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Literary Histories

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A COMPANION TO
AMERICAN
FICTION
1780–1865

EDITED BY SHIRLEY SAMUELS

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Literary Histories

Michael Drexler and Ed White

A familiar argument about early American fiction goes like this. A host of sociological factors conspired to make fiction-writing difficult or unlikely: an underdeveloped economy of subsistence and manufactory, limited leisure for writing and reading, poor production and distribution systems, neglect of belletristic culture, and various cultural prohibitions against fiction all resulted in the absence of the necessary infrastructure to support the development of fiction. Additionally, America was not culturally mature enough to produce serious fiction. Persistent parochialism and the late emergence of national culture, a tendency to ape European forms, crude privileging of pragmatic or didactic writing, and uncertainty about the New World content of fiction meant that what was produced was embarrassingly coarse. The earliest examples of fiction – the clumsy works of the 1790s – merely foreshadow the writing of quality that finally emerged in the 1830s.

Mercifully, the scholarship of recent decades has chipped away at these assumptions. The popularity of imported European novels, for instance, or the success of a work like Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, suggest that claims about the missing American audience are exaggerated. More serious challenges have questioned the basic assumptions behind this dog-eared narrative. Might not the perceived crudeness of early American fiction reflect anachronistic esthetic standards inherited from the nineteenth-century novel?¹ And what if our very concept of "fiction" is too narrow? Various critics have suggested that works traditionally deemed nonfictional – Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* or Dr. Alexander Hamilton's *History of the Tuesday Club* – must be read as innovative fictional experiments, inviting us to rethink the early trajectories of American letters.² Such arguments invite us to consider a less commonsensical definition of fiction that informed an earlier formal-generic criticism – the view that fiction is "any work of literary art in a radically continuous form, which almost always means a work of art in prose" (Frye 1957: 303). With this more expansive definition, we find fiction doing quite well before the 1790s. Travel narratives, provincial histories, ethnographies, captivity

narratives, pamphlets, satires, conversion stories – the list speaks to an astounding proliferation of fiction in the last century of English colonization. That this *colonial* phase of American fiction largely remains invisible speaks to conceptual obstacles impeding a colonial literary history: pre-revolutionary writings are today still read as documentary auxiliaries to the history of settlement. Our concern in this essay, however, is with our subsequent understanding of antebellum fiction, and we begin with a few theses which suggest a productive revision of the old story.

Our starting point is that the dominant prose tradition of late colonial America amounted to a series of locally developed historiographic formulas. Ethnographies, captivity narratives, provincial histories, imperiographies: these were the constituents of early American fiction. Traditions of more imaginative, less obviously realist writing – what we would commonsensically call “fiction” – emerged from experimental adaptations of pre-existing colonial genres of historiography. These adaptations, partially pursued under the growing influence of European fiction in the narrow sense, were primarily attempts to address, even *solve*, historical problems inadequately treated by traditional genres. That is, early fictional innovators sought to develop historiographic conventions in more imaginative formats in order to better capture the confusing processes of New World development. The American “failures” to duplicate British and continental European forms were less second-rate knock-offs than attempts to develop properly New World imaginative genres. If these peripheral innovations did not “succeed” by establishing counter-traditions or influencing the European core, this is less a sign of American esthetic inferiority and more a matter of the hegemony of European conventions. Consequently, the very idea of an early American literary history has a double resonance, for early national “fiction” is commonly “literary history”: an attempt to extend or develop history in an imaginative fashion. At the same time, any literary history must explore the synergy between “history” and “literature,” fictional currents that were hardly discrete in the eighteenth century. An appreciation of this relationship should allow us to engage with a critical tradition (best exemplified by Lukács) of tracing the formation of imaginative fiction via the historiographic imaginary. While the following pages do not give a complete picture of this literary-historical dynamic, we hope to illuminate some examples of that interplay while sketching the outlines of what a better history of early American fiction might look like.

We might usefully begin with the career of Charles Brockden Brown, a writer exceptional for the volume of his output (more than 5,000 pages), its generic scope, and its self-reflexive interest in literary and historiographic modes. Over nineteen years, from 1792 to 1811, he wrote six novels, numerous serialized columns and short narratives, poems, literary reviews and essays, historical narratives, political commentary, biographies, and translations. Until recently, Brown’s reputation rested solely on appraisal of his novels, primarily those written in the creative burst of 1798–1801, though even critical reception of these has been mixed. Traditionally, these novels are viewed as intriguing failures to adapt the Godwinian mode to New World concerns. But after producing his quartet of *Wieland*, *Arthur Mervyn*, *Ormond*, and *Edgar Huntly*,

Brown abandoned the novel form in favor of editorial and historiographic tasks. This rejection of the novel has long registered as a retrenchment from generic innovation, evidence of Brown’s esthetic immaturity, and a marker of his political conservatism (see Watts 1994; Christopherson 1993). Accordingly, his 1807 assessment of novels, whose readers would “often be deluded by estimates of human life and happiness that are calculated upon false foundations,” seems to reveal a moralizing retreat from fiction and an abandonment of those “wild narratives of the imagination” pursued in his younger days (Brown 1807a).

But we might view this career differently. Rather than rejecting the fad for novels, Brown found the utility of the European-dominated form to be exhausted, inadequate to the conceptual problems of contemporary life more effectively treated in other historiographic modes. Rather than making a conservative retreat from the novel, Brown pursued a progressive elaboration of a narrative theory, already evident in his earliest prose, in the link between history and fiction. Originally, the attraction of novels resided not too far from the draw of historical narrative: both, he maintained, offered compensation for the “tameness and insipidity of common life and common events” (Brown 1807a: 410). The proximate appeal of the novel and history-writing warranted a synthesis that Brown appreciated in the “fictitious biographies” of Richardson and Fielding (see Brown 1804); the desired synthesis of the life-events of marginal, unremarkable personages with the grand sweep of historical movements obviously prefigured the work of Walter Scott as well. But whereas the novel tended to feed imaginative fancy with the repetitions of stock tropes – the “terrific” or the “romance” – a deeper, more valued variety lay in historical accounts which, if not factually verifiable, were at least tested by the limits of probability. It is critical to recognize that the difference between historiography and the novel was *not* the difference between fact and fiction. Brown continued to spin fictitious narratives; however, released from the expectations of the conventional novel form, he was free to broaden the reach of fictional experimentation by dressing his narratives in the garb of the discovered letter, the secret history, or the annals of the undiscovered country.³ If Defoe, Behn, and others had earlier spun fictional narratives out of similar cloth, claiming that their narratives had a basis in fact in order to win public interest in an emergent genre, Brown effectively returned to these pre-novelistic historiographic modes to revitalize what he saw as a predictable and consolidated narrative form at the century’s end.

History surpassed the novel in its possibilities, and, having departed from the novel form, Brown devoted himself to refining the presentation of historical narrative while chronicling the differentiation of historiographic modes. This project had the added benefit of offering a vigorous defense of the value of New World writing. His last publishing venture, *The American Register, or General Repository of History, Politics, and Science*, testifies to Brown’s attempt to make American writing more visible to the broader community of English readers, while theorizing its world position as well. In a comparative essay entitled “A Sketch of American Literature for 1807,” for instance, Brown published lists of US writing under distinct generic “departments,” including

history, politics, military books, law, poetry and drama, and theology to parallel British publications. American productions in these areas were distinct from their British counterparts. Yet in writing about fiction he provided no "department" for the American novel, while British novels were called "*home*" productions (Brown 1807b, c). And even these made up only a fraction of novels consumed by English-language readers, most having been "naturalized" from French and German authors. The implications were clear: national distinctions were insignificant to the novel form, with Anglo-American productions a small and dominated subset of continental European fiction. In world production, the peripheral US novel could not hold its own as an innovative genre. Further, foreshadowing Franco Moretti's recent theorization of world literature (Moretti 2000, 2003a, b), Brown implied that original development could thrive only in the less dominated historiographic genres. Novels were cosmopolitan, in a negative sense: the US novel was feeble because of the novel's international success. The peripheral society needed the peripheral genres in which "history" could out-imagine the novel.

The career of "Connecticut Wit" David Humphreys offers another case of an apparent paradigmatic opponent of "fiction." This staunch Federalist devoted his literary career to the production of Augustan verse, patriotic biography, and anti-Jacobin satire. Not only did he never venture into what we normally call "fiction," he presented familiar arguments against "the reveries and fictions which have been substituted by hacknied writers in the place of historical facts": repeatedly exposed to "[t]he lie," the fiction reader would eventually "run into the opposite extreme, and give up all confidence in the annals of ancient as well as modern times" (Humphreys 2000: 6–7). Yet this picture is complicated by a survey of his *Essay on the Life of the Honourable Major-General Israel Putnam*, which Humphreys trumpeted as "the first effort in Biography that has been made on this continent" (p. 2). What is fascinating about this work is the sharp stylistic and generic divide between its two halves, examination of which reveals some of the challenges in the literary-historical enterprise.

The work's first half, treating Putnam's background and experiences in the Seven Years War, offers an assemblage of colonial genres: a gothic tale of a wolf hunt in a cavern of "horror" (Humphreys 2000: 14–17); tales of military heroism (pp. 23–30); a captivity tale (pp. 42–8); the story of an attempted seduction of a captive Anglo-American woman by a French officer (pp. 48–53); and a Plutarchan sketch of Putnam, Cincinnatus-like, leaving his plow (p. 67). Clearly Humphreys could not present the subjectivity of his protagonist without recourse to the most popular fictional conventions. Yet the second half, uneasy with colonial genres, takes a drastically different approach, becoming a pastiche of revolutionary documents: a congressional declaration (p. 76); Washington's orders to Putnam (pp. 77–9); a prohibitory decree (p. 80); various public orders (pp. 81, 95–6, 99); a military address (p. 121); and military correspondence (pp. 105, 106–7, 108, 113, 118–19, 124–6). Interspersed with these are a description of a painting of Bunker Hill (p. 73), excerpts from Barlow's "Vision of Columbus" (p. 73–4), and, in a footnote, a 22-stanza satire by

Francis Hopkinson (pp. 83–7); and the work concludes with Washington's laudatory 1783 letter to Humphreys at the close of the war (pp. 124–6). The stylistic shift allows us to trace some of the tensions shaping American fiction. For the early Putnam is a character of the imperial periphery and thus of literary innovation: his primary conflicts are with beasts, cowards, Indians, and rakes; his principal settings the howling wilderness, the pastoral farm, or the French city of sin (Québec); and he thrives as a walking almanac of a "rural philosopher" (p. 18). But the Putnam of the second half represents the new center of power as he becomes a military and social leader. Consequently he can no longer be the character-in-form displaying rebellion and independence. In literary terms, the narrative suggests that colonial genres reach a definitive terminus, the Revolution, after which authors aspiring to world status must deploy less parochial forms like the command, the decree, the manifesto, the encomium, or the tableau – all "centripetal" forms, in Bakhtin's terms. It is revealing that Humphreys tucks Hopkinson's satire into a footnote – a visible symptom of generic repression.

In a sense, then, Humphreys' biography illustrates some of the implications of Brown's analysis, despite his apparent distance from that author. Like Brown, Humphreys sought the innovative blend of imaginative colonial genres in a fictional mode distinct from the European novel. The "essay" of his title was no austere marker of nonfiction but rather an insistence on the imaginative project of fiction. And if Humphreys was clearly capable of crafting an adventure story along the lines of the historical novels of the 1820s, he insisted instead on pursuing a different direction, away from the hegemonic European forms. Such a turn was less failure than refusal, an attempt to make central the transition to the hierarchic republican forms thriving on the world periphery. He sought a cumulative form of fiction that might indulgently take readers from a remembrance of things colonial to the mature subjectivity of republican meritocracy, in each case remaining true to New World genres. The *Essay* thus offered "literary history" in both the aforementioned senses: a combination of imaginative and historiographic modes, presented in a historical *précis* of American genres.

The literary-historical hybrids of American fiction were grounded in a sometimes implicit, often explicit self-theorization of America's marginal position in "world" fictional production, for which a commitment to historiographic adaptation was an essential counter-response. But how did this global sphere affect the fictional adaptations of historiography? We can again approach this question with reference to Brown, whose first major novel, *Wieland*, offers an interesting engagement with local history. Its immediate inspiration was Robert Proud's *History of Pennsylvania*, one of a slew of post-revolutionary provincial histories. Focusing on the colonial era, Proud insisted that the 1750s marked "the golden days of *Pennsylvania*" before the lapse of the Paxton Riots of 1763–4 (Proud 1797: 7). At that moment, "certain most furious zealots" aroused a band of "*armed demi-savages*" to commit "the most horrible *massacre*" of local Indians (p. 326). The resulting "spirit of faction . . . infected the minds of many," proving a "sorrowful presage of the approaching change" of the

Revolution (pp. 329–30). Proud's Tory account of colonial "madness," "enthusiasm," and massacre would serve as the kernel for *Wieland*, a novel carefully set in the time and countryside of the Paxton Riots. Brown hints at his approach in a 1799 assessment of Proud, praised as "the humble, honest, and industrious compiler" for carefully preparing the building materials "in the order in which they will be successively required by the builder" (Brown 1992: 26). Here the proper building blocks are the constituent regions and populations of Pennsylvania, the decisive episode the Paxtoneers' rural insurrection. For the uprising was no arcane detail of Pennsylvania's past, but a case study of a worldwide phenomenon – the rural uprising – evident not only in post-revolutionary America (in the Shays, Whiskey, and Wyoming conflicts) but also in Haiti, Ireland, and France. Consequently, the tendency to read early American fiction as a series of national allegories risks eliding the historiographic method linking local inspiration to global analysis. Like Proud, Brown used the provincial historians' building blocks, reworked in imaginative form, to explore the dynamics of seemingly incomprehensible rural insurgencies.

A similar route was taken in Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism*, a novel whose Pennsylvania countryside setting and political-sentimental discourse displays a profound concern with the recent Fries Rebellion, the details of which were circulated in the documentary collection *The Two Trials of John Fries*. Dorcasina Sheldon's final renunciation of her sentimental fervor strongly echoes Fries's plea for mercy. "I have passed my life in a dream, or rather a delirium," she writes, much as Fries confessed to President Adams that he "is one of those deluded and unfortunate men . . . [who] solicits the interference of the President to save him from an ignominious death, and to rescue a large, and hitherto happy family, from future misery and ruin" (Tenney 1992: 320–3; Anon. 1800: 130, 135). Like Brown, Tenney started not with a national allegory but with a local Pennsylvanian insurrection before moving on to what she viewed as the transnational cultural dynamics of Jacobin sentimental violence. The contrast with the novel's British counterpart, Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, is telling, for rather than address the quixotic individual she examined the "ism" expressed most recently in France and Haiti. While this imaginative circuit from local history to an eighteenth-century world-systems theory highlights the tremendous significance of insurrectionary movements for the period's literature, its literary-historical implications are more far-reaching. For to deplore the limited character development of these works is to miss the point. *Wieland* and *Female Quixotism*, like many other fictions of the time, were concerned less with individual character depth than with the dynamics of insurgency in particular geopolitical settings. Consequently each novel attempted a historical analysis or problem-solving that contemporary US readers would have connected with political upheavals of the time. In short, these novels were conceived as historiographic projects elaborating affiliated forms of historical prose (the provincial history, the trial record) rather than following the established conventions of British prose.

A slightly different synergy is evident in the work of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, whose famously expanding *Modern Chivalry* is frequently criticized for weak character

development and plot cohesion. We might approach *Modern Chivalry* through Brackenridge's fictional project of the 1790s, *Incidents of the Insurrection*, a work ostensibly justifying his involvement in the Whiskey Rebellion. What is striking about *Incidents* is its numerous parallels to the later historical novel tradition: a "mediocre" protagonist who is the "hub" around whom events flow; the search for a "middle way" or "neutral ground" within a conflict; depiction of this middle way as a crucial "cultural development"; characterization following "historical-social types"; a "retrogressive" plot driven by the constant overcoming of impediments; major historical figures appearing tangentially, but humanized rather than heroized; emphasis upon the interaction "between 'above' and 'below'"; compression and intensification of events; and the geopolitically marginal context (Lukács 1983). Here Brackenridge mapped the conflict between democratic backcountry yeomen and republican littoral elites, presenting himself as the seeker of the middle way; he chronicles the ebbs and flows of the uprising, complete with humanizing cameos by Hamilton and Washington in a spectacular meeting of "above" and "below." In short, Brackenridge wrote something very similar to a Walter Scott novel, but *twenty years earlier*; and we should certainly read *Incidents* as one of the innovative fictions of the period.

Twenty years later, Brackenridge insisted, in *Modern Chivalry*, that *Incidents* was less an account of an isolated event than "a picture of a people broke loose from the restraints of government, and going *further than they had intended to go*"; and he wished his book back in print to speak to the secession movements of the 1810s (Brackenridge 1962: 765–6, emphasis in original). The comments suggest continuities between *Incidents* and *Modern Chivalry* that are at first hard to track: the latter has no continuous plot tracing a definitive conflict. Nonetheless, in its smaller episodes it characteristically traces conflicts between political and cultural extremes, high and low cultures, the search for a middle ground, repeated impediments, and actual historical personages mingling with stock character types. So what was the historiographic model for the work? In his *Law Miscellanies* (1814) Brackenridge declared his ambition to draft a "Pennsylvania Blackstone," a detailed legal commentary on juridical issues, and we might usefully read *Modern Chivalry* as a "comic Blackstone," mapping a vernacular common law of ideological impulses and reactions that lay the cultural foundations for formal legal-political decisions. In this light, the oddity of *Modern Chivalry* – its constant serial expansion from 1792 to 1815, and the resulting stylistic "inconsistencies" – is far from a literary flaw: it is instead a historiographic achievement mapping the ideologemes of everyday adjudication. With the legal history as model, *Modern Chivalry* snaps the confines of the bourgeois novel to offer an imaginative anatomy of cultural interpretation in the early republic.

One further illustration from Brown's career suggests further experimental routes open to early American writers. Having abandoned the framework of the European novel, Brown devoted much of the next decade to grand-scale experimentation with macro-historical traditions in a series of historical sketches. One segment, published in Dunlap's biography of Brown as "Sketches of the History of the Carrils and Ormes," covers centuries tangentially unified by the history of several elite families.⁴

Brown's focus, though, is the major structural determinants of culture, from "the management of agriculture to the logic and effects of political, military, artistic, and ecclesiastical culture" (Barnard forthcoming). It is as if Brown sought to write a grand global fiction in which "events" span decades and "society" is the major character, whose qualities include architecture and music. The sketches are striking illustrations of the historiographic-literary synergy, betraying the influence of Machiavelli's historical method. Brown's own "machivelliads" drew on republican institutional analyses to produce counterfactual historical fictions comparable to *The Florentine Histories*, though explicitly imaginative. The neglect of these works has left an unfortunate gap in our literary history, not least for our appreciation of a transnational macro-historical track in early American fiction.

The United States' theorization of its position in world literature, the fictional experimentation with colonial genres, the innovations with local or macro-histories – all suggest an expanded account of American literary development with which we might not only move beyond conventional censures of the so-called first novels of the 1790s but also complicate our picture of canonical successes. Take the career of Washington Irving, for example, extending from the Jonathan Oldstyle letters of 1802 to the biographies of Mohammed and Washington in the 1850s. His career, apparently focused on the two tracks of "sketches" (*Salmagundi*, *The Sketch-book of Geoffrey Crayon*, *Bracebridge Hall*, *The Alhambra*) and "histories" (*Knickerbocker's History of New York*, *The Life and Voyages of Columbus*, *The Conquest of Granada*, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*), further illustrates the early republican failure to produce a true novel, famously attributed to Irving's inability to escape European influences. Yet we would suggest that the parodic *History of New York*, the satirically narrated *Conquest of Granada*, and even the various sketch-books taken as fictional unities, signal a refusal to accept the novel's recognized conventions, and continued attempts to develop innovative fictional-historical hybrids, whether in the sketches' episodic engagement with local history or the experimental reworkings of discovery and colonization. Clearly our canonical literary history can gain much from a thoughtful reconsideration of earlier innovations and resistances.

We want to conclude with some brief speculations about Atlantic fiction, explored in recent years primarily to stress the continuities between British and US writing. Yet while colonial and post-revolutionary American writers clearly perceived the hegemony of European letters, the project of historiographic experimentation prompted spatial and temporal connections to the broader Atlantic basin, which should be examined with greater specificity. For instance, the North African Barbary coast – "Algeria" in American parlance – became a literary focal point following the capture, enslavement, and ransom of American sailors in the region. Within the sphere of global mercantile enterprise and the circumatlantic slave trade, Algerine captivity literature reinvigorated the old colonial formula of the Indian captivity narrative while offering a bridge to the new republican critiques of African chattel slavery. The result was a partial equation of the marginal United States with the North African Atlantic rim, and a literature exploring the servitude of the periphery.

One of the first works to respond to this global-cultural mapping was Franklin's innovative "Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim" of 1790, a fictionalized political pamphlet imagining republican anti-slavery arguments within the breakaway "Erika" sect. Such stylistic experiments would become popular and take a prominent position in US writing, in works like Mathew Carey's *A Short Account of Algiers* (1794) and John Stevens' *An Historical and Geographical Account of Algiers* (1797). More significant, perhaps, were the innovations of Royall Tyler and Susannah Rowson, prominent figures in the emergence of a US literary culture. Each had initially written popular works – "The Contrast" and *Charlotte Temple* respectively – inspired by the revolutionary contrast between the new republic and its former Atlantic metropole. And each quite naturally turned to the Algerian sphere, Rowson writing "Slaves in Algiers" (1794) and Tyler *The Algerine Captive* (1797). Like Franklin's piece, these works crafted ironic parallel histories to explore problematic republican issues resurfacing around the Atlantic rim. Rowson's work proved particularly innovative, drawing on the harem as a metaphor for marital and sexual inequality in Anglo-American society to envision a geopolitical historiography of domesticity. This "Algerian" movement thus combined the most innovative features of US fictional experimentation: a melding of historiographic, colonial, and European styles and forms, and a vernacular theorization of global (or at least "Atlantic") culture from a peripheral perspective.

The challenge for contemporary literary history, then, is to resist the assessment of American fiction in the cramped, anachronistic framework of national fiction. Rather than seeking the most European of American novels as the pinnacle of fictional achievement, we might consider an alternative literary history in which a work like Leonora Sansay's *Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo* takes center stage. In his 1808 survey of American publications, Charles Brockden Brown catalogued this work in the department of "history" – a sign of his appreciation as much as it is a marker for today's critical bafflement. For Sansay's work defies conventional generic expectations in fascinating ways. Written as a series of letters from a lady of Philadelphia to the infamous conspirator Aaron Burr, Sansay's text offered a hybrid of personal writing, sentimental narrative, historical explanation, and ethnographic survey; the epistolary form allowed for the vertical integration of a variety of historiographic modes to relate a complex account of revolutionary violence, European tyranny, and nascent anti-colonial movements across the Caribbean from Haiti and Cuba to Jamaica and Philadelphia. The result was a stunning sentimental tour of the cataclysmic final stages of the Haitian Revolution, in one of the most innovative and trans-American works of early republican America. Brown's classification suggests that, without dismissing the marital plot as excuse or device, he found in the *Secret History* a valuable contribution to a distinctive New World tradition of historical fiction. We could do worse than to follow Brown's project of a new conceptualization of early American fiction. Attuned to the Atlantic battle over literary forms, and resistant to *ex post facto* generic conventions, we might find early American fiction an innovative guide to cultural mapping rather than a collection of crude New World knock-offs.

NOTES

- 1 An excellent example of such an argument is the discussion of *Arthur Mervyn* in Warner 1990: 151–76.
- 2 On Crèvecoeur's *Letters* as a "bildungsroman of sorts," see Rice 1993; on Hamilton's *History* as a "comic novel" influenced by the anatomy, see Micklus 1990.
- 3 See, for example, his pamphlet *An Address to the Government of the United States...* (Brown 1803), which uses the ruse of a discovered letter to present a historical analysis of the state of the territories beyond the Mississippi.
- 4 For an introduction, see the excellent overview offered by Barnard 2004.

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