youth of the deepest penetration and most vigorous imagination (who had studied books and conversed with mankind) on the sublimest subjects that can engage the human faculties, on the uses, bounds, and relations of the Sciences and on the nature and capacity of the soul. I easily foresaw that this would furnish opportunity for forming, explaining, and digesting my own opinions.

Finally, at the same time Brown composed an ambitious but uncompleted series of letters between himself and a mysterious young woman named “Henrietta.” This long, fictional exchange was to have been the basis for an epistolary novel.7

These first forays into fictional prose writing emerged partly from the young author’s enthusiastic immersion in the eighteenth-century world of letters. In the late 1780s and early 1790s Brown paid frequent homage to his literary influences. In his fledgling speech to the Belles-Lettres Club he cited the authority of Dr. Hugh Blair, the influential Scottish writer on aesthetics who insisted that “A man of correct taste is one who is never imposed on by counterfeit beauties; who carries always in his mind that standard of good taste which he employs in judging everything.” Brown also informed friends that his “Journal” meditations were prompted by the French philosophes, particularly d’Alembert’s introduction to the Encyclopédie and Diderot’s “analysis of the branches of human knowledge.” The young Philadelphian’s greatest intellectual inspiration came from two pioneering novelists of the age: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Samuel Richardson. In the summer of 1788 Brown first read the Frenchman’s Nouvelle Héloïse and rapturously described it as a book of “impassioned pages and transcendent excellence” and a “model of pathetic eloquence.” This novel would inspire Brown’s “Henrietta Letters,” the protagonists of which he described as “not less ardent and sincere and virtuous and delicate than St. Preux and Héloïse . . . [from] the vivid fictions of Rousseau.” Richardson, author of novels like Pamela and Clarissa, also galvanized the aspiring American writer with his deeply moralistic tales of virtue rewarded. “I esteem him,” the adoring novice burst out in a letter, “inferior to none that ever lived, as a teacher of virtue and the friend of mankind, but the founder of the Christian Religion.” Contemplating these literary giants led Brown to conclude that “genius,” rather than mere perserverance, was the key to powerful and effective writing. He reminded himself that each author must “determine exactly what is suited to their strength of intellect.
and make a single mode of composition their peculiar study." Brown began a determined search for his own unique species of genius.8

Just as his literary talents began to flower, however, the young author's parents moved to prune back his efforts. While respectful of literary endeavor, they were skeptical of writing as a career. Mindful of their other sons' promising mercantile positions, and upholders of the Quaker tradition of useful labor, Elijah and Mary began to push their sickly but intellectually exuberant boy in a more practical direction. Thus, in 1789 Charles began a three-year stint reading law in the office of Alexander Wilcocks, a highly respected barrister and city recorder for Philadelphia. Brown bent to the task of studying Blackstone's legal commentary and spent hours copying a variety of legal papers—deeds, rents, contracts, wills. He also joined with other young law students to form a legal society and accompanying "moot court," a forum that allowed him to present several grave legal "decisions." This engagement with the law was a reluctant one. Unable to abandon the field, he privately complained of its restrictions. For Brown, legal study was so intellectually narrowing that it prompted this acerbic comment: "I should rather think that he can only derive pleasure, and consequently improvement, from the study of laws, who knows and wishes to know nothing else." Moreover, legal practice appeared merely a means to wealth. "Our intellectual ore is apparently of no value but as it is capable of being transmuted into gold," he wrote of lawyers, "and learning and eloquence are desirable only as the means of more expeditiously filling our coffers."

This unhappy situation gradually generated internal tensions. As the months wore on, Brown grew increasingly bitter in his criticism of the law, terming it "rubbish" and denouncing its "endless tautologies, its impertinent circuities, its lying assertions and hateful artifices." The fictional delights and enlightened sensibility of Richardson and Rousseau contrasted pleasantly to the logic-chopping and crabbed style of Coke and Blackstone, who appeared mere remnants of "barbarous antiquity, polluted with the rust of ages, and patched by the stupidity of modern workmen into new deformity." Brown's growing alienation slowly pushed him into a kind of schizoid existence. His days became one long, tedious round of legal study and transcription, leaving him "listless and melancholy," while in the evening he threw himself with abandon into literary pursuits. He filled his journal with long and often self-absorbed ruminations, concocted grandiose writing schemes, and engaged in long, written exchanges with various correspondents. Brown's life became so divided between law and
literature that it astonished his first biographer, Paul Allen. On practically any given page of the journal one found “dry, grave and judicial” legal writing followed closely by a “poetical effusion as much distinguished by its wild and eccentric brilliance as the other composition was for its plain sobriety and gravity of style.” These early journals made it difficult to believe that “so much eccentricity, and so much irregularity were the productions of one man . . . to all appearances, two persons are present.”

To complicate matters even further, Brown’s late adolescence predictably saw the first stirrings of sexuality. Already facing family and career pressures, the young man also began to display intense emotional and libidinous energy. He fell in and out of love with great rapidity. In 1789, for example, he grew enamored of Dolly Payne, a young woman to whom he dedicated these heartfelt lines:

But when thy gentle self appears in view,
  Like rosy Venus, absent from her sphere
Flames that inactive slept revive anew
  My breast alternate grows with hope and fear.

Miss Payne was succeeded in the early 1790s by Debby Ferris, whom Brown showered with extravagant letters and love poems describing her as “my guide into the temple of virtue . . . up to the everlasting gates of Heaven!” A few years later he would become infatuated with Susan Potts and eventually plan to marry her. None of these relationships matured, probably because of parental interference. Brown’s mother and father disapproved of their children’s marriage to non-Quakers—none of these young women belonged to the Society of Friends—and evidence suggests that they moved to squelch these attachments. As in the case of career choice, young Brown grew resentful of parental pressure and wrote a somewhat melancholy poem on marriage in the early 1790s:

Let the girl be not widow, nor wanton, nor shrew
  But all are far better than no girl for you.
If your parents say yes, where your fancy says nay,
  Never haggle but let the old folks have their way.11

Brown’s surging sexuality also encompassed intense friendships with two fellow students—William Woods Wilkins and Joseph Bringhurst, Jr. The trio maintained close personal ties and a fervid correspondence until the mid-1790s. Even granting the extravagance of language common to eighteenth-century letter writing, many of Brown’s letters to these young
male friends exhibited a definite sexual charge. For example, in May 1792 a highly emotional missive to Bringhurst contained these passages:

My Bringhurst! Suffer me to call thee by thy tenderest appellations. My heart is open to divine and softening impressions. I am soul all over. . . . And what, thinkest thou, occasioned this delightful revolution? I caught a momentary glimpse of my correspondent. I saw him buried in profound and tranquil sleep. . . . He looks upon me with regard. He dreams of me. . . . Let me cherish thee, in the same rapture which thou breathest, a refuge from despair, a cure for madness and an antidote to grief. . . . I see nothing but myself and thee.

In other letters, Brown described his attachment to Wilkins as “like the lightning of love” and frankly admitted that “I am absolutely enamored of him.” “If I love my friend, I shall often tell him so on occasion, perhaps when such a declaration is not absolutely necessary,” he told Wilkins on another occasion. “I will willingly become a pupil to you and be taught, by my amorous friend, the art and mystery of a Lover.”

Whatever their object, Brown’s “passions,” as he came to call them, became an obsessive concern by the early 1790s. The young man agonized over his physical and emotional urges, engaging in outbursts of confession and repentance. “I have never for a moment been free from the dominion of passions, turbulent and headstrong passions,” he despaired at one point. “These passions may, indeed, have sometimes tended to good, as they have much more frequently to evil, but whatever was their tendency they were equally irresistible.” In one of his earliest fictional efforts, Brown fantasized about a young woman and a sexual liaison “of yielding beauty, of melting love, of meeting bosoms and unutterable ecstasy,” but then chastised himself for these “lawless imaginations”; they had him “plunging deeper into guilt in proportion as I endeavor to disengage myself.” This emotional turmoil fed a growing anxiety over success in the world of letters. Brown worried that his ardor was dissipating the discipline and sustained effort necessary to writing, noting that he had scarcely formed a “plan of study . . . before passions, violent absorbing passions, interfered, equally detrimental to study in their gratification and disappointment.” As an attempt to control this emotional enthusiasm, he tried to subject himself to a disciplined regimen of nightly writing, keeping to his desk transcribing letters, committing thoughts to his journal, and refining his style. Such efforts, he hoped, would eventually subsume his self-styled “native indolence.”

Not surprisingly, Brown’s mother and father became agents of repres-
sion, in terms of both sexuality and literature, as they moved to thwart what they saw as the self-indulgence of their brilliant but undisciplined son. Elijah and Mary had pressured their son away from writing and into a respectable legal career, and had interfered with several of his female dalliances on the grounds of religion. Beneath these overt authority struggles, however, lay another cluster of disturbing family issues. Although the evidence remains sketchy, Mary Brown appears to have exercised a domineering influence over her son, serving as a fount of parental advice and an agent of authority. Well into adulthood, Charles still appeared excessively concerned with pleasing her.

Moreover, his father appears to have been deeply committed to a hierarchical view of the world that ran contrary to the liberalizing trends of post-Revolutionary America and to his son's ambition. This clash reflected, at least in part, a widespread struggle to redefine authority in eighteenth-century America. An older model of paternalism—seen in the influence of writings like Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*—offered the father-child relationship as a metaphor for obligation and dependence in public and private life. By the time of the American Revolution, however, paternalism was under assault from several directions. Lockean pedagogical notions about the "contractual" family, literary advocacy of "affection" and "example" rather than duty and deference, political attacks on monarchical authority—all of these shaped an "antipatriarchal ideology" that influenced both the new American republic and the youthful American writer. According to one student of the Brown family, the elder Brown upheld paternal tradition: "Believing in a world hierarchy, Elijah saw social position as fixed and pointing to God... Contentment with one's station was the moral application of this eighteenth-century philosophy." Not only did the younger Brown rebel against his demanding father, but his permissive early upbringing muddied the waters further. Although his parents attempted to discipline Charles as an adolescent, they had pampered and spoiled him as a child. Brown's close friend William Dunlap became convinced that the young man's erratic, agitated personality could be traced to his boyhood, when sickliness and precocity led to parental overindulgence. By late adolescence, these emotional cross-currents led Charles to hint darkly at family unhappiness. In the "Henrietta" epistle, for instance, he refused to discuss family matters and "domestic incidents" with his female love interest because "the pain would outweigh the pleasure of attending to the narrative, and no instruction would be derived from the melancholy tale."14
From this welter of pressures emerged a full-blown crisis for Charles Brockden Brown as he arrived at the threshold of manhood. Beginning in the late 1780s and intensifying until around 1794, the young intellectual entered an extended period of severe emotional turmoil. His future career seemingly a shambles because of a loathing for the law and the dampening of his literary ambitions, his family relations tainted by strain and resentment, and his sexual urges frustrated by half-hearted repressions, Brown struggled with a darkening vision of the world and himself. This crisis, as it ran its course, gradually unfolded a number of complex and interrelated dimensions: a bitter critique of American social values, a series of gender formulations based on a rather desperate cultural logic, an escalating series of harsh demands for self-control, and a self-destructive agonizing over identity and performance. By the early 1790s the young man's friends and family had just cause for alarm.

Brown's emotional struggles became especially evident in three highly informative series of writings. First, a long sequence of letters to his close friend Joseph Bringhurst, Jr.—the correspondence eventually totaled several dozen pages on Brown's part alone—contained lengthy, self-revealing confessional monologues. Second, the fictional "Henrietta Letters" depicted their young author in a highly charged emotional and cultural dialogue with himself. Finally, "The Rhapsodist" literary essays, Brown's first significant publication, presented a clear sublimation of personal issues and social preoccupations into a literary form. In each of these three efforts, an intermingling of private and public, literary and social, psychological and cultural emerged as a benchmark of Brown's expression.

The young writer's long correspondence with Joseph Bringhurst Jr., a close companion from his earliest days in the Friends' Latin School, apparently began in early 1792. At that time Brown was about to make a momentous decision to leave Alexander Wilcock's office and drop his legal study entirely. By 1793 he would employ himself for a time as a master in the Friends' Grammar School, all the while concocting literary projects and meandering restlessly between the homes of friends and family in Philadelphia and New York City. Bringhurst, also a young man of letters and fellow member of the Belles-Lettres Club, was busy in Philadelphia shaping a career as a businessman. Brown began sending a steady stream of letters to Bringhurst's residences on Union Street and Front Street—forty-six of those letters have survived—which would flow unabated for some five years. In these epistles their troubled author unburdened himself.15
An overriding theme in Brown's epistles to Bringhurst was an almost frantic pursuit of knowledge. He constantly referred to his hunger to know “the history of nations, and of individuals, of life and manners.” The scope of his ambition was vast and inclusive, as he impatiently told his correspondent: “Everything that relates to man is of importance in the study of human nature. Every art and science. Every scheme of the understanding or operation of the senses.” As usual, Brown was driven by a desire to integrate all branches of knowledge because an understanding of their relationship “appears to me absolutely indispensable to a rational enquirer.” As a dutiful child of the Enlightenment, however, the young intellectual carefully disassociated knowledge from mere tradition or unthinking faith. He was absolutely sure of one thing: wisdom would come only “in proportion as I gain access to truth . . . , in proportion as my understanding is uniformly, steadfastly, and powerfully illumined by its beams; and in proportion as my actions conform to the deliberate judgements of my understanding.”

This elevated discourse masked a deeper concern in Brown's psyche: the personal meaning of intellectual pursuit. In a long, self-reflexive letter of 1793, for instance, he explored the relative weights of “diligence” and “genius” in the search for moral and intellectual excellence. Brown contended that while application would certainly lead to improvement, it would be limited because of human inequality. It seemed clear that “genius is indispensable to some pursuits; that genius is the gift of nature; that it is a gift entirely withholden from some.” Brown often seemed sure that he possessed such genius. Most youths were so indifferent to knowledge and moral cultivation that to find an elevated one would be as surprising as “an Elephant soberly passing along the streets of my native city.” In contrast, the young writer deemed himself to be quite special. Expressing contempt for most of his acquaintances, he admitted that “I imagined myself infinitely superior to my juvenile associates.” In spite of this arrogance, Brown was perceptive enough to honestly assess his own motives as a combination of genuine love of learning and desire for distinction. While the possession of knowledge was “inexpressibly delightful” in and of itself, he granted that “reputation . . . when attained, [is] by no means unacceptable.”

Brown's concern with the individual pursuit of knowledge and virtue, however, also radiated outward into the realm of social commentary. His many letters from the early 1790s reveal the pain, disapproval, and ambivalence resulting from his encounters with a volatile, expanding American
society. Growing up in the booming commercial atmosphere of Philadelphia, where the structures and sensibilities of the marketplace were remaking traditional social arrangements in the post-Revolutionary decades, this young man struggled with the emerging model of striving individualism. In one of his early philosophical journal entries in 1787, Brown observed in rather exasperated fashion that “Man may be considered as one, and alone; or he may be considered as a member of a community, and connected with others.” With his own career quandary looming in the background, such ambiguity colored his correspondence with Bringhurst. Brown frequently insisted that as one made a pathway through the world, the applause and support of others must remain strictly secondary to “an anxious desire to obtain the approbation of our own heart.” He also lamented that “man cannot become master of his destiny. He cannot, indeed, control the course of events. It were absurd and presumptuous to make that an object of his wishes.” Brown’s ambivalence grew even more pronounced as he considered the inherent artifice in social relations among ambitious individuals. He grew convinced that “of all the virtues, mankind is most universally deficient in sincerity.” Nor did the youthful writer shy away from self-analysis on this point, acknowledging to Bringhurst that in his dealings with others “a mask became so habitual to me that I scarcely remember how I was induced to lay it aside, and to appear before my friend in my native character.”

Brown’s social critique also took more concrete forms. Stung by personal experience, he set up lawyers as convenient targets for bitter denunciations of a morally vacant scramble for wealth and status. In an American society where material success overshadowed all else, the attorney became a figure of “dull, unvarying temper” whom “chance, not merit, has awakened to fame.” In a bitter burst of doggerel written around 1792, Brown vented his contempt for social-climbing attorneys:

Low at those feet where wealth and power gives laws,
Let others prostitute their venal strain;
And air-blown piles of undeserv’d applause,
Build for the weak, the wicked, and the vain.

The young critic did not stop with lawyers. In his wanderings in the countryside outside Philadelphia, he encountered many farmers who seemed as uncivilized and greedy as any barrister. No defender of the yeoman, Brown described a group where “avarice is their predominant passion on which
every other principle of action is based, and they are universally sunk in ignor­ance and brutality.” Back in an urban setting, merchants and specula­tors in the market environment of Philadelphia likewise earned severe crit­icism for their morally suspect practices and money grubbing. As Brown put it rather sharply in 1789, he could not disavow “the despicable idea I have always entertained of the character of a ‘Retailer.’”

Even more striking in the letters to Bringhurst, however, was the author’s obsessive preoccupation with self. Brown unfolded in these missives a nearly endless analysis of his own motives, nature, talents, and prospects. It burst out of every letter, often theatrically, always revealingly. Brown told his correspondent in late 1792 that “I will set you an example of sincerity, and tell you in what light, were I a spectator, I think I should appear to myself.” He more than fulfilled the promise. On the one hand, the young intellectual rather arrogantly defended his special character: “Excell­ence of my kind is singular, and I cannot discover my disadvantage in being noted as singularly excellent on any account.” Brown was also given to playing the tortured artist, frequently advertising a love of solitude and contemplation. On the other hand, however, and more frequently in this period he engaged in gloomy self-deprecation and self-pity. Granting a tendency toward “fits of disconsolateness,” Brown admitted to Bringhurst that his supposed excellence was merely a conceit and that he could be happy as long as the “delusion lasts, but surely miserable when it is at an end.” He often went to even greater lengths of self-abasement. In July 1793, for instance, Brown insisted that he felt only contempt for himself:

None of my hopes have been fulfilled, and . . . nearly all my apprehensions have been realized. . . . I am not happy. It is useless to deny . . . the disapprobation of my own conscience. . . . I am . . . yet a poor and miserable reprobate. Whose bitter portion is anger from those he loves and scorn from those he reveres. . . . Sunk into the lowest abyss of self-contempt and weighed down by early and extreme mortifications.

Such extreme self-criticism eventually led the young man to frighten Bringhurst and other friends with talk of suicide, as he admitted: “I once was determined to destroy myself” since “there, at this moment, creeps not upon the surface of the earth a wretch more miserable.”

In part, such theatrical displays of self-loathing were pathetic calls for reassurance from a young man caught up in an agonized struggle to enter the adult world. They also revealed a kind of internal fragmentation re-
suiting from a struggle with career choice, marriage, and a coherent sense of self. Problems of identity formation, of course, probably persist as part of the human life cycle in some way. Scholars have suggested, however, that the exigencies of developing liberal society greatly intensified them. “Adolescence,” for instance, as a stage of transition from childhood to adulthood, was itself a postmedieval concept that seems to have been identified only in the eighteenth century. With a market society increasingly posing choice as the key to destiny, with Lockean pedagogy stressing the formation of personal autonomy, with the Enlightenment enshrining individual understanding and rationality as an emergence from infantile “nonage,” educated and ambitious young men faced newly intensified pressures by the late 1700s. A splintering of the psyche could result, and this image often came into full view with Brown.

“To comprehend one’s own character is sufficiently hard,” he once confessed to Bringhurst. In a nearly hysterical letter in May 1792 he admitted he was utterly unable to comprehend his own proclivities. “I am no longer master of myself—I weep involuntarily,” he wrote frantically. “I am no more—I must relinquish my pen and fly from myself.” Later the same year in another letter, Brown revealed even more clearly the picture of a divided self. Within the space of a few paragraphs, he informed Bringhurst of his misery and frequent thoughts about suicide and then turned 180 degrees to state that “in my opinion, no one of the same age that ever lived has seen, has read, has written, has reflected more than myself.” Brown then provided a dramatic snapshot of his own fragmented identity:

How often have I smiled on considering within myself: how difficult a person am I from him whom those with whom I associate, suppose me to be. How imperfectly is my real character represented by my countenance, my manner or my dress. How little do they know of him with whom they imagine themselves perfectly acquainted.21

This self-described masked figure, by Brown’s own account, waged a constant battle with passion. Joseph Bringhurst read numerous missives insisting that happiness can be found only “in the arms of love.” He also saw frequent recitations of guilt as his young correspondent confessed affairs where he had been both “seducer” and “seduced.” As Brown observed on several occasions, his passions were so strong that they seriously undermined his intellectual aspirations. He had engaged in the systematic study of “grammar, rhetoric, and poetry,” he wrote in 1792, when the “deity of love” presented herself and “I began to riot in those intoxicating draughts
which the divinity presented to my lips.” At that point, he noted sorrowfully, his projects were “thrown aside and entirely neglected.”

Brown’s internal fragmentation especially came to light in what would become a lifelong preoccupation: dream life and states of altered consciousness. In late adolescence he began to exhibit an attraction to the dream state as an alternative to everyday life. During one unhappy period in 1792, he complained to Bringhurst that “the privilege of dreaming to any agreeable or useful purpose is denied me, and I am forced to be contented with insipid realities . . . which the wand of wakeful Imagination can call into existence.” In that same year Brown related to Bringhurst a long, highly symbolic dream in which both of them played central roles. In the young writer’s fantasy, the two friends were in a landscape out of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, wandering as religious pilgrims looking for the temple of some divinity. In Brown’s words, “all our happiness depended on the success of our journey.” After a long and arduous trip, they came upon an imposing stream laying between them and the temple. After much doubt and delay, Bringhurst lifted Brown in his arms and carried him safely across. At the very moment of success, however, a gigantic knight clad in black armor astride a black horse rushed down upon them, snatched up Brown, and carried him off. At that point Bringhurst, overcome with despair, prepared to hurl himself into the river when his mother appeared to pull him back to safety. At that point Brown “awoke in much distress and horror.”

While the precise meaning of the dream is open to interpretation, several issues appeared clearly in it. At an unconscious level it seems to reflect Brown’s troubled “journey” to success, a “wild, unknown, and dangerous” travail that had left him wandering and uncertain. Moreover, his companion carrying him across the river suggests a serious questioning of the individualist ethos of self-reliance. And the river itself—water traditionally symbolizes life, organic vitality, and sensuality in Western myth and artistic imagery—pointedly appears as a barrier in the dream, a reflection of Brown’s struggle with his passions as an obstacle to worldly success. The dream’s culminating episode embodies the dreamer’s nascent gender anxieties, where men appear as aggressive “black knights” and women as rescuing, nurturing creatures. Overarching this cluster of psychosocial tensions, of course, was Brown’s magnetic attraction to the dream state itself, which he described here almost reverently as “an intercourse with invisible agents.” This fascination with his own hidden layers of consciousness even seemed to culminate in a species of death wish. As Brown observed at the
end of his dream narrative, while his mother still lived never “shall I volun-
tarily cease to exist.” In other words, for this troubled adolescent suicide
seemed to promise the ultimate but forbidden dream. 24

If the Brighurst letters provided young Brown an extended stay in the
confessional booth, his “Henrietta Letters” comprised a kind of literary di-
ary of the fragmented self. There his internal psychic voices engaged in a
fascinating dialogue of contrary emotions and ideas. Apparently written in
1792 and 1793, this long series of letters was presented as actual correspon-
dence between Brown and a young woman with whom he had fallen in
love. More recently, however, scholars have demonstrated their fictional
status as an aborted epistolary novel modeled on Rousseau’s Heloïse. What
fascinates in this text is neither the plot (which is nearly nonexistent) nor
the language (which is inflated and stilted) nor the formal ideas (which are
highly derivative from Rousseau and Richardson) but rather the cultural
and psychological dynamics. The literary discourse of “Henrietta” clearly
suggests a process of self-definition, with Brown composing both male and
female voices in a dialogue of competing impulses. 25

The structure of the “Henrietta” manuscript takes a simple and
straightforward form. It consists of an extended exchange of letters be-
tween “C.B.B.,” a youthful gentleman, and “Henrietta,” the female object
of his affections. While the young man lavishes love, hopes for marriage,
and adoration on the young woman, she responds with admonitions to
control his passion. Throughout the text there weaves long, highly senti-
mental discussions of an array of issues in late eighteenth-century culture:
education, marriage, equality between the sexes, languages, and political
principles. The narrative has virtually no plot or action, and eventually it is
aborted. It simply stops before even telling the reader if the two protago-
nists ever marry.

On several counts this rather frustrating and unsatisfying text reveals
more than the author ever intended. First, Brown’s fictional exchange with
himself discloses a persistent struggle for self-control. For instance, follow-
ing one of C.B.B.’s passionate declarations of physical love, Henrietta
rebukes him: “How would you be induced to write in that inexcusably li-
centious manner? I read it with indignation . . . For surely he whose de-
portment is regulated not by reason or prudence but by violent and domi-
neering passion . . . is in ruins.” The young correspondent can only reply
that the beauties of her “animating mind” are matched by “the graces of
thy person.” Brown asks, “Am I not a man? And would you punish me for
faults which are inseparable from my nature?” Such internal conflict sur-
faced frequently in Brown’s late adolescent experiences. In published poetry he announced “the sacred task, to love as sexless beings,” while in private letters he burst out, “what is a being without passion? What is that cold, sapless, and inanimate virtue founded only on principle, and not on sentiment?”

This internal contest for self-control led Brown to postulate clear gender definitions of human impulse in the “Henrietta Letters.” In Freudian terms, the female representative Henrietta takes shape as a kind of Super-ego figure while C.B.B. appears as an embodiment of the Id. The young woman is typically described as an “angel,” a model of “purity” that inspires her suitor with “a boundless desire of rising to the same extraordinary pitch of mental and moral excellence.” On the other hand, she describes C.B.B. as a creature whose “wild, impetuous, and ungovernable passions” must be guarded against. The clashing juxtaposition of these instincts presents the libidinous C.B.B. embracing Henrietta and showering her with kisses while she cries, “My friend! forbear!” Brown records the victory of the Superego: “It was impossible not to obey you. I unloosed you from my arms, . . . bathed your hand with my tears of remorse and sorrow and supplicated your forgiveness.”

Such formulations eventually prompted the young author—this would become especially significant for Brown’s developing grasp of his own role as a writer—to identify “culture” as the domain of women. The “Henrietta” manuscript constantly portrays its female protagonist in fervent pursuit of knowledge in languages, literature, and philosophy. Expressing her admiration for the Richardsonian heroine Clarissa Harlowe, Henrietta proclaims, “Why should women be outstripped by men in literary pursuits? For is not female curiosity insatiable, and what other passion is requisite to render learned labor successful?” Brown, writing in the guise of C.B.B., goes even further. Male intellectual capacities, he insists, naturally flow into mathematics, military science, and the law while females are attracted inherently to “the sedentary and domestic avocations” of poetry, moral reflection, and literature. As he reassures Henrietta regarding her love of poetry and romance, “you are destined by your maker not only to rival but to outstrip your masculine competitors in all the excellencies of heart and understanding.”

This dissonant dialogue among Brown’s internal voices—male and female, libidinous and repressive, willful and genteel—ultimately produces a persistent and disturbing presence in the “Henrietta Letters”: the fluid, fragmented self. One glimpse appears from the fictional pen of Henrietta
as she recounts her first impressions of C.B.B. as a fleeting visage who "haunted my imagination." Arresting her attention as he stopped to glance in her window before disappearing, the young man would intrude obsessively into her dreams as a mutable, protean figure: "I saw you under a thousand different shapes. At one time methought you came to visit me in a magnificent equippage . . . ; at another time that you put on a mean disguise and became a servant of the gardener. . . . Afterwards I thought you overleapt the garden wall by midnight and suddenly appeared before me."

At another point Henrietta describes her suitor as such an "inexplicable, unintelligible creature" that "it has taught me hereafter to place no confidence in external appearances." Writing as C.B.B., young Brockden Brown replies in a highly schizoid manner. Insisting on his absolute abhorrence of pretenses and disguises, he claims always to have "acted and spoken with sincerity from the strongest and [most] invincible motives." Just a few sentences later, however, he confesses, "I own I do not thoroughly comprehend my own motives." With such images in the "Henrietta Letters" any sense of firm identity or stable sense of self seems to have vanished. 29

In the autumn of 1789 Brown's first substantial publication, a quartet of essays entitled "The Rhapsodist," appeared. Offered in the pages of Philadelphia's *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine*, these short pieces were likely a portion of his early notebook "The Journal of a Visionary." They constituted a benchmark in the young man's development both as a writer and as a human being. The essays presented their author as a literary observer who utilized both reason and fancy to explore "the sentiments suggested by the moment in artless and unpremeditated language." As a clear product of the turmoil of Brown's private and public life in this era, however, "The Rhapsodist" also took shape as an exercise in sublimation. It provided an intriguing self-portrait as the young artist struggled to claim a social comprehension of place, a cultural means of expression, and a psychological sense of self. As Brown frankly admitted, the rhapsodist would employ "that caution and decency becoming one who is painting his own character." 30

From the outset young Brown made clear his central theme in defining this persona: the question of individual sincerity and deception. At the beginning of the first "Rhapsodist" essay, he passionately affirmed the "sincerity of my character" and promised to write only what is "strictly true." Brown then made the following bold and highly revealing statement:
I speak seriously when I affirm that no situation whatsoever will justify a man in uttering a falsehood. I have, therefore, rigidly exacted the truth from myself, even in a case where the world is willing to be deceived. . . . Truth is with me the test of every man's character. . . . Wherever I perceive the least inclination to deceive, I suspect a growing depravity of soul. . . . But I am not alone sagacious in discovering the faults of others. I am also careful to regulate my own conduct by this immutable standard.

Uneasy in a liberalizing social milieu of competitive individualism, and agitated by vocational and personal pressures, the young intellectual self-consciously presented himself to the public as a sincere, even artless moral writer. The rhapsodist, he promised, “will write as he speaks, and converse with his reader not as an author, but as a man.”

Brown, however, quickly added an important addendum to this self-definition. The genuineness and sincerity of the rhapsodist, he insisted, could only flow from a condition of isolation. The author claimed at one time to have written in solitude on “the solitary banks of the Ohio,” but now in Philadelphia he was forced to retire to the deepest recesses of his garden or bedchamber to escape the clamor of society. When alone, Brown claimed, he could indulge flights of fancy and “solicit an acquaintance with the beings of a higher order.” Thus, an important cultural juxtaposition—the sensitive, imaginative, artistic imperial self versus the mundane, utilitarian, constricting demands of society—began to take shape in his earliest writing. A rhapsodist, he wrote, yearns to

be left to the enjoyment of himself, and to the freedom of his own thoughts. It is only when alone that he exerts his faculties with rigour, and exults in the consciousness of his own existence. . . . In spite of my pretensions to unlimited sovereignty over my own person and actions. In spite of my strong original propensity to silence and reserve, I am, in some measure, compelled to pay obedience, tho' grudgingly, to the laws of society.

In a sentence heavy with cultural, economic, and psychological layers of meaning, Brown claimed as his goal to “withdraw himself entirely from the commerce of the world.”

Such brave proclamations of romantic individualism in “The Rhapsodist” essays ultimately turned even further inward. Once again Brown betrayed a magnetic attraction to the pull of the dream state and unconsciousness. The rhapsodist’s lively imagination carried him far beyond the
world's mundane materiality, he argued, so that "there is scarcely a piece of unanimated matter existing in the universe. His presence inspires being, instinct and reason into every object, real or imagined." As Brown added a bit later, the rhapsodist "loves to converse with beings of his own creation, and every personage and every scene, is described with a pencil dipt in the colours of imagination." This proclivity led the young writer to describe the hurly-burly of Philadelphia urban life in terms of a fantasy, as "the lively representation of a dream." It prompted him to relate the contents of a long, messianic vision in which, as an "imaginary hero," thousands of spectators pay tribute to his genius. Ultimately, this preoccupation with fantasy helped foster the young writer's growing tendency to define, separate, and elevate the realm of "imagination" away from the day-to-day utilitarian realm of social existence. For Brown, the aspiring man of letters, work life and creative life seldom intersected. Thus, it must be, as he conceived it in these essays, that "the life of the rhapsodist is literally a dream."  

With "The Rhapsodist" essays the earliest stage of Brown's life reached a highly schizoid culmination. On the one hand, by early manhood his literary definitions and goals had begun to crystallize into a coherent intellectual foundation for his career. At the same time the young writer's personal definition and selfhood had fallen into increasing incoherence and disarray. The contrast, and tension, between these elements, was growing acute by the early 1790s.

As a writer, Brown had developed remarkably in early life. With a flurry of half-formed juvenile efforts, the young author had begun to shape a pronounced literary sensibility. The writing of fiction, he concluded, should focus on the domestic experience of people—"the personal character of individuals, their visages, their dress, their accent, their language, their habits, manners and opinion, their personal behavior." The novel could present unmatched insights into the "human heart." Even skilled writing, however, could only partly capture "the influence of the passion" and the "strange events in our own domestic experience." As Brown put it directly in the "Henrietta Letters," "Fiction, however published and elaborate, could never yet surpass reality." Literary explorations of real life and moral issues, however, could benefit equally both the author and the reader. The culture of books—both writing and reading—seemed useful insofar as it provided "a text to which your imagination must furnish a supplement. . . . The ideas of others are of no importance and utility but as you render them by meditation your own . . . the products of your own labor,
or the offspring of your own imagination.” For Brown, this belief shaped a kind of authorial solipsism where spontaneity of expression was essential. Regarding his ideas and words, “whichsoever first offer themselves are instantly adopted” and any revision or rewriting was anathema as “the dress of borrowed or artificial sentiments.” The fledgling novelist, in the language and sensibility of liberal individualism, staked out his literary claim early in life: “I deliver the suggestions of my heart, I speak in my native character.”

Behind this apparent intellectual coherence, however, Brown’s sense of self had shattered into psychological fragments. Poised on the brink of manhood, the young writer faced an intense and persistent emotional crisis. Dramatically claiming that “I utterly despise myself,” Brown stared into an “abyss of ignominy and abasement into which I am sunk by my own reflections.” By the early 1790s his gloomy self-absorption had helped create a personal fantasy world constructed of, in Brown’s own words, “air built structures of a wild, undisciplined, untractable imagination.” Making false claims about traveling in Europe, fabricating wild tales about an early marriage and his wife’s premature death, and deliberately confusing his own woes with those of his fictional characters, the young author, according to the admonitions of his friend Dr. Elihu Smith, too often wandered “in a world of your own creation.” Brown himself recognized these imaginative journeys as both dangerous and liberating. On the one hand, they allowed him to be “rescued from the tedious or distressful present, by the aid of an excursive imagination,” an instinct that would feed his writing. On the other hand, however, Brown agonized over whether “a visionary has not now become a lunatic, whether the objects around me be phantoms or realities, whether my reason be not overpowered by imagination.”

This volatile mix of professional, public integration and private, psychological disintegration might seem to comprise a full-blown “identity crisis,” as one scholar has termed it. Brown’s situation actually had roots extending much deeper and ramifications spreading much wider. From the specific historical matrix of a transforming market society in the early American republic, several intense pressures—career choice, expression of sexual passion, parental authority—had emerged to entangle this sensitive young intellectual. Struggling with the liberal model of individual success, Brown had gradually begun to shape his literary efforts as an expression of this social milieu. For Brown, the public man, writing became an expression of pure individual imagination, removed from and elevated above the
sordid material world of profit seeking. Defenders of culture, he insisted, must flee society and "seek...a visionary happiness in a world of their own creation." At the same time, the deeply troubled private man, cut loose from the moorings of social identity and strained by the external demands for success, grew splintered and formless. Brown recognized in himself, at some layer of consciousness, a fragmented and fluid self:

No one more widely differs in his sentiments and dispositions from others than at different periods from himself. ... We vary according to the variations of the scene and the hour, and ... the particular circumstances in which we shall then be placed. Man...is always either returning from a certain point or leaving it behind him.37

Charles Brockden Brown's early life crisis, however, was but the first act in a lifelong drama of the market and the self. Unhappy in the social world and anchorless in the private realm, he appeared trapped in a scene where external and internal struggles entangled one another. The writing of literature, as a complex act of cultural mediation, offered one way out. So, too, did Brown's alienation, which gradually began to flow outward into a social critique. As he had observed in the "Henrietta Letters," a penchant for concealing motives and counterfeiting conviction had made it obvious that "of all the virtues mankind is the most universally deficient in sincerity." By the mid-1790s this sentiment would trigger Brown's developing literary assault on the social relations and cultural values of the liberalizing American republic.