

CHAPTER 5

ARTHUR MERVYN;
OR, MEMOIRS OF THE
YEAR 1793

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IN the very broadest terms, Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* is a tale of upward mobility and social aspiration at a time of economic uncertainty and corruption, political instability stoked by fear of foreigners, and political revolution emblemized by deadly plague weighted with symbolism. The novel was published in three phases between the fall of 1798 and the fall of 1800. The first nine chapters were released serially, in June–August 1798, in the Brown-edited *Monthly Magazine*. The whole of its “First Part” was published in the summer of 1799, with the “Second Part” appearing in full in the fall of 1800. Arguably the most ambitious element of Brown's burst of Gothic writing at the turn of the century, *Arthur Mervyn* challenges readers with a complex formal structure, multiple plot lines and entanglements, and a surprising number of characters whose surnames begin with *W* or who look alike. For their effort, readers get much in return: crime, sex, a plague, violence, corruption, and even romance. There's foreign intrigue, a radical crypto-Jewish Madonna, gravediggers, and gold-diggers. Despite the novel's challenges, readers may also marvel at how energetically Brown worked through his own era's struggles to comprehend revolution, racism, and gender anxiety.

The novel's setting is also vast. From rural Chester County, Pennsylvania, to the streets of Philadelphia, from Charleston, South Carolina, to Baltimore, and from France to England and revolutionary Saint-Domingue (soon to become Haiti), the geography of *Arthur Mervyn* is global. And yet, despite this rich tapestry, the novel is replete with Gothic tropes of claustrophobia. Arthur will be trapped in closets, cellars, and mysterious attic nooks. He will face obstacles that threaten to circumscribe his freedom: rural obscurity, criminal activity, premature marriage, live burial. Yet not all circumstances that circumscribe are so unpleasant: the novel begins in medias res with a scene

of domesticity around a hearth, where the eponymous hero shares his history with a kindly couple, who have opened their home to him.

Just two weeks have passed since Arthur, a farm boy not yet twenty years old, has arrived on the Stevenses' doorstep in Philadelphia sorely weakened and disoriented from a bout of the "reigning malady," the deadly yellow fever. Fortunately for Arthur, his benevolent host is a doctor and his wife an able nurse. Once restored to health, Arthur is invited to tell his story. The matter is pressing. A reliable friend has warned the doctor that Arthur must not be trusted; he is a known associate of a criminal on the lam, the notorious Thomas Welbeck, a suspect in financial and other capital crimes. Arthur must clear his name. To do so, he will explain what he knows of Welbeck's misdeeds, including forgery, seduction, and murder. He will confess to having helped dispose of a victim's corpse and having aided Welbeck's flight from his pursuers. He will exculpate himself with acts of benevolence, including a return to the city to save a young merchant from the spreading fever and an errand southward to provide restitution to those who fell prey to Welbeck's schemes. By the end of the novel, Arthur will have assuaged the doctor's concerns about his sincerity, relocated to the city, and begun an apprenticeship in medicine as Stevens's protégé. It's a most improbable rise from rags to riches abetted, not insignificantly, by the power of telling a good story.

Much of the novel is narrated retrospectively. Dr. Stevens looks back on the yellow fever epidemic, he explains, "merely to compose a narrative of some incidents with which my situation made me acquainted" (AM 5). Arthur's history begins in the second chapter and opens with recollections of childhood. As is consistent with Brown's writing generally, *Arthur Mervyn* also contains its share of other characters' backstories. The layers of mediation can be difficult to follow, but this layering can be read as an experiment in realism. For as new characters enter the plot, Brown develops them with attention to their own idiosyncratic life stories, and each of these are deeply embedded in historical events that would have resonated with contemporary readers: the French and Haitian revolutions, epidemics of yellow fever that hit Philadelphia especially hard in 1793, and financial and sexual scandals that filled the local newspapers. Exposition is thus always ongoing in Brown's universe.

Formally, the novel consists of three distinct scenes of storytelling divided between the two separate volumes in which it appeared in book form. In addition to the hearth scene that concludes the First Part, a second at the opening of the Second Part has Arthur bringing his hosts up to date since lingering at the rural Hadwin farm and making his second and third trips back to Philadelphia. In this second scene, Arthur must once again overcome Dr. Stevens's suspicions and prove his good-heartedness. Toward the end of the Second Part, a third scene introduces a surprising formal shift into the present; Arthur narrates the last several chapters without mediation. Having been tasked to take over from Dr. Stevens and complete writing his story for himself, Arthur seemingly steps away from his manuscript and narrates the remainder in an anticipatory mode. That is, the story is still unfolding as the novel concludes. At this point, Arthur has risen from a poor country bumpkin to an aspiring physician and is on the

cus of marriage to a wealthy Jewish divorcée, Achsa Fielding, only lately arrived from England. The novel ends as Arthur awaits a response to his marriage proposal.

The shift to unmediated first-person narration has suggested to critics that Brown wished to wash away suspicions about Arthur's character. Nevertheless, critical appraisal of the novel began with competing claims about Arthur's veracity. Were readers to have confidence in Dr. Stevens's judgment? Or were we, along with the naive or perhaps idealistic doctor, dupes of a master deceiver? These questions were bound up with critics' desire to justify Brown's status as a major figure in American literary history. Because Brown traded in scandal, sexual intrigue, and other narrative elements associated with Gothic fiction, twentieth-century critics had to defend his artistry and contest the widely held position that authentically "American" literature only came to be written following James Fenimore Cooper in 1820s.¹

Perhaps inspired by the bicentennial of US independence, critical interest in early American writers bloomed in the 1970s. Thus, scholars returned to Brown at the height of New Criticism, which privileged close reading to elucidate artists' mastery of craftsmanship associated with irony, paradox, and formal integrity or completeness. In *Arthur Mervyn*, critics rediscovered a text that met these criteria, and this is evident in the titles of journal articles from that time. A few examples are Patrick Brancaccio's "Studied Ambiguity: *Arthur Mervyn* and the Problem of the Unreliable Narrator," Carl Nelson's "A Method for Madness: The Symbolic Patters in *Arthur Mervyn*," and Emory Elliott's "Narrative Unity and Moral Resolution in *Arthur Mervyn*." As these titles indicate, scholars worried over Arthur's character, some advocating that the hero was naive yet benevolent and others convinced of the character's duplicity. In one particularly ingenious article, James Russo argues that Arthur is an imposter "who finds the guise of a country bumpkin well adapted to his necessity" (387). According to Russo, Arthur is really the missing heir to the Clavering estate that at the beginning of the novel has been rented out to Welbeck. Pretending to have witnessed the young Clavering's death, "Arthur" is free to marry whom he chooses; Clavering's parents had rejected his mistress and thus prompted the youth to elope to Europe. Despite Russo's creative rereading, most critics tended to argue that Arthur ought to be believed.

The success of efforts to raise Brown's reputation may be judged by the more frequent reprinting of his oeuvre, including the MLA-certified "Bicentennial Edition" of novels and related works published by Kent State University Press in 1977–1987. Comprehensively framed by historical and textual essays, this series' scholarly edition of *Arthur Mervyn* encouraged robust historicist work on the novel in the following decade. Robert Levine, Shirley Samuels, and George Spangler were among those who argued that the novel was enmeshed in the fears and anxieties of the post-Revolutionary era, including the changing role of women, revolutions abroad, insurrections at home, and development of national character. A third phase gradually challenged this ethnonationalist approach by placing the novel in wider discursive networks of the Atlantic world. In place of concerns for the formation of national identity, scholars pointed to political economy, philosophical touchstones such as John Locke and Adam Smith, medical speculations about racial difference, and the rise of a transatlantic bourgeoisie.²

Noteworthy in this vein is the Hackett edition of the novel published in 2008. Editors Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro place Brown in an intellectual circle that includes William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and novelist Thomas Holcroft. They argue that Brown aimed to exemplify enlightened Woldwinitic principles, including the emphasis on freedom from tyranny and egalitarianism between men and women. Readers of the Hackett edition can track Brown's commitment to these principles in the editors' footnotes. They will find an exhaustive but prescriptively focused elaboration of Brown's motives laid bare in allusions to the Woldwinites and their writing as well as in denotative interpretations of nominal details and relevant historical contexts. As with Brown's self-evaluation, Barnard and Shapiro aim to mediate, or reconcile, a gap of understanding between audience and object. In particular, they contest what was once a common understanding about Brown's politics, that is, the idea that as Brown matured, his views became more politically conservative, or consistent with the Federalists, who had been tossed from power with the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1801. By yoking Brown to the Woldwinites, Barnard and Shapiro argue for Brown's democratic bona fides. Barnard and Shapiro extend Brown's progressive political affiliations to thematic analysis of the text; this, too, is consistent with Brown's aspirant-class position. In addition to Brown's self-proclaimed motive, Barnard and Shapiro extend Brown's politics to a critique of the credit-based market economy, which, unlike the rational discussion of enlightened professionals, relied on rumor and was subject to manipulation and the uncertainties of fate. The villains in the novel are thus speculators and the bankers who invest in their schemes.

Another angle has scholars returning to Brown's biography and to formal and aesthetic considerations, though now informed by the histories of affect and ideas as well as events.³ Peter Kafer's biography of Brown, published in 2004, emphasized the trauma Brown experienced when his father was rounded up by loyalist-hunting revolutionaries in 1777. Bryan Waterman examines Brown's circle of male associates who came to call themselves the Friendly Club. Members came from several professions—doctors, lawyers, and artists—with the common thread being that all were dedicated writers. The club's central figure was New York physician Elihu Hubbard Smith. Smith contracted the yellow fever and succumbed to it in 1798, a devastating blow to Brown, who may also have caught the fever but survived. *Arthur Mervyn* was the first novel Brown began writing after Smith's death. Indeed, the yellow fever figures prominently in the novel as both metaphor and catalyzing tragedy.

I. THE REIGNING MALADY

Yellow fever epidemics struck US coastal cities periodically during the summer months. The rich escaped to more temperate retreats, abandoning the cities to the sick and the poor. The number of deaths is staggering. In Philadelphia, the fever of 1793 killed approximately five thousand people, or 10 percent of the population. As the deaths mounted, physicians and government officials scurried to identify the fever's origin, how it spread, and

how it could be cured or controlled. Physicians and natural scientists were divided about the origins and pathways of the fever. Some believed that it was local in origin, while others contended that it originated in the Caribbean and got to Philadelphia via stale air in the holds of merchant ships. Contrary to the contagionists, who believed the fever spread through contact with poisonous miasma, others, including Benjamin Rush—so-called first doctor of the republic—contended that healthy diets and cleanliness could protect against infection, a theory that Dr. Stevens espouses in Brown's novel. We now know that yellow fever is transmitted by infected mosquitoes, but in 1793, Rush's views were progressive, on the cusp of scientifically reasoned argument. Rush also believed that patients could be cured by extreme bleedings, possibly causing more harm than good; his pathological work surpassed his palliative care. Nevertheless, Rush worked to dispel vernacular speculation that an unusual number of pigeons had brought the disease to the city or that wearing a mask dipped in garlic could prevent it.

Rumors led to other faulty conclusions. People of African descent were mistakenly believed by some to be immune to the disease and were consequently exploited to nurse the ill, drive hearses, and dig graves. Prominent black freemen petitioned for unpaid wages, while the press heaped scorn upon them for stealing from the dead or charging exorbitant sums for manual labor. Most notable were accusations from one of the city's most prolific publishers, Mathew Carey, and a counterpamphlet written by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, titled "A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia." Jones and Allen lashed out at Carey, who fled the city and "left [the blacks] to struggle with their arduous and hazardous task." They also charged Carey with appropriating controversy to make money: "We believe he has made more money by the sale of his 'scraps' than a dozen of the greatest extortionists among the black nurses," they wrote. As this dispute illustrates, the yellow fever yoked disease and race in powerful and unfortunate ways. Indeed, the rhetoric of contagion metastasized into politics as well. Fear of a spreading disease of uncertain origin encouraged those who felt America had been infected by foreign ideas, especially those connected to revolutionary events in the Caribbean basin and, by association, the French Revolution.

Partisans noted that Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Charleston, and New Orleans had opened their doors to refugees from the violent slave revolt on the French island Saint-Domingue (to become the independent black republic of Haiti in 1805). Refugee plantation owners, the *grands blancs*, fled north and were often accompanied by their "loyal" slaves. By the thousands, these émigrés brought a foreign Creole culture that, because it was also French, implied dangerous ideas associated with Jacobinism, the radical ideology that stoked the Terror of 1793. Americans worried that slaves from the Caribbean had imbibed revolutionary aspirations and might spread these among the domestic slave population. These fears were realized in August 1800, when Gabriel Prosser, known as Gabriel, hatched his plans to lead one thousand slaves to assault Richmond under the banner of "Liberty or Death," a slogan of both American and French revolutionaries. Gabriel's plot was quashed before it materialized, but at trial, the scope of his revolt was recorded: Gabriel planned to capture Governor James Monroe

and kill all white people, excepting only Quakers, Methodists, French expatriates, and those who were known to support emancipation. Thus, miasma, insurrectionary violence, and racial animus converged in the yellow fever, which thus served as a multivalent sign of often contradictory symbolic values.

Brown included all of this in his novel. He played on metaphoric fantasies that cast the yellow fever as an ominous sign that the new republic, only a decade old, had gone astray. The pathologies of the nation could be traced to economic and social ties to the Caribbean, the slave trade, the entanglements of the European wars, the spread of dangerous and radical ideas from France and Ireland, or, paradoxically, the nation's embrace of monarchist refugees. But despite leveraging these anxieties to heighten the drama of his story, Brown seems to deny an analogous extension of the fever's meaning in his preface, where he explains that his motive has been to "snatch some [remarkable and instructive instances] from oblivion" to inspire both emulation and sympathy for those who have fallen ill (AM 3). Compared to hyperbolic conspiracy theorists such as Carey, Brown was remarkably moderate. Indeed, he argues for the rational use of fiction.

II. MEDIATION, DIFFERENCE, AND INCOMPREHENSION

Brown imagines that fiction can mediate, or mitigate, the gap between readers and sufferers.⁴ He aims to activate his audience by both moving them and inspiring them to become agents of benevolence and thus not to inspire or encourage their most outrageous fears. Though a seemingly modest goal, formally, Brown's impulse is utopic: to reduce the gap between an author's desire for *X* and the actions of his readers, that is, to eliminate the problem of mediation. Of course, to eliminate such a gap would require that readers first pay for the book. That is, Brown does stand to gain if his benevolent project is successful. We may forgive such commercialism, recalling that Brown was among the first American writers to aim to make a living by writing fiction. The novel provides at least one overt expression of this desire. In one of his retreats from Philadelphia, Arthur decides to translate a book he had taken from Welbeck's library. When he reaches a passage that details the author's efforts to secure his money from bandits, Arthur finds that the pages are curiously pasted together and, once he has separated them, finds banknotes of considerable value deposited between them.

Discovery of the Lodi treasure that Welbeck had previously embezzled from his mistress, Clemenza Lodi, drives much of the Second Part of the novel, wherein Arthur determines to return the ill-gotten gains to the rightful beneficiaries. This includes money found on the body of the murdered Amos Watson. Indeed, much of what Arthur uses to clear his name for the second time with the increasingly skeptical Dr. Stevens consists of the story of his good deeds. He finds Clemenza, stillborn babe in her lap, at a reputed bordello and vows to use the Lodi fortune for her benefit. Though confronted in

the brothel by the mistress of the house and grazed by a bullet for failing to heed a warning to leave, he also meets the woman to whom he will later become engaged, the mysterious wandering Jew, Achsa Fielding. Finding her amenable to protecting Clemenza, Arthur removes both to the care of the matronly Mrs. Wentworth, at whose home Arthur will court Fielding in the novel's final pages. This crafting of a female circle of friends and his welcome among them are another sign of Arthur's transformation from rural youth to bourgeois adult and may stand in for the Wollstonecraft-Godwin circle Brown so much admired. It seems important, at the least, to recognize that Brown places Arthur in contact with a rich diversity of women characters who vary in their conscious awareness of the era's gendered inequalities.

Mrs. Wentworth, though a minor character, is in the end crucial to bringing the strands of the novel together. For one thing, she has rented out the home of Mr. and Mrs. Clavering, parents of a young man whom Arthur met in Chester County before the events of the novel commence. Recognizing the similar physiognomy Arthur and Clavering share, she is further tested when Arthur reveals to her that young Clavering had died in his presence. This is important news not only for the tragedy of the young man's demise but also because his elopement from Philadelphia had led his parents to seek him out in Europe and thus make the estate available. Thomas Welbeck and the youthful Clemenza Lodi have rented the property. The wayward male characters, Welbeck, Clavering, and Arthur, bemuse and unsettle Mrs. Wentworth, while the co-location of the women under her roof at the end of the novel resolves much of that tension. Among the women taken under her wing are Clemenza, Eliza Hadwin—another youthful character Arthur had briefly considered for marriage—and Achsa Fielding. It is also Mrs. Wentworth who asks Arthur to complete his story in writing, a task still evolving as the novel comes to a close.

In addition to Clemenza, who represents foreign innocence, Eliza, who represents simple rural domesticity, and Achsa Fielding, who, previously married and nomadic, represents foreign experience, are a few mother-surrogates. Arthur leaves for Philadelphia in the first instance because he cannot stomach the usurpation of his dead mother's place by Betty, a former maid for the Mervyn family, now married to Arthur's father. She may also be a prostitute, depending on whom one chooses to believe. Mrs. Stevens nurses Arthur to health from the fever. But most surprising, Arthur develops his admiration for Achsa Fielding by designating her as his *Mamma*. Like the sexually unobtainable Madonna, Achsa is unavailable to fulfill Arthur's romantic desire until he successfully transitions from worshipping her to loving her. Though Brown wrote a century before Sigmund Freud, the dynamics of childhood development, jealousy, desire, and rivalry had been mined for millennia. Freud, of course, relied on Sophocles, who wrote plays during the fourth century BCE, to expound the Oedipus complex. Freud also got inspiration from the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann, a Prussian contemporary of Brown's most famous for his novella *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* and for "The Sandman," a story Freud used to explain the psychoanalytic definition of the uncanny. One may consider how Freud's theories might have changed had his model been Brown's uncanny universe.

Four other mothers make more minor contributions to the plot. Notably, two of these mothers have dead babies, and the other two have sickly ones. Arthur's mother has lost several children to an inherited disease that Arthur assumes will end his life, too, around the time he turns twenty. Mrs. Stevens allows her husband to jeopardize their child's life by inviting Arthur into their home while he is suffering from the yellow fever. Clemenza's child dies in her arms and, in an important and often overlooked scene, Arthur, hiding in a closet, overhears a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Thetford, whose infant has just died. Thetford has come home with a foundling and presents it to his wife as a replacement. I will address the theme of surrogacy at the end of this essay, but suffice it to say here that the idea of originals and reproductions may be observed throughout the novel. When Dr. Stevens takes on Arthur as a physician's apprentice, Arthur may be seen as a surrogate for the Stevenses' infant, whom we met in the first chapter.

Much as Brown represented a variety of women characters in his novel, he also created a tapestry of black people that features a diversity of types. Though modern eyes may identify the portrayal of black characters as stereotypically racist, there is a similar structural logic to Brown's choices for the positionality of his women. Characters appear as analogues to subservience, violence, civic belonging, and revolutionary incomprehensibility. This last position is most pronounced in scenes about Arthur's last do-good mission before he can turn to more domestic concerns. As Arthur assumes the first-person narration of his life history (no longer mediated by Dr. Stevens's retelling), he determines he must repair the damage that Welbeck and his fraudulent schemes have wrought. He decides to restore Amos Watson's loot to his widow and other monies to the defrauded investor, Mrs. Maurice. In this capacity, Arthur takes a stagecoach to Baltimore, in which there features an often cited encounter with a Frenchman, his monkey, and two enslaved women.

The stagecoach scene is important for many reasons, as it ties together the novel's thematic interests in natural science, race, gender relations, and Atlantic commerce. The Frenchman, we learn, is an émigré from Saint-Domingue. Arthur observes his upbraiding of the monkey, named Dominique, a possible allusion to François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture, the black general most associated with the Haitian Revolution, still ongoing through the time of publication of *Arthur Mervyn* in 1800.⁵ Coming in the section after Arthur has taken control of his story, speaking directly to his readers, the stagecoach is the vehicle that takes Arthur southward to Baltimore, the novel's only venture into slaveholding territory. The scene is a critical episode in Arthur's development and so is included here in full:

I mounted the stage-coach at daybreak the next day, in company with a sallow Frenchman from St. Domingo, his fiddle-case, an ape, and two female blacks. The Frenchman, after passing the suburbs, took out his violin and amused himself with humming to his own *tweedle-tweedle*. The monkey now and then mounded an apple, which was given to him from a basket by the blacks, who gazed with stupid wonder, and an exclamatory *La! La!* upon the passing scenery; or chattered to each other in a sort of open-mouthed, half-articulate, monotonous, and sing-song jargon.

The man looked seldom either on this side or that; and spoke only to rebuke the frolicks of the monkey, with a Tenez! Dominique! Prenez garde! Diable noir!

As to me, my thought was busy in a thousand ways. I sometimes gazed at the faces of my *four* companions, and endeavoured to discern the differences and samenesses between them. I took an exact account of the features, proportions, looks, and gestures of the monkey, the Congolese, and the Creole-Gaul. I compared them together, and examined them apart. I looked at them in a thousand different points of view, and pursued, untired and unsatiated, those trains of reflections which began at each change of tone, feature, and attitude. (AM 370)

This curious group of four may suggest the eighteenth-century naturalist's fascination with gradations of humanness. Arthur aims to categorize his four companions, including the Frenchman, the ape, and the "Congolese," in a set of sameness and difference. The inclusion of the ape rings with the stereotype of Africans and apes in the period's racial discourse. And yet nowhere does Arthur explicitly draw this conclusion. In fact, the odd doubling of the Congolese women (why are there two?) suggests that a meaningful dialogue takes place between them, one from which Arthur is excluded by ignorance. He hears the *tweedle-tweedle* of the Frenchman's violin, hears the monkey satisfying his appetite by chomping the apples, but struggles to interpret the "open-mouthed, half-articulate, monotonous, and sing-song jargon" of the blacks, "who gazed with stupid wonder, and an exclamatory *La! La!* upon the passing scenery." Does Arthur master the scene as the categorizing-obsessed Carl Linnaeus or the count de Buffon might? Note that the result of Arthur's speculation is an "untired and unsatiated" appetite for these reflections—and not action. Stuck within his thoughts, Arthur is more like the apple-munching monkey than a protégé of Buffon. As with the monkey, the Congolese women have provided Mervyn with much food for thought. And in this state of passive reflection, Arthur discovers that he is the one entrapped in "crude and inadequate" thoughts:

I marked the country as it successively arose before me, and found endless employment in examining the shape and substance of the fence, the barn, and the cottage, the aspect of earth and of heaven. How great are the pleasures of health and of mental activity.

My chief occupation, however, related to the scenes into which I was about to enter. My imaginations were, of course, crude and inadequate; and I found an uncommon gratification in comparing realities, as they successively occurred, with the pictures which my wayward fancy had depicted. (AM 370–371)

The Frenchman is a slaveholder from Saint-Domingue and most likely a refugee from revolutionary violence. While home burns, he tweedles away on his fiddle, pleasing only himself. His exasperated rebuke of the monkey is toothless: "Hold on! Dominique! Watch out! Black devil!" The monkey, Dominique (i.e., of the Lord), frolics without restraint. The two Congolese women pay no regard to the Frenchman but cater to the monkey's appetite and look out the window at the passing scenery. Arthur tells us that he finds the black women's speech disgusting. He intuits their stupid wonder, but what might they really be thinking as they look out the window of the stagecoach? All we know for sure is that Arthur resists approaching that question as he is overwhelmed by

what he, himself, sees outside the coach. The second half of the stagecoach episode is an inverse reflection of the first; it is now Arthur who appraises the landscape. He describes his own thoughts as “crude and inadequate,” and he hesitates to share his dreams or the content of thoughts “suggested by the condition of the country through which I passed.”

In the first part of the scene, the Frenchman dominates the monkey while tweedling along blithely as his Saint-Dominguan servants look with confusion on what surrounds them. Arthur shifts and arranges these moving parts. We are treated to this elaborate exercise in comparison and counting as Arthur describes his four companions. Critics hone in on the racist joke that includes the monkey in this series but miss the truly significant fact that the position of the Congolese women requires doubling. The monkey in the scene doubles Arthur doing his elaborate calculus without end, while the women actually talk to each other. In the second part, however, Arthur has nothing left to say. He withholds his knowledge from us as his “crude and inadequate” thoughts begin to congeal into knowledge. This knowledge is the truth that the resistant monkey is but an incomplete and inadequate screen that has prevented him from properly appraising the Congolese women. Arthur’s disdainful commentary on how the black women responded to the passing scenery seems now, in retrospect, to describe his own incomprehension. Likewise, if understood as Freudian projection, we might learn what is happening outside the stagecoach from what is going on within. It is, after all, a stage from which the actors watch another scene played out through the window. The Frenchman makes no further impression here. His abuse of the monkey has been displaced by the scenery outside; this ought to raise our suspicion that something other than Arthur’s dream is being withheld. On its way to Baltimore, the stage is, of course, entering the slaveholding south. Might scenes of slavery be witnessed, perhaps even episodes of disciplinary violence along the road? Might the women slaves’ “stupid wonder,” along with their seemingly incomprehensible exclamations, be expressions of dismay, grief, or horror? For Arthur, the slaves’ liberty to speak without the master’s intervention is actually the message, and not the sing-song chatter that he dismisses as nonsense. What Arthur misses is the irony, as both inside the stagecoach and outside on the stage of history is the specter of Haiti.

This encounter with an incomprehensible revolutionary agency joins with other types who appear on rare, but significant, occasions. One is an obsequious servant glimpsed briefly as a reflection in a mirror, interrupting Arthur’s appraisal of himself dressed in rich clothing and inviting him to supper (AM 51). Carroll Smith-Rosenberg insightfully linked this first mirror scene with another episode amid the disease-infested apartments of the city. As Arthur searches for yet another character with a *W* surname, Wallace, he enters a room that contains a dead body and, on turning to leave, sees a tawny ruffian of monstrous proportions, who knocks him on the head with a club (AM 148).⁶ This ghastly figure seems torn from the pages of Carey’s pamphlet condemning black people for stealing from the dead, taking advantage of white people’s misfortune. An unconscious Arthur is saved from premature burial by the Quaker Medlicote and his black steward Austin (whose name appears in italics in the text; AM 161), the first black character to be granted a proper name. Thus are both sides of the debate about the actions of black people during the fever represented. Black servants/slaves are also

represented dually. Two black women collect Arthur's lost belongings from the street, bringing them ultimately to Mrs. Wentworth's, where Arthur will retrieve them (AM 66). But later, in Baltimore, Arthur is mistreated by two male slaves as he tries to gain an audience with Mrs. Maurice to return her money (379). These servants are vicious in the same ways that Mrs. Maurice is venal. By contrast, Arthur also first glimpses Mrs. Watson as she plays with a light-skinned black girl in a scene of domestic felicity.

If we return to consider the tawny ruffian in relation to the stagecoach Haitians, yet another doubling is apparent. While the ruffian knocks Arthur unconscious, the Haitian women spark conscious awareness of the limitations of his knowledge. Moreover, the ruffian's assault is individualized and isolated. It is also destined to fail, because racist ideology will always be prepared to account for sporadic outbursts of violence. On the other hand, the action of the free blacks in Philadelphia and the Haitian uprising are resolutely communal in form. While both are progressive responses to the horrors of the slavocracy, the Haitians are the only truly revolutionary agents. Here is confirmation of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's assertion that the Haitian revolution, as a radical emancipatory project, was unthinkable to its contemporaries. While this is certainly true in the scheme of "silencing the past," it may also be equally true that the revolution's incomprehensibility was a great source of its revolutionary agency (Trouillot and Carby).

What the panoply of black and women characters demonstrates is that Brown peopled his novel with structurally significant contraries, oppositions, complements, and doubles. If it seems odd to argue that Brown's timely and historically rich narrative may best be approached formally, consider Roland Barthes's famous argument that "a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it" (Barthes x). Such seems a productive gambit with this novel, as its framing and generic playfulness might be appraised not only as a great challenge but also as an opening for critical engagement. Jennifer Fleissner reminds us, "Such struggles require literary analysis for their detection, the lesson that texts—even texts as reassuringly familiar as novels—are not contourless containers of information or 'content,' but full-fledged miniature worlds, shaped by implicit choices about the most fundamental things: what a person is, what counts as making meaning, how to think about space and time. Here we remember what might be a much more lasting lesson of *The Political Unconscious* and its precursors in novel theory: the living struggles we unearth by taking seriously questions of form" (Fleissner 188). I will suggest that formal analysis of *Arthur Mervyn* yields a new context, itself deeply historical, that of the conditions of production under which it became a thing in the world.

III. FORM AND GENRE

A formal analysis might begin by relating *Arthur Mervyn* to Brown's other novels, especially the quartet of titles published in a frenzied period between August 1798 and the fall of 1800. While there are numerous similarities in style and structure among these

Gothic novels, it bears noting that Brown invests each with protagonists who wish to escape the drudgery of work. Edgar Huntly begins his story believing that an unexpected bounty has rescued his fiancée from poverty and enabled the couple to plan their marriage. Unfortunately, his hopes and fortune are blasted when their claims to the money are challenged. This crisis triggers Huntley's sleepwalking, mobility without consciousness, an apt metaphor for tedious and repetitive mechanical labor. Theodore Wieland has time for leisure because servants work his property. He also discovers that he has inherited a German estate but rejects assuming the property because it would take him away from his already rich and luxurious life; later, he will try to murder his whole family. Stephen Dudley, in *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness*, does all he can to avoid following his father into the apothecary business. He had wanted to become an artist, but circumstances compel him to take over the practice after his father's death. Years later and planning to retire, Dudley discovers that his seemingly reliable apprentice has embezzled his nest egg. On top of that, he goes blind. Now his daughter, Constantia, must bear the burden of wage earning.

Noting that within Brown's works characters are similarly situated regarding hard labor, we might think of this aversion in another way. If Brown's characters seek instant gratification, how might the subgenres of the novel form that he deploys in his complex, at times formally unstable works reflect or enable the quick fulfillment of a character's immediate desires? Consider how many fairy-tale elements appear in the early part of *Arthur Mervyn*, for example. Arthur was his mother's favorite child, but, like her and all his siblings, he is cursed. His mother and his five siblings have all died, and he is certain that he will also die in short order on the cusp of adulthood. He finds it unbearable to live under his father's roof, because an evil stepmother has usurped the place of his dead mother. Arthur gathers his earthly possessions into a bundle; they include three shirts, three pairs of socks, three quarters, and a talismanic portrait of a deceased friend, which he will soon lose. Arthur leaves for the city and crosses a bridge but finds he is unable to return. He loses his bundle but is saved from despair by a dapper young man in whom he sees his own likeness. He is taken on a wild journey through the mazes of the city but is betrayed by his guide and finds himself locked in a bedroom where a married couple sleeps. The wife has just miscarried, but her husband has "found" a replacement baby to console her. Like a shoemaker and his wife, the couple will awake to find Arthur's shoes, which he leaves behind to crawl out a window and make his escape. He wanders the city until he arrives at a castlelike mansion. He is hired by the master and taken into his home. A richly made set of clothing transforms the youth into a festooned prince. He fantasizes that he will marry the master's daughter and inherit the estate. Under the logic of the fairy tale, Arthur imagines shortcuts cuts between unpleasant circumstance and fulfillment, and this pattern repeats throughout the novel.

What else is common to these cycles of unpleasantness and desire? Allow me to propose a basic formula that integrates what we have already noted about Arthur's encounters with women and black people. First, something familiar is perceived as less so. For instance, Arthur's father turns him out of his home after the death of his mother has already altered it irreparably. In Philadelphia, Arthur meets Wallace, a young adult

like himself but fully acclimated to city life. And yet this surrogate peer, like the distorted paternal relationship, goes awry. Indeed, Wallace abandons Arthur in another unfamiliar domestic space. The same may be said for Thomas Welbeck, who appears to be a benefactor but ultimately does not have Arthur's best interests at heart. Next, the experience of estrangement, or the uncanny, brings Arthur into conflict with otherness, often in the guise of women or black characters. Recall that Arthur must leave home because he rejects his father's new wife. The search for Wallace will lead Arthur to a deserted house, where he will be knocked unconscious by the tawny ruffian. Welbeck's financial interests unravel because the ship in which he has invested is impounded when a British naval vessel discovers two Saint-Dominguan soldiers on board. But likewise, other characters can end up solving Arthur's dilemma, too. Arthur's father disowns his son because Arthur rejects his new stepmother; but Achsa Fielding (his new Mamma) is more viable first as mother and then as spouse. The black servant Austin helps Arthur after he is victimized by the ruffian. Arthur's mission southward is temporarily destabilized by the Creole black slaves on the stagecoach, but the encounter speeds Arthur toward restoring the money appropriated from Welbeck's failed commercial scheme. The promise of marriage and sex completes the cycle. Clemenza Lido will become his princess, if only in fantasy. Eliza Hadwin will reconnect Arthur to rural life, until he decides he has become her superior. And finally, Achsa Fielding, who joins the foreignness of Clemenza to knowledge and experience beyond Eliza's capacity and as well via the racialized otherness of her Jewish background, appears as the ultimate fulfillment of Arthur's dreams. Savvy readers will recognize that Brown closes the novel *before* Arthur and Achsa's wedding. Thus, even as Brown experiments with other subgenres of fiction, the cycle of wish, obstacle, and short-lived fulfillment appears again. Readers may want to consider other subgenres that Brown may be said to experiment with in *Arthur Mervyn*, even as the fairy tale remains the kernel of each restyling, much as Freud argued that dream work distorts the latent content of a dream into its manifest signification. Perhaps this is the novelist's insight, gained as he explores a variety of generic strategies from the eighteenth-century Bildungsroman (the development of a character from ingenue to enlightenment), to the picaresque tales of the itinerant hero, to the tidy conclusions of comedic romance.

The final element of consistency in *Arthur Mervyn* is that the cycle from sameness through difference and to resolution leads always to a new round of storytelling. The one who narrates, then, is the final arbiter of where one story ends and the next begins. Here is the quintessential insight: telling a good story may be even more remunerative than less scrupulous modes of securing wealth and also a more honorable way to avoid mind-numbing physical labor. In this sense, the New Critical questioning of Arthur's sincerity is irrelevant; it does not matter whether Arthur's story is true. It works! Brown is at pains to eliminate the possibility that Arthur should simply have to work hard and, viewing this result as its own reward, postpone the question of class elevation. If you can tell a good story, you can have it all now.

To conclude, let me suggest a less venal motive. Recall that Brown's circle—his Friendly Club—included other artists, such as playwright William Dunlap, but also lawyers and, most notably, physicians such as Elihu Hubbard Smith. In the preface to

Arthur Mervyn, Brown imagines a higher purpose for the novelist's art, what he would call the moral observer or, elsewhere, the moral painter. Physicians and political economists, he writes, have already taken their swipe at reflecting on the yellow fever. Like them, Brown imagines that the moral observer has much to contribute, though his narrative be "humble." Aiming to "methodize his own reflections," Brown claims that the moral observer plays an equally important role in drawing lasting value from the periodic catastrophe of fever season. "Men only require to be made acquainted with distress for their compassion and their charity to be awakened," he writes, adding that one who can do so "in lively colours," or with skill, "performs an eminent service to the sufferers, by calling forth benevolence in those who are able to afford relief" (AM 3). Is this not a bid for equal standing among the professional classes with whom Brown most wished to associate? We may no longer grant novelists these rights or rightful emoluments, yet this only underscores how the origins of professional authorship were bound to the conditions under which it developed.

NOTES

1. A rather late example of this perspective is Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky's "The Early American Novel". He concludes that an argument can be made for the existence of an early American novel, though unless it accounts for the contradictions, inconsistencies, and instabilities in the genre as American writers adapted it, it is falsifying the achievement" (Rubin-Dorsky 25).
2. See Baker; Goudie; McAuley; Ostrowsky; Shapiro; Silyn Roberts; Smith-Rosenberg; Traister.
3. See Waterman; Cahill.
4. Mary Kathleen Eyring situates Brown's aim to use *Arthur Mervyn* for the social good within the context of charitable activity during the post-Revolutionary era. See esp. Eyring 19–64.
5. Louverture became general-in-chief of the quasi-independent French colony after delegates of the Constitutional Convention in Paris declared a universal emancipation in 1794. Louverture would be deposed with the arrival of Napoleon's forces, who aimed to reinstate slavery in 1802. The Haitian Revolution ended when Louverture's successor, Jean-Jacques Dessaline, repelled Napoleon's invasion and declared Haitian independence in 1804.
6. For contrary readings that emphasize Arthur's assumption of racial superiority, see Smith-Rosenberg; Goudie.

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