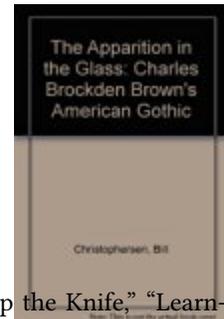


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bill Christophersen. *The Apparition in the Glass: Charles Brockden Brown's American Gothic*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993. xi + 208 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1530-0.

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Christophersen has given us a book on Charles Brockden Brown that will appeal to some readers of an earlier generation. For those who look to the era of consensus history as a tonic to the contentious age in which we currently practice, this book will re-affirm a belief in symbolism, allegory and formal triumphs over historical and political situations resistant to interpretation. In fact, Christophersen, in writing a work of criticism more attuned to the prevailing wisdom of both the 1950s and 1970s (works drawn from these eras form a preponderance of his secondary sources cited in the bibliography) draws on a "symbolist core" to reduce the metaphorical fevers and chills of both *fin-de-siecle* America and the vicissitudes of current criticism grounded in the new historicism. The first is handled (as many literary critics are fond of doing), in a too-brief (15 page) initial chapter titled "the Condition of Our Country." Christophersen's prescription is nothing less than a return to the familiar voices of Richard Hofstadter, Vernon Parrington, John Miller and Russel Nye. In fact, among these musty authorities, Christophersen's nod to Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word* (1987) represents the outermost point of "recent" criticism in the book betraying a frustrating lack of perception about the content and thrust of recent critical discussions in American literature in general and early American texts in particular. These omissions are not the product of sloppy scholarship, in general this book is well researched and written; but rather, the cursory attention to historical contexts read in the lexicon of the past four decades is a deliberate attempt to write a book on one of America's most important authors that renews a sense of purposeful activity and, dare one say it? – "individual genius." This sense of purposefulness and "intentional fallacy" is recorded repeatedly in both the substance of Christophersen's chap-

ters and their subtitles—"Picking Up the Knife," "Learning to Play the Pianoforte," "The Jeffersonian Mind," and so on. Christophersen's excessive faith in and use of the past as interpreted by the likes of Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch and Larzer Ziff is deliberately put forward in his fourth chapter on Brown's paradigmatic novel of danger (social and personal), "Ormond." There, Christophersen claims:

Ormond is indeed a symbolist work, perhaps the first in American fiction. It represents a thematic extension of discoveries set forth in Wieland concerning the depravity latent in everyone and operative in all realms of experience—personal, domestic, and political ... Ormond seeks both to embody this vision in symbolic terms and to scrutinize it further ... Both in its form and content, then, Ormond is an experimental novel (p. 56).

Christophersen's appreciation of the form and function of Ormond would be readily recognized by Harvard graduate students in 1955. Thematic extensions, oddly "domesticated and tame" experimental techniques, paradoxes, psychological and social realms of ambiguity interpreted by the discerning gaze of the therapist/critic/author are all hallmarks of a critical tradition that was "new" forty years ago. Christophersen's pianoforte plays a straight-ahead tune. As scholars, we learned the intricacies of allegorical interpretations of American classics from the masters, we treasure the nostalgia of that mode of criticism, and I appreciate Christophersen's attempt to resurrect the effort as one enjoys hearing the "standards" of Duke Ellington, Count Bassie and Ben Webster played again in weekend moments. But the crisis, the danger and circulating discourses of Brown's age is mere ornament; a context to be fitted to the author's craft. Most students and scholars of

American literature teaching today know that the artistic manipulations Christophersen detects in Brown's writing is hopelessly naive and superficial. The tempests of Brown's age and the critical discussions of our own cannot be carried forward using these categories. An eminently readable, but inherently misleading analysis of Brown's work, *The Apparition in the Glass* renews a sense of literature and its analysis as a "safe harbor" isolating art and sheltering its ideas from tempestuous gales. While one can appreciate the effort to write another "standard" work about an author who is already a "standard" in many American literature courses, it remains to be answered why we need another book that operates in ignorance of new historical assumptions and relies so heavily on the critical achievements of forty years ago? The answer is we don't. Christophersen's book, to all but the neophyte, makes absurd claims in the interests of serving historical purposes: "America, then, is Brown's subject. His quintessential protagonist ... is also the young nation, unaware of its atavistic potential ... If the word awakening rings with religious overtones, that is not altogether amiss: Brown was writing on the eve of the Second Great Awakening" (p. 3). Worse, such over-rehearsed claims and strained connections, because they never address their most obvious implications in a substantive or convincing way, build momentum and, ultimately, trap Christophersen's insights in a literary-critical amber. Fossilized conclusions, such as the one he offers in his chapter on Arthur Mervyn: "Arthur Mervyn, though less concerned than Ormond or Wieland with establishing political-historical allegories, not only reflects

the time and place in which it is set also suggests an attempt on Brown's part to characterize a changing America ... [Arthur Mervyn] recapitulates America's national history much as the history of the Wieland family recapitulated America's colonial history" (p. 103). Christophersen's conceits, so attractive in their rhetorical force and so badly executed in their historicity, is symptomatic of this book. If Brown is the supreme diagnostician of the fevers of his time, then Christophersen's attempt to "feed a cold, starve a fever" by offering a reading of Brown as supremely representative of an America that reflects unquestioned truths, ideology and hegemonic realities is nothing less than malpractice. Christophersen's book, coming as late as it does in the critical discussions of the myriad ways literature intersects historical concerns should offer a much more substantial reading of Brown's gothic fiction than it does. His effort, well articulated but unfortunately mired in the critical standards and traditions of the "distant past" of rhetorically-based formalist criticism, will be of little interest to contemporary scholars and critics of early America. In retrospect, I deeply lamented Christophersen's desire to read Brown "without preconception or ulterior motive" because, undoubtedly inscribed in those conceits and motives were the riffs and rhythms of a newer and more insightful appreciation of an important writer and his tenuous social circumstances.

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