THE AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AMERICAN NOVEL

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IN A RECENTLY published study¹ the present writer has shown, apparently to the satisfaction of those best qualified to judge, that The Power of Sympathy, the first serious attempt at novel writing produced by an American and published in the United States, was not written by the poetess Mrs. Sarah (Apthorp) Morton.² The purpose of this paper is to consider further the claims of the only other known candidate for the doubtful honor of authorship, the minor Bostonian poet, essayist, dramatist, and fiction writer of the early 1790’s, William Hill Brown.³

By way of preliminary information, The Power of Sympathy was first published, anonymously, in two small volumes, at Boston in January, 1789, by Isaiah Thomas and Company, who had hailed its appearance in extensive advertising as “the first American novel.”⁴ The author, in order to forestall the prejudices of his time

² The chief facts which make this conclusion unavoidable are briefly: (a) the inaccuracy and unreliability of the unsupported statements of F. S. Drake (in print, 1878) and Samuel Jennison (in MS. ca. 1850?) on which the attribution to Mrs. Morton rests; (b) the gross inconsistency between Mrs. Morton’s good taste and excessive family pride, and the inclusion of the “Ophelia” episode (see below) in the novel; (c) the fact that she wrote no prose fiction, so far as is known; (d) the total lack in the extensive records of her life and work of any item of evidence indicating that she was the author or that any of her contemporaries supposed that she was; and (e) her remark in the preface to My Mind and its Thoughts (1824) that she had never before had leisure, disposition, or capacity to write a book.
³ Born in 1765, son of Gawen Brown, the celebrated clockmaker of Boston, and Elizabeth Hill, he was author of numerous poems; The Yankee and other essay series; two plays; and a short novel, Ira and Isabella; besides short prose tales and other pieces, mainly posthumous. He died in September, 1793, while studying law in North Carolina.
⁴ The language of the publishers, the author himself, and contemporary critics makes it clear that The Power of Sympathy was intended as a novel and not as “a kind of religious tract in the cause of female education,” as contended by Miss Edith F. Wyatt in defense of her article “The First American Novel” (i.e., Gilbert Imlay’s The Emigrants, London, 1793), in The Atlantic Monthly, October, 1929. Mr. Ellery Sedgwick’s objection on the score of undue brevity (Atlantic, December, 1929, p. 864) seems invalidated when in the same issue of his magazine Thornton Wilder’s The Woman from Andros, of approximately the same length, is both advertised and reviewed as a novel.
against novel reading, both avowed a painfully evident moral purpose and supplemented his tragic tale of the effects of seduction by several illustrative examples, which form the basis of its claim to being "Founded in Truth." Among these he had the bad taste to include an occurrence which had aroused general indignation in Boston less than five months earlier. This was the revelation of an alleged illicit amour between a beautiful girl of prominent family, Frances Theodora Aptorp, called "Ophelia" in the story, and her brother-in-law, Perez Morton, scarcely disguised as "Martin," and Frances's subsequent suicide. This episode was given exaggerated and offensive prominence in the novel by the frontispiece of the first volume, a graphically realistic portrayal of the dying agonies of "Ophelia" after taking poison.

The name of the author was never divulged, for reasons doubtless easily imagined; and only three contemporary clues as to his identity, of slight value, have been unearthed. The title page of the novel bears the following quatrain:

Fain would he strew life's thorny way with flowers,
And open to your view Elysian bowers;
Catch the warm passions of the tender youth,
And win the mind to sentiment and truth.

Clearly, this quotation has meaning and appropriateness only if it applies to the author of the book. A second hint is contained in a letter praising the work, in The Herald of Freedom, Boston, 10 February, 1789, in which an "amiable youth" is alluded to as the "reputed author." The only remaining clue is found in a scurrilous dramatic skit attacking the Mortons, entitled Occurrences of the Times, printed while the novel was in press. In this the supposed seducer, in the character "Mr. Sidney," remarks that he suspects ----- (five dashes representing the letters of a name) of being the author and threatens, if he can be found, to blow "his" brains out. The only assistance derived from these three allusions is their common agreement as to the author's sex, with the additional hint contained in one that he is young, and in another that his name comprises five letters.

*This legend appeared on the title page of The Power of Sympathy.
*My italics.
The Power of Sympathy was soon deservedly forgotten, for it had little except its priority to recommend it—so completely forgotten that the writer, with moderate diligence, has so far found mention of it, aside from advertisements, only twice between 1790 and 1850. In the latter year, a chance reference by Joseph Tinker Buckingham in his Specimens of Newspaper Literature seems to have aroused speculation concerning it and its author, which finally centered upon Mrs. Morton some decades after her death. In 1894 Mr. Walter Littlefield, then a young journalist in Boston, considered the time ripe for a reissue of the novel, which he published, in somewhat elaborate form, praising Mrs. Morton in his preface as the "self-acknowledged author" for her contribution to American literature. In October of the same year, Arthur W. Brayley, with whom Littlefield was then associated, began printing The Power of Sympathy in serial instalments in his magazine, The Bostonian, with an introduction giving considerable information, mainly mistaken, regarding the supposed author.

To some readers it may be news that the first printed ascription of the novel to William Hill Brown appeared nearly forty years ago—only sixteen years later than Drake's attribution to Mrs. Morton in his History of Roxbury, in 1878. While Brayley's serial edition was running in The Bostonian, information apparently came to his attention which sent him to call upon Brown's niece, Mrs. Rebecca (Valentine) Thompson, an elderly lady then living in Boston. As a result of this interview Brayley became convinced that he had been in error and proceeded to make amends by inserting an article "The Real Author of The Power of Sympathy" in the next (December) issue of The Bostonian, and by completing his serial publication of the novel under Brown's name.

According to Mrs. Thompson's account, as reported by Brayley, William Hill Brown "was well known as a poet, his verses appearing in the Palladium and other papers of the town, while his tragedy, entitled 'West Point,' founded on the death of André, was performed twenty-seven times at the Haymarket Theater. He also wrote a successful comedy." Living on State Street almost directly opposite the Apthorp-Morton residence, he was thoroughly con-

I, 323.

The Bostonian, I, 224-233.
versant with the details of Fanny Apthorp's tragedy and conceived the idea of embodying it in his novel.

Only one person outside of the family knew of his intention; that was . . . Catherine Byles, eldest daughter of Rev. Mather Byles of the Hollis St. Church. Katie . . . was a great admirer of William and his writings, and as she was a writer of no mean ability each would look to the other for criticism of their work. After the manuscript of the novel was finished, William read it to her the day before it found its way to the hands of Mr. Isaiah Thomas, the printer.

The identity of the author was soon discovered and Mr. Apthorp was greatly angered at the turn of affairs. When Mrs. Apthorp called on Mrs. Brown in reference to the subject she exclaimed, "Oh, why did Willy do such a thing when we were such good friends?"

To which the latter replied, "The names are fictitious."

"But," answered Mrs. Apthorp, "everybody knows whom he means."

When the young man saw the distress caused by the publication of the story he readily agreed to stop the sale of the book and have the volumes destroyed. A few copies, however, were preserved and are now and again brought to light from some old collection.

As to the general trustworthiness of Brayley's report of Mrs. Thompson's account, on which as positive evidence the claims for Brown must chiefly rest, there seems to be no reason for doubt. Some journalistic "heightening" there may be, but any serious tampering with the facts would have subjected him to prompt refutation by the source of his authority. It remains, then, to consider the authenticity of Mrs. Thompson's information by applying to it as tests such pertinent questions as naturally suggest themselves.

1. Is Mrs. Thompson a competent authority? To this question an affirmative answer appears to be justified, in view of the statement in her brief obituary notice in The Boston Transcript of 15 February, 1902, that "Mrs. Thompson was a thorough Bostonian and thoroughly posted on its history and was an authority on all points connected with it."

2. Was Mrs. Thompson in this instance in a position to know whereof she spoke? Mrs. Thompson's mother, Ann (Brown) Valentine, a younger sister of William Hill Brown, was seventeen years old when The Power of Sympathy was published and may well have been a witness to the conversation between her mother
and Mrs. Apthorp recorded above. As a widow, she lived for several years before her death in 1853, with her daughter, Mrs. Thompson, in Boston, and could have communicated the facts of his authorship to her either there or during Rebecca's childhood, spent in Weston, Massachusetts, the town, by the way, in which Fanny Apthorp's illegitimate daughter is said to have grown up. Mrs. Valentine was certainly cognizant of her brother's literary work, because she shared with her sisters the proceeds from the benefit night when his tragedy West Point Preserved was performed. Contact between Mrs. Thompson and Catherine Byles, at a time when the former was sixteen at least, is established by the album verses of Catherine Byles mentioned by Brayley.

The same lady, Mrs. Thompson, has a dearly prized album in which are written several verses by Miss Catherine Byles. . . . One bears the following inscription written by Miss Byles when eighty-two years of age:

Lines

Inserted at the request of Miss Rebecca Vallintine

How shall my languid pen the muse engage
Impressive lines should grace an album's page?

Our Saviour God invites us to his arms;
In our Emanuel what unrivalled charms!
Let us obey his call. "Lord may we see"
And find our happiness alone in thee.

April 28, 1832               C. Byles

At the bottom of the page is written the following quotation from the title page of "The Power of Sympathy," the last four lines being her own verse:

May gracious Heaven its choicest blessings shower
On my young friend to smooth each passing hour,
And may I meet her in the realm above
Of perfect friendship and abounding love!

C. B.

9 The Bostonian, I, 231.
10 See the Boston Columbian Centinel, 22 April, 1797.
12 Thus the family regularly spelled its name at that time.
13 "Fain would he strow," etc. (See above.) The quatrain, separately inclosed in quotation marks, is here omitted.
So circumstantial a passage is not likely to have been fabricated, and if genuine, it suggests not only an acquaintance between the two but also common knowledge of the title page of *The Power of Sympathy*.

3. *Is the Thompson-Brayley account accurate with respect to details not concerning the novel?* The article includes considerable genealogical information and a number of items regarding Brown’s work which, when checked against records of the 1780’s and 1790’s, prove surprisingly accurate.¹⁴ The existence of Brown’s lost comedy is verified by Robert Treat Paine, Jr., who also gives its name.¹⁵ To *The Palladium* under its earlier name, *The Massachusetts Mercury*, Brown is known to have contributed in 1793 over his pen-name “Pollio.” The error “Theodosia” for “Theodora” as Fanny Apthorp’s middle name, Brayley had earlier committed in his sketch of Mrs. Morton in the October issue. The only other error, the substitution of twenty-seven for seven, may also be due to a mis-hearing of the actual number of performances of *West Point Preserved* at the Haymarket Theatre.

4. *Is Catherine Byles’s friendship with Brown authenticated?* Miss Byles’s intimate acquaintance with her “nephew” William—for though she was aunt only to Brown’s half brother,¹⁶ Mather, the painter, she playfully assumed the same relationship to Gawen Brown’s younger children—and with his literary work is attested by many references in her letter books, preserved in the Massachusetts Historical Society Library and the Library of the New England and Genealogical Society. She corresponded with him during his absence in North Carolina and after his death was instrumental in securing the return of the manuscript of his tragedy, *West Point Preserved*.¹⁷ Indeed, if it were not for a regrettable gap in her

¹⁴ For some time I believed Mrs. Thompson to be in error as to Brown’s parentage, misled by a Suffolk County guardianship record, which described him and his sisters as “minors under fourteen years of age and children of John Hill, late of Boston.” The discovery of Brown’s birth record proved that Mrs. Thompson was right and I wrong, and that the record is an error for “[gr]and-children of John Hill.”


¹⁶ Her older sister, Elizabeth Byles, married Gawen Brown as his second wife. Brown and his sisters were children of the third wife, Elizabeth Hill.

¹⁷ Through her letter to Col. W. R. Davie, of Halifax, North Carolina, 29 October, 1793, in the *Byles Papers*. 
correspondence between 1785 and 1793, the authorship of The Power of Sympathy could probably be established on the basis of her testimony alone.

5. Is Mrs. Thompson's version of the attempted suppression of the novel to be credited? This supposed attempt appears in all nineteenth-century accounts of the novel but is probably traceable in Sabin, Drake, and the rest to the only statement early enough in point of time to merit serious consideration, that of Joseph Tinker Buckingham, already referred to, in his Specimens of Newspaper Literature, in 1850. He had remarked that the novel "was no sooner announced as published than an attempt was made to suppress it, by purchasing and destroying all the copies that could be found." Buckingham had gone to Boston as a printer in 1800, after several years' affiliation with Isaiah Thomas's business projects elsewhere, and for fifty years thereafter was intimately associated with the printers and publishers of the town, including Russell, Thomas, and other editors of the 1790's. He was thus more likely than almost anyone else of his time to be correctly informed; and it is hard to conceive any reasons for his fabricating such an item as this. There is no incompatibility between Buckingham's statement and Mrs. Thompson's, which is chiefly concerned with the detail that the Mortons or Apthorps sought and obtained the consent of the author before proceeding to buy up and destroy all the copies of his work that they could lay their hands on—a procedure most natural and appropriate as tending both to effect their purpose more successfully and to preserve neighborly relations on State Street.

That their attempt succeeded only partially is stated by Mrs. Thompson and proved by the continued advertising of the novel in the book catalogues of Thomas and of David West, at Boston, through 1792 and 1793, though the number of copies thus available for sale was probably small. Thomas sent two copies to Matthew Carey, at Philadelphia, in 1792; and his list of "books in stock" for his Boston store in that year and 1793 includes only one bound copy and two in sheets; even these disappear from the 1794, 1795, and 1797 lists. In 1850 the book was so rare that Buckingham had apparently never seen it; and it is likely that no American library except the Antiquarian Society's at Worcester possessed it before the
discovery of a dozen fresh and uncut copies in an old trunk about 1867.\textsuperscript{18}

In short, there seems to be every reason for accepting that part of Brayley's article which is built upon Mrs. Thompson's testimony as a valid and trustworthy basis for attributing \textit{The Power of Sympathy} to Brown, particularly since such an attribution harmonizes with all the known facts. Brown's name, sex, and age suit the three contemporary allusions noted earlier in this paper. As a neighbor, he would know many details of Fanny Apthorp's tragedy, supplemented by others in Fanny's letter, printed in \textit{The Herald of Freedom} shortly after her suicide.\textsuperscript{19} A motive for including the Morton-Apthorp episode in his novel may be found, if needed, in the general indignation, in which he probably shared, at Perez Morton's exoneration by John Adams and Governor Bowdoin as a committee of investigation, after a coroner's jury had imputed to him at least a share of responsibility for the unfortunate girl's death.\textsuperscript{20} The attitude of the Apthorps and Mersons, who were prominent and influential neighbors, would account for his silence and that of his family regarding a work of which they were doubtless more ashamed than proud. Their silence would persist after his death, even after \textit{The Power of Sympathy} was recalled to public notice, but would naturally be broken when, at the end of the next century, the work came to be reprinted and praised as a meritorious performance, wrongly accredited to another writer.

Perhaps the chief reason why Mrs. Thompson's revelation of her uncle's authorship of the novel received so little attention in 1894 was the fact that his work was by that time so completely for-

\textsuperscript{18} Reported in the \textit{Boston Transcript}, 2 May, 1867. The oft-repeated statement that \textit{The Power of Sympathy} created a great sensation and was denounced in the press and the pulpit has no foundation in fact. Aside from the advertisements, and two puffing notices in Thomas's \textit{Massachusetts Magazine}, it was referred to only four times in Boston newspapers of 1789: in a mildly critical letter from "Civil Spy," in \textit{The Massachusetts Centinel}, 7 Feb., poking fun at its title and its claim to being founded in truth; a rejoinder by "Antonia" (Catherine Byles?) in \textit{The Herald of Freedom} three days later; "Civil Spy's" retort in the \textit{Centinel}, 18 Feb., 1789; and a reply to him by "Belinda" in \textit{The Herald of Freedom}, 20 Feb., 1789. None of these alludes to either the moral or the personal aspects of the work. In contrast with the very real newspaper sensation caused by the earlier scandal which the author utilized surprisingly little attention was paid to the novel, suggesting that few Bostonians probably had an immediate opportunity of perusing it.


\textsuperscript{20} See \textit{The Herald of Freedom}, 9, 13, and 16 October, 1788.
gotten. It is now ascertained, however, that Brown was a prolific writer of many literary types, including sentimental prose narratives similar in spirit to The Power of Sympathy; and that he was probably personally known to Thomas in January, 1789, in which month his tale, "Harriot, or the Domestic Reconciliation," appeared as the initial piece in Thomas's new periodical, The Massachusetts Magazine.

Nearly the strongest evidence in support of Mrs. Thompson's assertion is found in the striking resemblances between Brown's Ira and Isabella, and The Power of Sympathy, published in his name in 1807, seems never to have been examined by anyone before Miss Pendleton, for whatever light it might throw on the problem. A comparative analysis of the vocabulary, sentence structure, figures of speech, and other elements of style in the two works has shown the closest identity, even to the parallel misspellings "illudes" for "eludes" (P. of S., II, 129) and "illusive" for "elusive" (I. and A., p. 35). Even more impressive are the extraordinary resemblances in plot between the two. In each, a pair of lovers ignorant of any relationship between them become secretly betrothed. In each, they are warned that they must not marry because of some mysterious but insuperable bar. In each, proceeding despite this warning, they are finally told that they are children of the same father. In each, one of the lovers (in Ira and Isabella both) proves to be the offspring of seduction. The chief differences are that in Ira and Isabella the marriage takes place before the revelation comes, and a tragic conclusion is averted through the discovery that Isabella's father is not, as he supposed, Ira's father at all.

The most natural explanation of these resemblances in style and content is that Brown, balked in hopes of fame or profit by the failure of The Power of Sympathy, attempted to salvage his plot, rewriting the story entirely, disguising its identity with the original form, omitting the illustrative episodes which proved so injudicious at first, and substituting a happy ending for the more appropriate tragic one. The very legend on the title page of Ira and Isabella, "Founded in Fiction," argues such an origin, since it is meaningless as prefaced to a work of avowed fiction, unless one recognizes it as

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21 For the results of this investigation, I am indebted to Miss Pauline Aiken, formerly a graduate student at the University of Maine, now at Yale University.
consciously set off in the writer’s mind against the phrase “Founded in Truth,” on the title page of his ill-fated earlier attempt.

One other significant fact remains to be recorded. When Brayley’s article was published, in December, 1894, at least four persons were living who had referred at greater or less length to Mrs. Morton as the author,22 of whom at least one was an antiquarian of note and editor of The New England Historical and Genealogical Register. Not one of these persons, then or subsequently, so far as is known, ever attempted a refutation of Brayley’s claims for William Hill Brown.

22 Namely, Littlefield, John Ward Dean, William Dana Orcutt, and Marion C. McBride. It is perhaps noteworthy that Sabin, Duyckinck, and Appleton’s and Allibone’s dictionaries, which had occasion to mention either Mrs. Morton or The Power of Sympathy, had not linked her name with the novel.