

# “The Work Committed to Us”: Orestes Brownson’s Views on Literature （「我々に委ねられた使命」： オレスティーズ・ブラウンソンの文学観）

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アメリカのキリスト教思想史におけるブラウンソンの特異な位置と貢献についてはすでに本誌前号で述べた通りである。彼はジャーナリストであり、他の評論誌に寄稿していたが、特にカトリック改宗後、同時に自らの機関誌*Brownson’s Quarterly Review*を長年主宰し、当時の英国におけるカトリック復興運動とフランス、ドイツにおける知的潮流とカトリック教会の動きにつねに注目し、評論しながら、米国における宗教事情についての的確な評論を書いていた。彼の著作は死後息子のヘンリーによって集大成され、20巻の全集として出版され、リプリント版も存在している。本論文はその19巻に収録された文芸評論（その大部分は長い書評といくつかの大学での講演）からブラウンソンの文学観を導き出そうとしたものである。それらの評論は書かれた状況を反映した文章であって、ブラウンソン自身がある一定の体系的考え方に沿って全体をまとめたものではない。評論は30年の間におけるそれぞれの時点の彼の見解であるが、個々の点で相違があっても全体からはある一つの考え方が浮かび上がってくる。ブラウンソンの文学観についてすでにA.Lapatiは彼の小著において先鞭をつけているが、今回それをアメリカン・ルネッサンスの状況の中で見直し、彼がいだいた将来のアメリカ文学に対するカトリック作家の貢献についての考え方をこのコンテキストの中に当てはめて論じることにしたしだいである。ブラウンソンは改宗前エマソンを取り巻くグループの一員であった。彼の著作の大半はニューヨークに移ってから書かれたが、商業出版が行き渡り、印刷文化が全米に広まって、エマソンの「アメリカの学者」をエリート主義だと批判し、一般市民の

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ためのジャーナリズムの役割を高く評価し、「国民文学」の創出のためにいくつかの提案を行っている。彼の書評を通して我々は19世紀後半の米国に大衆小説を含む多くの英国、フランス、ドイツの文学が入ってきていたことをうかがうことができる。それに刺激されて多くの作品が米国で書かれていた。ブラウンソンの文学観の特徴は小説を積極的に評価したことである。エマソンに影響を与えた英国ロマン派の理論家コールリジは「創造」を詩人の活動に帰したが、ブラウンソンはシラーの審美主義・芸術至上主義を痛烈に批判した。彼にとって「創造」はまず神に帰されるべきであり、人間としての詩人の作業は二次的な「創造」である。伝統的なカトリック神学の本性と恩恵の区別と「恩恵は本性を完成する」という定理によりながら、彼は恩恵によって支えられつつも、独自性をもつ本性の領域とその神秘がカトリック文学の豊かな将来の土壌であると考え、そのアメリカ的展開に期待をかけていたのである。

“In prosecuting the work committed to us, there will arise poets, philosophers, theologians, politicians, whose wide and deep experience will find utterance in a living literature.” (“American Literature,” *Works* 19: 39)

## I. New England Heritage and American Literary Identity

Brownson's name is mentioned in the most recent narrative of American literature, *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Vol. 2, but general interest in him, if there is any, appears to be in his theology and political philosophy. This is seen in Patrick Carey's recent study. Americo Lapati has already taken up Orestes Brownson as a literary critic; my approach, however, is to draw as much literary theory as possible out of his occasional essays against the background of contemporary New England as the pivotal region in the “American Renaissance,” and my model is Eric W. Carlson's work that extracted from Emerson's occasional essays his views on both individual authors and emerging literary theory. Orestes Brownson's literary criticism consists mostly of review essays for his own organ, *Brownson's Quarterly*, and other journals together with several “orations.” They constitute now the nineteenth volume of *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson* collected and arranged by his son Henry F. Brownson. There are a few contributions to the *Boston Quarterly* and “orations” delivered at academic occasions; it was a fashion in the days of New England's intellectual ascendancy to invite men of letters for the celebrations of important occasions. Emerson was frequently asked on such memorable occasions to give public lectures on topics of broader intellectual significance. But Brownson's literary concerns were expressed mostly in the journal he had founded and published in New York after he moved to this city. From these reviews it is evident that he had read widely and brought his thinking to bear on numerous topics.

Two major concerns emerge from his literary essays. One is the formation of American literature. His attention in this respect is understandable, for he was a conscious New England man of culture in Boston, well accepted by Harvard Divinity School graduates, though he was an autodidact. But since a few years after launching his journal he converted to Catholicism the second aspect of his concerns was Catholic literature in America amidst predominantly Protestant currents. The two aspects taken together constitute Brownson's engagement

with literary criticism. To us today it may often appear too utilitarian, as it endeavored to inculcate moral edification, and is aggressively polemical for the Catholic cause. But it must be remembered that those were the days of anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant feelings on the part of the Protestant press as well as of the emerging secularist journalism. And it must be remembered that the idea of pure imaginative literature did not exist or had only started to emerge in the first part of the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic.

Even after his conversion to Catholicism Brownson did not renounce his New England heritage (Buell 1986, 56-83), although Brownson found grave flaws in Emersonian Transcendental thinking (Caponigri in Barbour, 247-54); he proudly asserted New England’s intellectual and cultural superiority and its unique contribution to the Union. In his review of Henry Beecher’s novel *Norwood* for *The Catholic World* in December 1869, he attributed to the Puritans a partial contribution to the establishment of religious liberty in the American mind. “[T]hey certainly had great and civil virtues, and they had the leading share in founding and shaping the American state” (539). He deplored only its secularizing liberal tendency. This was a touch of nostalgia on his part, but New England’s past was revived and promoted for the conscious creation of high American culture such as Ralph Waldo Emerson had envisioned in orations like “The American Scholar” and others:

The Puritans not only adopted a high moral standard, but they lived as nearly up to it as is possible for human nature alone since the fall, and few examples of a more rigidly moral people can be found than were the New England people for a century and a half after the landing of the Pilgrims, and to them, the whole Union is indebted for its moral character as well as for the greater part of its institutions of learning. There have been as learned, as gifted, as great men, found in other states, and perhaps even more learned, gifted, and greater; but there is no part of the Union where the intellectual tone of society is so high, or intellectual culture so general as in New England, especially in the states founded by Puritans, as were Massachusetts and Connecticut. New York leads in trade and commerce; Pennsylvania latterly, Virginia formerly, in politics; but the New England mind has led in law, jurisprudence, literature, art, science, and philosophy; though since Puritanism has been lapsing into liberalism its preeminence is passing away. (539)

When Brownson referred to Puritanism lapsing into liberalism, he must have had the Transcendentalists in mind. New England had certainly been the most fertile and conspicuous region in the intellectual life of America's colonial period. The colonists in the seventeenth century had brought with them a remarkably deep orientation to inner life as well as familiarity with printed letters. Their divines, who had been leading figures in New England colonial intellectual life such as John Winthrop and Cotton Mather, were not only preachers but also creators of print culture on the new continent. We may see the popularization process of print and reading as the consequence of Renaissance humanism, which, acquiring its momentum from scientific and technological advances, economic development and social changes, had been dreamed of by its elite scholar class. The Puritans had brought to it the habit of mind of a print/reading culture from the Old World which was rapidly spreading; in the New World the popularization of this culture—and as the Civil War did not prevent the pace of industrialization and growth of mass consumption in print/culture, and as New York and Philadelphia had become more and more centers for publishing—caused the New England elite class, who had till then a hegemonic monopoly of producing reading material, to develop a sense of crisis in the face of mass journalism which began now to possess the potent voice (Bercovitch 13-17, and in general Charvat and Loughran). And Brownson himself moved to New York to find more opportunities for publishing. Emerson's "The American Scholar," famously called America's intellectual declaration of independence, though too optimistic about the future of American intellectual life and rosy as to the role of intellectuals for the future vista of American destiny, shared nonetheless this sense of crisis as to the elite's position in society. Brownson shared the New England intellectuals' anxiety in a society in which they were increasingly alienated. The flowering of New England's literary culture was a phenomenon in which its proud Puritan tradition could no longer validate itself as the intellectual paradigm to represent American way of life. All contemporary New England persons of letters were children of erstwhile Puritan clergymen, and many of them were clergymen by profession, but they turned from the Puritan faith. As Brownson saw it, all the children of Congregationalist forebears were abandoning Christianity for Transcendentalism and then for Unitarianism:

The author, though nominally a Christian, and professedly a Congregational preacher, is really a pagan, and wishes to abolish Puritanism for worship of

nature. But it is less the Puritan than the Christian he wars against; and if he understands himself, which is doubtful, his thought is, that a child, taken as born, without baptism or regeneration, may be trained up by the influence of flowers and close communion with nature, beasts, birds, and fishes, reptiles and insects, to be a Christian of the first water. (541)

This quotation is from Brownson’s *Catholic World* review of *Norwood*. While writing this review of a contemporary social romance, Brownson was reflecting his own religious odyssey from Congregationalism, Presbyterianism and Methodism, to Catholicism. It is rather odd to come across the traditional theme of “born again” in his critique of naturalism:

The theory, of course, rejects the very fundamental principle of Christianity, which declares that “except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” The author, indeed, does not deny in words; nay, asserts it, but resolves it into a natural operation, a sort of mental and physical crisis, and recognizes nothing supernatural, or any infusion of grace in it; which is in reality to deny it. (542)

Brownson was pretty much conscious of the need for a national culture immediately after the Civil War to overcome the division. For this national culture every state both northern and southern has to have its share. He especially alluded to the role of the South:

We have wished to give New England her due, without detracting any thing from what is due to any other section of the Union. We should be sorry to see the effort now making to new new-englandize the South succeed. There are some things in the New England character that could be corrected with advantage: and there is much in the southern character, its openness, its frankness, its personal independence, its manliness, its aristocratic tone and manner, that we should be sorry to lose. (544)

Sometimes Brownson, a New Englander with a self-conscious intellectual mission for the entire nation, deplored the nation’s plebeian materialism and the general leveling-down of intellectual life, compared with that of the colonial golden days. “Puritanism keeps alive in the community a certain Christian habit of

thought, a belief in the necessity of grace, and more or less of a Christian conscience" (543). Obliquely referring to revival movements, he remarked that common crowds gathered for emotionalism on such occasions. Included in this cultural jeremiad was the loss of religion due to the disappearance of a traditional elite and the increase of those he called "Nothingarians" (543) who pursued material wealth alone. In another place ("Dana's Poems and Prose Works," *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, October 1850) he diagnosed contemporary American society:

The American revolution and independence have had an astonishing effect in developing the material resources of our country, and in stimulating industrial activity and enterprise, but they have not an equally salutary influence on our manners and morals, and our general habits of thought and belief. The tone of good society under the republic is below what it was in colonial times, and thought has lost in depth and soundness what it has gained in expression. American society has not yet recovered the loss of the old loyalist or Tory families, for the most part the *élite* of the colonial gentry. Democracy is great and glorious in the order of mere material industry and prosperity, when that industry and prosperity are able to thrive in spite of the government; but it is not remarkably favorable to growth, respect, and courtesy. . . . Its natural tendency is to bring every thing down to a common average, to the level of the common mind, and to make public opinion the standard of doctrine and morals. It puts the people, or rather the mob, in the place of God, and makes all men taken individually slaves of all men taken together collectively. Of all conceivable governments democracy is the most unfavorable to free and manly thought, to mental independence, to freedom and nobility of thought. (333-34)

## II. "The American Scholar" and Creation of National Literature

As is to be seen in Emerson's celebrated address "The American Scholar," the question of what is the American scholar was the pivotal concern for New England intellectuals, as he was regarded as iconic of American intellectual life. In "The Scholar's Mission," an oration given at Dartmouth, Brownson urged to young students:

But the tendency I ask you to withstand, is not merely a tendency to sweep away privileged orders, to bring down all who are elevated only for their *private* advantages, and to place all men with their feet on the same level; but it is a tendency to level from the other extreme, to obtain equality by lopping off all heads, that rise above the general average, and to resist the elevation of any to a sufficient height, to enable them to labor with advantage for the elevation of others. It is this leveling tendency, I ask you to withstand. But this tendency is so strong and decided, that you will find it no easy matter, no child’s play, to withstand it. The public mind is unsound and the public conscience is perverted, and in order to set either right, you must appeal from the dominant sentiment of your age and country, to that higher tribunal, to which you and the public are alike accountable. But this requires a degree of moral heroism, which is as rare as refreshing. (84)

Brownson gives the celebrated example of Samuel Johnson, who rejected Lord Chesterfield’s offer of patronage. Schiller too boasted that he had no patron nor would have a patron except the public. The writer’s situation in modern times through the dissemination of print/reading culture obliterated the system of patronage:

There is here all the distance between a thesis by Abelard or Saint Thomas, and an article in the penny magazine, between the *Divina Commedia*, Hamlet, or Macbeth, and a modern lyrical ballad by Wordsworth or Tennyson. There was no doubt something humiliating to the soul after the suppression of the convents and monasteries, the nurseries and support of learning in the palmy days of the church,—something not a little derogatory to the freedom and dignity of letters; but nothing to compared to the meaner servility we must cultivate, in order to gain the good graces of the non-descript patron, THE PUBLIC. A few well-turned phrases might sometimes conciliate your noble and wealthy patron, and leave you free to speak out, in strong and thrilling experience of your life; but when it comes to the *public*, you can only ask, how much truth is the public prepared to take in? How much of what is deepest, truest, holiest will the public heed, or appreciate? How much will the public buy? ay, and pay for, in SOLID CASH? Here is the secret of the thin, waterly, vapory character of modern English and American literature. I must write for the public at large, and the public at



large has no ability to sit in judgment on what is really rich, profound, and original in science or philosophy. (85)

In "Necessity of Liberal Education," 1844, Brownson declared: "We ask, indeed, for an educated class. . . . We ask such a class in these times, as a feeble antagonist at least, to the all-triumphant money power. We would raise up MIND, high and thorough SCHOLARSHIP, against WEALTH" (99). He even continues to say on America's social situation: "The situation of our country is alarming. Dangers, numerous and threatening, hang over us, and we have no hope, but in the educated men, the SCHOLARS of the country. It is for them to come to the rescue. It is on their fidelity to their mission, and their boldness, energy, and devotion to truth and social progress, that the salvation of the country, under Providence, depends" (99).

It is evident that Brownson included Emerson among the idolaters of nature; he was critical of Emerson, though initially he belonged to the periphery of Emerson's circle, and Buell points out the influence of Emerson's oracular style on him (94-95). For one thing he did not genealogically belong to any traditional New England elite preacher family, nor did he attend Harvard Divinity School, which had produced intellectual leaders; starting as a printer-apprentice, he had educated himself to be a preacher who could mingle with New England Brahmins (Collison in Mott/Burkholder, 179, n7). Brownson shared some of Emerson's elitism, but had a tendency to go more sympathetically with the populace, their tastes, aspirations and drive, ostensibly because of this difference in family and educational backgrounds (Newfield 21, Grossman 125). As an independent minister in Boston he organized the Society for Christian Union and Progress for young workers. Brownson wrote his reaction to Emerson's "The American Scholar." In his comment on Emerson's oration, Brownson mainly tries to mitigate and to nuance Emerson's sharp rebuke of contemporary American life. He did not forget his origin of destitute life as a laborer. "We have a few misgivings about the propriety of this declamation, in which some of our scholars are beginning to indulge, against the utilitarian pursuits of our age and country. . . . Perhaps this business world on which the scholar looks down, is fulfilling a higher mission it or the scholar dreams of" (7). His past in his imagination was the same as most of those who arrived at America: "We commenced in this country poor; we had little beside our hands, our wits, and our self-confidence. We had a savage world to subdue, and by our labors a wilderness to convert into a fruitful field. We had

this to do also for the *whole* people” (7). In his polemical stance Brownson even says: “A poor people, a people sunk in the depths of poverty, all whose thoughts and exertions are needed to gain a mere subsistence for the human animal, can never be expected to contribute any thing to the cause of letters” (12).

To Brownson as well as to Emerson the American is a new Adam, a new man: “Every man is an Adam in the garden, and may summon all creatures before him, distribute them into their classes, and give them their names. . . . Creation is born anew. . . .” (1). His elitism is hastily merged with the educated elite’s service for the elevation of the popular level. The greater cause to raise American society’s cultural level is of paramount importance. He invokes what he has abstracted about the ideal artist from the history of world literature, and then applies it to the contemporary American situation:

In all the masterpieces of ancient and modern literature, we see the artist has been in earnest, a real man, filled with an idea, wedded to some great cause, ambitious to gain some end. Always has he found his inspiration in his cause, and his success may always be measured by the magnitude of that cause, and ardor of his attachment to it.

American scholars we shall have; but only in proportion as the scholar weds himself to American principles, and becomes the interpreter of American life. A national literature, we have said, is the expression of the national life. It is the attempt to embody the great idea, or ideas on which the nation is founded; and it proceeds from the vigorous and continued efforts of scholars to realize that idea or those ideas, in practical life. (20)

Like Emerson in “The American Scholar,” Brownson reiterates that the scholar/writer is not isolated, lonely figure; he cannot be too far advanced from his countrymen: “He must have an audience, a public. This is always an indispensable condition of his existence” (13). In a democratic tone he says: “Now in this country the whole people must constitute the audience, the public. The scholar here must speak not to a clique, a coterie, but to the entire nation. The first thing to be done, then, is to make the whole nation a ‘fit audience.’ To talk of a ‘fit audience though few,’ betrays an entire ignorance of the age and country” (13). The first thing that the American scholar should do is to make the whole nation a nation of readers. And here he sees the business world Emerson rejects is contributing to spreading the knowledge of reading. Not only that but also it

works favorably for the growth of the mind, for moral and spiritual progress. When Brownson talks of American scholars' role in the creation of American literature, he gives a positive estimation of what was going on in contemporary American society where business was the focus of attention: "The business world is in no sense inferior in active intellect to the world of letters" (14).

In Brownson's view, journalism, already widely spread in the nation (Charvat 298-316), is a characteristic of American culture with the potential for good literary output in the future:

Nor is American literature, as it is, to be condemned outright. True, not much is to be said of our regular built books; but we have newspapers. Our newspapers are conducted for the great mass of the people, by men who come out immediately from the bosom of the people, and they of necessity express the sentiments of the people. They constitute, therefore, in the strictest sense of the word, a popular literature. And scattered through our newspapers and popular journals, may be found more fine writing, more true poetry, genuine elegance, vigorous thought, original and comprehensive views, than can be found in the classics of either France or England. All the elements of the soul by turns are appealed to, and in turn find their expression; all subjects are discussed, and on all sides too; and often with a clearness and depth which leave little to be desired. Your most ordinary newspaper not unfrequently throws you off an essay, that it would be impossible to match in the writings of Addison, Steele, or Johnson. (14)

By broaching the names of eighteenth-century British literary journalists that remained in the British literary canon, Brownson suggests that newspapers and journals were not "a definitive literature," because they called forth the literary talents and created a taste for literature and thus lead "directly to its creation" (15).

According to Brownson America did not yet have a national literature, but it would appear as a product of maturity in the national consciousness, not that of a few outstanding men of letters:

This notion, which some entertain, that a national literature is the creation of a few great men, is altogether fallacious. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Pope, and Johnson are themselves not the creators of English

literature; but they are themselves the creatures of the spirit of the English nation, and of their times. Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke are not the authors of English philosophy, they are but its interpreters. Great men do not make their age; they are but its effects. . . . When a national literature has been quickened in the national mind and heart, the great man is sure to appear as its organ, to give it utterance, form, embodiment. Before then his appearance is impossible. (16)

In the conclusion to his essay on “The American Scholar,” Brownson rejects Emersonian elitism:

In order to rear up American scholars, and produce a truly American literature, we would not do as the author of the oration before us, declaim against American literature as it is, against the servility, and want of originality and independence of the American mind; nor would we impose a specific discipline on the aspirants to scholarship. We talk little about the want of freedom; we would not trouble ourselves at all about literature, as such. We would engage heart and soul in the great American work. We would make all the young men around us see and feel that there is here a great work, a glorious work, to be done. . . . When our educated men acquire faith in democratic institutions, and a love for the Christian doctrine of the brotherhood of the human race, we shall have our scholars enough, and a literature which will disclose to the whole world the superiority of freedom over slavery. (21)

### **III. European/British Writers and Brownson’s Literary Theory**

Emerson complained: “Our books are European. . . . A Gulf yawns for the young American between his education and his work” (Emerson 222). He mentioned a litany of famous British authors, and deplored the contradictory situation of the literary tradition that American youth faced, but Parker, Thoreau, Ripley, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott as well as Brownson himself—all around Emerson were sophisticated readers of Continental philosophers and novelists.

There are two more essays on American literature in the nineteenth volume of Brownson’s complete works: one given at Brown University as an oration in

1839 and the other a review of *The Literary World: A Gazette for Authors, Readers, and Publishers*, nos. 1-15, in which he pondered what American literature should be. In his oration "American Literature," Brownson ascribes "the meagerness" of native literature to the colonists' dependence on England's literary tradition even after political ties were cut by the colonies' independence and the educated class's slow acceptance of democratic institution. Although it is meager now in America, as demand for it is not strong, great literature appears in an age of great conflict. He finds precedents for the future greatness of American literature in ancient Greek and Roman literatures, but gives China as a contrary example; the reason he gives it is "the land of immobility, routine, where all changed is prohibited." "No thought is there permitted, no new problem ever comes up for solution, and what can literature find there to do?" (29). Thus Brownson shared a widespread nineteenth-century prejudice about Chinese culture. Karl Marx, too, expresses a similar view of China in *Das Kapital*. Brownson adopts a circumstantial theory of literature's origin. He refers to the great periods of other literatures from ancient to modern times—Hebrew, Greek, and Roman. Brownson's may be said to be an agnostic theory of the origin of a national literature. He sees a great American *agon* in the future. He foresees great confrontations between the rich and workers, a problem for future American society that he was probably the only one to consider among the New England Brahmins; Emerson was certainly not aware of these things, and gives a prognosis on what future American literature would be:

In the struggle of these two elements, true American literature will be born. This struggle, which has already commenced, presents the conditions of its birth and its growth. We have now to solve, not the question of its birth, but the problem of social equality. This problem, if I have not wholly misconceived its magnitude and bearing, will present work for whoever has a hand, a head, or a heart; and in the effort to finish this work, a literature will be born before which all the literatures now extant may, perhaps, shrink into insignificance. (57)

The following remark may sound to us like an old-guard Marxist literary critic's call: "The struggle which is coming up here is not between the high-born and the low-born, between the gentlemen and the simple men. . . . It is to be a struggle between the accumulator of wealth and the simple laborer who actually produces

it; briefly, struggle between man and money. This struggle has not yet commenced in the Old World, but it must come there and ultimately make the tour of the globe” (35). Only Brownson saw it as a God-given destiny for American writers: “Whoso would contribute to American literature, ought indeed to reflect on the nature and wants of his own soul; ought to store his mind with the riches of ancient and modern literature and science” (37).

To Brownson literature is not a purpose itself, created independent of any use. To the aesthetic theorists he insists: “But literature is no arbitrary creation” (29). “Regard literature always as a means,” he says, “never an end” (38). *The Literary World* was a New York publication with its chief attention given to American authors. It seems that Brownson was critical of the journal’s belle-lettristic tendency; his idea of literature as a means of inculcating purpose is connected in this review with that of literature as instruction, and indeed as a means of raising the popular level of religious life:

Literature, in our sense of the term, is composed of works which instruct us in that which it is necessary for us to know in order to discharge, or the better to discharge, our duties as moral, religious, and social beings. Works which tend to divert us from these, which weaken the sense of their obligation, or give us false views of them, or false reasons for performing them, are bad, worse than none, though written with the genius of Byron, Moore, Goethe, Milton, Dante or Shakespeare. Genius is respectable only when she plumes her wing at the cross, and her light dazzles to blind or to bewilder when not borrowed from the Source of itself. (210)

Some may find it a bit out of place that Brownson here develops his idea of Christian literature, though he does not limit it to Catholic literature. It has certainly the danger of absurdly narrowing the range of literary vision even from today’s understanding of Christian literature. And he ultimately denies the fundamental value of the author as creator of imaginative literature:

We have no respect for mere professional authors, whether American or not. An author class, whose vocation is simple authorship, has no normal functions, in either the religious or the social hierarchy. Our Lord, in organizing his church, made no provision for professional authors, and in the original constitution of society they have no place assigned them. They have and

can have no normal existence, for the simple reason that literature is never an end, and can never be rightfully pursued save as a means. Authors we respect, when they are authors only for the sake of discharging or better discharging duties which devolve on them in some other capacity. (216)

Brownson had a good knowledge of classical and modern European literatures, and of philosophers as great authors. According to him, the great American authors are limited to only orators like Webster and Calhoun. He rejects a host of modern poets and novelists like Shelley, Byron, Dickens, Hugo and Balzac as “the greatest pests” (217), as well as American popular authors that decked contemporary literary magazines.

Brownson's literary criticism is occasioned of course by the popularity of particular authors in the book market, but indicates his ideas on the function of literature as such. This is more true as regards the works of Wilhelm Schiller, the German poet, literary theoretician, and dramatist. Why Schiller in particular from among German authors, if he as a poet “falls far below Goethe” for “he wants always the ease, the grace, the sense, the keen insight, the sedate majesty” (104-05) which are characteristic of Goethe? In “Modern Idolatry” a review of the translation of Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* in *Brownson's Quarterly* in July 1845, Brownson rejects Schiller's ideal of intellectual beauty. He summarizes Schiller's aesthetics thus:

This beauty is to be sought in every department of life, and the aim of all culture should be to reveal and realize it. Hence all culture, or the revelation and realization of the beautiful in every department of life; order will be brought out of confusion, the world will be saved, on the one hand, from lapsing into barbarism, and, on the other from wasting itself in an intellectual culture which leads to no practical results, and the human race will be carried forward to the realization of its destiny. (106)

Brownson's answer is: “Schiller's doctrine, that the race are lifted out of their present condition, and placed on the level of their destiny, by aesthetic culture, is, after all, but a theory” (109).

Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* appears to have been popular among Emersonian Transcendentalists (Chai 387-91). In an essay “Schiller's

Aesthetic Theory,” which appeared in April the following year, Brownson further castigates Schiller’s aesthetic culture as the redeeming force of humankind:

Beauty appeals, as beauty, not to the intellect, not to the will, but solely to the sensibility. In relation to the intellect it is truth, to the will it is goodness. But art, as art, deals with beauty alone, and its aim is to affect the sensibility. It may affect it, and turn it towards what is true and good, and then it aids intellectual and moral culture; it may turn it in an opposite direction, and then it becomes the minister of vice and corruption. (126)

To Brownson Schiller’s reformist program of society by cultivating higher sensibility for beauty alone is based on the wrong idea of human nature:

He was in his way a reformer, and sought to remake man; but all his theories imply that he did not look beyond man himself, and that man is his own beginning and end. His love was for man, his hope was placed in man, and out of man, by aid of aesthetic culture, was to arise the new and brilliant social order he contemplated. He therefore belonged to the class of modern idolaters, and we were not wrong in designating his theory as one of the forms of modern idolatry. Practically, it would prove to be one of the worst of these forms, because it places first in order of time and rank, and as the foundation of all other culture, aesthetic culture; which is to place the sensibility above reason and will. To place sensibility above reason and will, when it comes to morals, is to place the inferior soul above the superior, the flesh above the spirit (128).

In his “Modern French Literature,” an essay in the *Boston Quarterly Review* in April 1842, Brownson critically surveys the contemporary French novel: “France has few, if any, writers that can compare advantageously with Scott, Bulwer, Washington Irving or even Charles Dickens” (48), and gives his reason:

The fault . . . of French literature, a fault which we find also with English literature is that it presents us too many images of vice, crime, and horror, and does not call forth the warmer, gentler, and holier aspiration of our nature. It affects us painfully; it raises a storm of passion in our bosom and leaves us mad and miserable. We have been affected by the night-mare, and



it is long after reading it, before our blood circulates freely again, and we recover our wonted strength and equanimity. (55)

But Brownson gives a high estimate of Georges Sand: "In originality, depth, and vigor of thought and expression, her writings betray very little of the woman. Her style is rich, graceful, delicate, and at the same time, terse, vigorous, and free from that diffuseness, the besetting sin of most French writers, and French female writers in particular" (56). Brownson concludes his essay by recommending to all readers her *Spiridion*, which he says is comparable to *Charles Elwood, or the Infidel Converted* that details the experience of "an ingenious mind in its progress through the stages of doubt, unbelief and absolute infidelity back to faith in God and immortality" (65). It may appear to us rather strange that he never mentioned George Eliot, a woman writer contemporary with this French woman writer who had a similar independent spirit.

Wordsworth and Carlyle are the only British authors whom Brownson had occasion to discuss fully, although on a very few occasions he surveys these authors in connection with the major themes of particular essays. In "Wordsworth's Poetical Works," *Brownson's Quarterly Review* of October, 1855, he defends the poet laureate against those readers who like Byron's satire of him. He praises Wordsworth's poetic language and delicate poetic sensibility. Nonetheless, his estimate of Wordsworth is subdued, and occasionally rather severe: "Wordsworth, like all English poets not of the first order, was fond of what is called descriptive poetry. Descriptive poetry, where description is the end, is simply no poetry at all" (426). To be sure, Brownson give a higher rate to Wordsworth than to the Goldsmith of *The Deserted Village*; the descriptive element must not be an end itself; it must serve "to illustrate a truth and heighten an effect" (426). But in this sense he gives more credit to Walter Scott in his poems and novels and even Byron in *Childe Harold* (426). And he reasons: "In Wordsworth mind succumbs to matter, and with all his pretensions to spiritualism he is in reality only a very ordinary materialist" (426). He further characterizes Wordsworth's religion: "He had some religious sensibility, some reverence for ecclesiastical establishments, and a vague love of some of the externals of Christianity; but he had no clear, well-defined religious conviction, no strong and earnest faith" (427).

While making such a literary assessment, Brownson gives a succinct historical perspective of the late eighteenth-century cultivation of taste around Edmund

Burke’s *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful* which had been perfected by German aesthetic theory: “they [the Germans] make the sublime and beautiful either sensations or emotions, or simply objects of the sensibility” (419). This brief description is, as it were, a preface to a lengthy discussion of literary theory. He combines Longinus’s idea of the sublime with the biblical notion of creation, and there is a theological vision of art and beauty. Art or literature is for Brownson an act of imitation, but he combines this idea with the sublime: “Art, according to the ancients, is imitative, and its aim is to give expression to the sublime and beautiful, or as we say now-a-days, all simply, to the beautiful. . . . Its province is to imitate nature in her creative energy, and realize, or to clothe with its own forms, the beautiful, which the soul of the artists behold” (420). Art as imitative action begins as “the contemplation of the creative act in its relation to God” (421).

By ascribing “the primary imagination” to the eternal act in the human mind, Coleridge replaces God’s act of creation with the poet’s power of creation by imagination (*Biographia Literaria*, ch. 13), but to Brownson it is creation in the sense of the imitation of God’s creation. Human creation is the creation of the second order:

As art imitates the divine act in the first cycle as expressed in the ontological judgment, Being—God—creates existences, it will be higher or lower as it takes this act, so to speak, on the side of being or on that of existences, and imitates the divine act in its primary revelation, or as it is copied by experiences in the order of second causes. In the former case, art is sublime, in the latter case it is at best beautiful, and usually pretty. (423)

Emerson declares in “The American Scholar”: “Man hopes, Genius creates. To create—to create, is the proofs of a divine presence” (57). Brownson clarifies the concept of genius when he discusses “the creation of the first cycle”:

But as the divine action in the first cycle, by which existences are produced from nothing, that is, the creative activity, is the highest action conceivable by us in the intelligible order, and that which best reveals the wonderful power of God, that order of genius which is able, as second cause, to copy or imitate it, is unquestionably the highest. If then we speak of genius, certainly, as all the world holds, the artistic is the sublimest, the most

beautiful, and the most godlike. It requires a higher order of genius to produce a great poem, picture, or symphony than it does to criticise it. (423)

In another essay, “Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading,” where he discusses mainly the relationship between nature and grace in connection with religious life versus secular life, Brownson makes a point relevant to the present topic:

God, not as author of nature, but as author of grace, is the beginning and end of religion, and in it we live from him, through him, for him, and to him, to whom belongs all the glory.

This being true of religion, it must be true also of art, in so far as it is religious. Art is the expression of the interior life of the artist. In his works the artist projects himself. The beauty he expresses or embodies in them he has first taken in and made integral in his own life, and in them he is simply attempting to realize without what he has already realized within. (229)

Here is Brownson's more interiorized vision of what literature is in the dark inscrutable depth of the human psyche, where God too works; the writer must learn to observe closely the subtle movements and counter-movements and to express them in language, for this interiority is also God's ingenious creation, his microcosm: “No man can express what is not in him. The artist must first incorporate into his own life that which he would embody in his art. Every painter, whatever else paints, paints himself, as every writer, whatever else he writes, writes himself. The art does not make the life, but the life the art” (229).

But this interior world sometimes erupts to the surface of history as the total, dynamic expression of one big Soul, as Brownson sees the French Revolution; one may recall here what we have above dealt with what he foresaw as the great American literary theme in future. He wrote a review of Carlyle's *The French Revolution* one year after its publication in the *Boston Quarterly Review* of October 1838. His style in this review is dithyrambic prose:

He selected this subject, then, because to him there came a voice out of chaos, we may be sure. But further, to any one who will review his literary course, the explanation will be clear enough of his interest in that ruin and re-creation of a social world. The gradual studies through Voltaire and Diderot,

led him to the observation of this unparalleled phenomenon. But his taste, his instinct guided him also. Like his master Goethe, he has been always hunting for a “bit of Nature.” Whether he is writing of Burns or Richter, of Novalis, or Elliott, of the Spirit of the Age, or, finally, of Mirabeau, he everywhere shows the same longing after the genuine product of Nature. Hypocrisy, however self-deceived and respectable, is his horror. . . . (40)

Carlyle’s momentous piece is a grand epic:

And now what has he produced? A history? Thiers, Mignet, Guizot forbid! We ourselves call this French Revolution an epic poem; or, rather say the root, trunk, and branches of such a poem, not yet fully clothed with rhythm and melody indeed, but still hanging out its tassels and budding on the sprays. (42)

Carlyle is neither mystic nor prophet. Brownson suggests this in the following words, as in his view Carlyle looks primarily upon the great struggle in the created world, not directly upon the movements of the world:

To him the Infinite is ever present. That holy and eternal life is life,—the soul of his soul,—the love of love, —the wisdom of his wisdom,—the power of his power,—the Father. But he strives not so much to look upon the dazzling glory of this central source, whence all of good and fair streams forth;—rather with lowly eyes would he drink in the beauty rayed abroad from each object which its light vivifies and hallows. (46)

Brownson’s several essays on American writers are largely on those who were more talked about in his times but are now forgotten except in the annals of American literary history. Poe and Whitman were his contemporaries, but they are not even mentioned. Southern writers remain unmentioned, though he acknowledges genteel Tory tradition in the South in his oration delivered at Saint Mary’s College, Maryland, on June 29, 1859. In contrast with Carlyle’s work above, he sharply criticizes George Bancroft’s *History of the United States* in *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* in October 1852: “Properly speaking, he does not write history, nor even commentaries on history; he simply uses history for the purpose of setting forth, illustrating, confirming, and disseminating his specula-

tive theories on God, man, and society. The history he writes is not written for an historical end, and the facts he relates are grouped and colored in subserviency to his unhistorical purposes” (382). Brownson’s objection is noted by Buell as a well known example of increasing dissent to New England history (Buell 1986, 229). What Brownson objects to vehemently with all his respect for Bancroft as an eminent statesman, diplomat, and scholar is his succumbing to the Transcendental historical philosophy of Herder, Kant, Hegel, Guizot, and Michelet; he implicates now even Carlyle with this tendency as well as Macaulay: “Bancroft finds that the original purpose of creation, of God and the universe, is fulfilled in the establishment of American democracy. No doubt, God has a plan in all he does, and is fulfilling a fixed and scientific purpose in every historical event. . . . But the science of this plan and this purpose is God’s science, not man’s” (384).

“The Works of Daniel Webster” in *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* in July 1852 is as lengthy as Brownson’s essay on Bancroft. In his overall estimate of American literature Daniel Webster comes to the highest level: “In him you see no labor to be strong or intense, no violent contortions, or unnatural efforts to escape being thought weak, tame or commonplace. He is always himself, collected, calm, and perfectly at his ease” (368). There is an interesting portion in this essay in which Brownson compares major early American authors to organize a synoptic view, in which Bancroft is contrasted with Webster:

Mr. Webster is free from the ordinary faults of even the more distinguished of the literary men of his country. American literary taste is in general very low and corrupt. Irving and Hawthorne have good taste, are unaffected, natural, simple, easy, and graceful, but deficient in dignity and strength; they are pleasant authors for the boudoir, or to read while resting one’s self on the sofa after dinner. No man who has any self-respect will read either of them in the morning. Prescott is gentlemanly, but monotonous, and occasionally jejune. Bancroft is gorgeous, glowing, but always straining after effect, always on stilts, never at his ease, never natural, never composed, never graceful or dignified. He has intellect, fancy, scholarship, all of a high order, but no taste, no literary good-breeding. He gesticulates furiously, and speaks always from the top of his voice. In general we may say of American literature that it is provincial, and its authors are uncertain of themselves, laboring, but laboring in vain, to catch the tone and manner of a distant metropolis. (367-68)

#### IV. Contemporary American Writers

To Brownson the contemporary American authors are but “forward pupils.” The American authors as well as the reading public were not yet mature, for which they need “a correct literary taste”:

A correct literary taste, a lively sensibility to the fit and the beautiful, the command of an easy and noble style, of appropriate, expressive, and graceful diction, are matters of great importance, and which no man who writes at all is at liberty entirely to neglect. Here we prize literary taste and culture, as highly as any one can, for here they are not for themselves, but for a legitimate purpose beyond themselves, and prized for a means to an end. (366)

Webster according to Brownson passes this test, but as he sees here at this time, the prospect for future America is not hopeful; he sees a continual decline from the first generation of those who achieved American independence, the generation next in time to which he belonged, down to those which follow: “The democratic order is exceedingly unfavorable to either intellectual or moral greatness” (380). Where would Brownson locate the New England intellectuals in this perspective? He says: “Ralph Waldo Emerson is almost the only original writer of distinction that we can boast. His friend, Theodore Parker, thought and wrote as a sectarian, and was rhetorician and sometimes a declaimer, but never a free, original thinker, and produced nothing that will live” (496). In his “R.W. Emerson’s Poems,” Brownson characterizes the general aspect of Emerson’s and Transcendentalists’ attitude toward beauty as preparation for his estimate of Emerson the poet:

[T]he beauty which the artist seeks to embody is objective, not subjective, —an emanation from God, not something in or projected from human soul. Mr. Emerson and the transcendentalists contend that beauty is something real, but they make it purely ideal. With them, it is not something which exists out of man and independent of him, and therefore something which he objectively beholds and contemplates, but something in man himself, dependent solely on his own internal state, and his manner of seeing himself and the world around him. But the ideal and the real are not identical; and

if the beautiful were the projection or creation of the human soul, and dependent on our internal state and manner of seeing, it would be variable, one thing with one man and another thing with another, one thing this moment, another the next. We should have no criterion of taste, and no standard of criticism; art would cease to have its laws; . . . Beauty is no more individual, subjective, than is truth or goodness. It neither proceeds from nor is addressed to what is individual, idiosyncratic; but proceeds from the universal and permanent; and appeals to what, in a degree, is common to all men, and inseparable and indistinguishable from the essential nature of man. (190-91)

Brownson's concludes: "Mr. Emerson's poems, therefore, fail in all the higher requisites of art" (191). Nevertheless, "he has a large share of religiosity" (202). And that is a factor that in future may "open his eyes to the sweet vision of beauty that awaits him, and his ears to the harmony which floats on every breeze" (202).

Richard Henry Dana, Sr. (1787-1879) was a New England poet and critic. Upon the publication of his *Poems and Prose Writings*, Brownson wrote a review for *Brownson's Quarterly Review* in October 1850. On Dana's poems he remarks: "As a poet, he steers clear of the literary faults we have rightly or wrongly, charged upon Wordsworth" (238). But he adds: "the author, beyond the exquisite beauty of his style and diction, seldom attains to the truly beautiful" (339). Brownson thinks highly of Dana's literary criticism for a good, fair appreciation of Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book*. Dana's critical essays indicate a good taste in assessing Hazlitt, Swift, Pope, Addison, Disraeli, and Wordsworth: "Mr. Dana's own criticisms are superior to any thing of the sort written on this side of the Atlantic we remember to have read" (336).

However, there are several important statements, occasional though they are, that reveal Brownson's literary theory, and they converge on imagination and its relations with beauty. He declares:

All art or aesthetics must be addressed to man under one or all of three relations—1. The intellect, or understanding; 2. The will; 3. The imagination. The proper object of the understanding is truth; of the will, moral good; of the imagination, if you please, the beautiful. All literature, or any

other species of art, in order to meet the demands of intellect and will, must be true and morally good. . . . The beautiful, then, as the proper object of the imagination, must be really objective and intelligible, and therefore belong to the order of the true and goodness; for the true is, in reality, identical with the good. Consequently imagination, therefore aesthetics, demands truth and goodness for the basis of its operations, as much as does Christian theology or Christian ethics. (319)

*The Vision of Sir Launfal*, a narrative poem of 1848 by James Russell Lowell, takes its theme from Malory’s legend of the Holy Grail. Brownson did not like Lowell’s modern adaptation of the Holy Grail, the central theme of which he says is chastity. He makes the point that the category of the beautiful is subservient to truth and goodness: “The beautiful is the form of the true, and cannot be found where the true is wanting” (212). “The man endowed with artistic genius—that is, one who has received from nature the gift, when they are presented to his mind, of apprehending and distinguishing these truths under the form of the beautiful—is furnished with the requisite conditions of art, and can give birth to expressions which all men shall admire; for he has present to his mind and soul ideal truth, which is always universal and eternal” (313).

## V. Popular Fiction and Future Catholic American Literature

Brownson paid attention to the rising tide of popular novels—in connection with the raising of moral standards. In “Granley Manor,” his comment on one contemporary novelist recognizes the novel’s right to realistically depict characters:

The novelist has not only the right to represent characters as he finds them in real life, but he has the right to enlist our sympathies for them, to make us love and esteem them, though they are marred by grave faults, even by vices and crimes. It is no objection to modern literature that it paints vicious and criminal characters, that it makes us acquainted with the deformities of social and individual life, the shocking depravities and loathsome corruptions of human nature. . . . Nor is it a fault of modern popular literature that



it shows us in characters marred by a thousand faults something still pure and lovely, something which rightfully commands our love and esteem. (263)

But he says after pointing out the proclivities of Goethe, Hugo, Balzac and others: "All they needed to have done was to have a correct moral standard for themselves, and to have refrained from sympathizing with the corruption they represented" (263).

Brownson is always thinking of the religious nature of popular novels; he objects to their sentimental appeal to the populace and the consequent corruption of their sensibility in religious novels:

The authors of religious novels seem, in general, to take it for granted that the appeal to the sentimental, to the class of passion and interests appealed to by novelists in general, is harmless, if made in juxtaposition with an argument for religion. But we cannot but regard this as a mistake. Is not this appeal essentially the same, whether made by a Catholic or a Protestant? Wherein is a Catholic, in so far as he relies on the sentimental for the attractiveness of his work, better than the Protestant who does the same? (144)

As all of Brownson's literary essays were written after his conversion to Catholicism, they implicitly contain the theological as well as moral premises of the faith he converted to. Nevertheless, his brand of Catholicism is combined with New England spirit and cultural outlook. He did not like most of the British popular "Catholic" novels generated by the Oxford Movement ("Religious Novels, and Woman versus Woman," 562-64). There are several essays on Catholic literature, mostly observations on the nascent Catholic literature in the form of popular novels; he looks from the dreary contemporary scene toward the future in which Catholic literature is to mature as an important integral part of American literature:

As to the form Catholic literature among us should assume, there need be no controversy. We make no objection to the novel as a literary form, and it has much to recommend it. The strong man, of good taste, always avoids whatever is singular or eccentric, and conforms to the fashion and tastes of

his age and country as far as he can do without sacrificing truth and simplicity. The novel is a popular form, and may be adopted by those who have received the proper culture, and entertain just views, with advantage. Perhaps there is, just at the moment, no literary form which promises more advantage to the Catholic secular writer than the historical. (305)

Brownson rejects the idea of the autonomous domain of pure literature. He never underestimates popular literature: “The office of popular literature is not precisely to spiritualize, but to civilize a people; and as we look here for the highest achievement of modern civilization, we demand of our American Catholics the highest and purest secular literature” (454). What will Catholic American literature be? He writes: “The principles of this independent American literature are determined by our religion, and our political and civil institutions; but its forms may be flexible, and bent to the varying fashions of the day. The Catholic is at perfect liberty to avail himself of poetry and fiction. He may use fiction, but he must not abuse it” (454). But he says in “Catholicity and Literature,” in *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* of January 1856: “The literature we need must be American, cast in an American mould, conformed to American institutions in all respects in which they are in accordance with Catholicity” (462). When he urges the Catholic writers’ need to contribute to “a Christian ‘secular’ literature,” Brownson is thinking of Christian novels (300); he thinks that novels are the best literary media to imaginatively absorb a modern society that is expanding enormously and becoming ever more complex.

With the traditional distinction between the order of nature (the world, human society) and that of grace, and understanding that nature presupposes grace, Brownson rejects exclusive attention on one or the other. Exclusive attachment to grace leads to Jansenism, whereas that to nature leads to radical atheism (449). Literature is no spiritual reading. He sees wider possibilities for novelistic media: “Grace presupposes nature, and consequently leaves a large margin to natural sentiments and affections. Not all the works of infidels are sin. Not all non-Catholic literature is to be condemned as anti-Catholic, any more than all literary works by a Catholic are approved as Catholic” (449). He says also in “Catholic Secular Literature,” in *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* of July 1849: “The field is ample, and genius and talent can never be at a loss for materials” (301).

American literature had to wait until the mid-twentieth century for the appearance of Catholic novelists like Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O’Conner and

Walker Percy. They were all conscious of their being Catholic novelists. But none of them wrote primarily for the limited circle of Catholic reading public. We may add the name of Julien Green the initiator of Southern Gothic novels, who contributed to the renaissance of French Catholic fiction. For O'Conner it is the Catholic novelist's task to re-enshrine the sense of "mystery" in the terrain Brownson pointed out for the future American fiction-writers almost a century ago: "Saint Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. *And this is what the fiction writer, on his lower level, attempts to do also*" (O'Conner, 863 italics mine).

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