INTRODUCTION

Tremendous times! Wars, Pestilence, Earthquakes, etc . . .

> —Elizabeth Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker* (October 24, 1793)

But, as in medicine there is a species of complaint in the bowels which works its own cure, and, leaving the body healthy, gives an invigorated tone to the system, so there is in politics: and whilst the agitation of its regeneration continues, the excrementitious humours exuding from the contaminated body will excite a general dislike and contempt for the nation; and it is only the philosophical eye, which looks into the nature and weighs the consequences of human actions, that will be able to discern the cause, which has produced so many dreadful effects.

> —Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794, I.522)

Although it is commonly treated and read as a single, continuous tale, Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* is actually two novels in one. It consists of a first novel that was published as a full-length work in its own right sometime between March and May 1799 (the first nine chapters were previously serialized in June–August 1798) and a "sequel," as its author understood it, which appeared as *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793. Second Part* in September or possibly early October 1800, after Brown had published two other full-length novels in the interim. Taken as a whole, in both its parts, *Arthur Mervyn* is one of the seven novelistic works that Brown published in a remarkable burst of literary activity between 1798 and 1801 and one of the high points in the interrelated sequence of novels that is still the best-known aspect of his prolific literary career.

 Even by the standards of Brown's other novels, all characterized by formal and conceptual complexity, *Arthur Mervyn* involves an impressive range of references and addresses a far-reaching set of questions. Generally known as an influential classic of American gothic and urban literature, the novel memorializes the epic Philadelphia

yellow fever epidemic of 1793 and develops a series of interconnected subplots that connect the outbreak with the upheavals of the revolutionary era and the murderous financial networks of Atlantic slavery. While the tale's surface action traces the social progress of an individual farm boy, Arthur Mervyn, as he leaves the country and faces the challenges of a corrupt commercial city before deciding to become a doctor and entering a concluding romance with a cosmopolitan refugee, its subplots and back-stories relate Mervyn's experiences and development to the momentous events of the year 1793 and suggest an engaged political response to the challenges they imply.

   This introduction is intended to orient the reader to the world of *Arthur Mervyn* by providing some tools for understanding Brown and his novel. We will outline and provide background for the novel's primary themes in order to draw the reader's attention to them and open them up for discussion. A sketch of Brown's life and the novel's late 1790s context, and a discussion of Brown's understanding of novels as instruments of political education and enlightenment, will provide general background. Information on central motifs—the 1793 yellow fever epidemic, the revolutionary turmoil of the Haitian and French Revolutions, which brought waves of émigrés and refugees to Brown's Philadelphia, and references to eighteenth-century theories of commerce, sensibility, race, and abolition—will lead to a discussion of how the novel develops and explores its primary social, economic, psychological, and political concerns.

Brown's Life and the Context of the 1790s

Brown was born into a Philadelphia Quaker merchant family on January 17, 1771. Philadelphia, the capital of the newly formed United States during the 1790s and then the largest, wealthiest, most culturally and politically diverse city in North America, was his home for most of his life. Beginning in the mid-1790s and particularly during the intense 1797–1800 period when he was writing his novels, however, Brown also lived in New York and moved in a cosmopolitan circle of young upper-class intellectuals who circulated and debated the latest medical-scientific, political, and cultural information and produced writings on a wide variety of subjects.

   Growing up a Philadelphia Quaker (members of The Religious Society of Friends are commonly known as "Quakers" or "Friends"), Brown was shaped by that community's history of dissenting relations to mainstream Protestant and Anglo-American culture, and by Philadelphia's importance as both a political center and a major port connected with Atlantic and global mercantile networks. Brown had a classical education at the elite Friends' Latin School in Philadelphia and briefly taught at the Friends' Grammar School in the early 1790s but, unlike his male friends in the New York circle, he did not attend a university, since many Quakers and other dissenters in the United States and England did not patronize the educational institutions that served dominant Protestant groups. Although Brown's adult years led him from his Philadelphia origins to the intellectual world of the radical Enlightenment, his Quaker background nonetheless marks his development in fundamental ways. Progressive

Quaker traditions and doctrines concerning egalitarianism and equal authority for women in the Quaker community contributed to Brown's lifelong commitment to women's education and equality. Similarly, Quaker leadership in antislavery organization is part of the background for the implicit and explicit reflections on slavery in *Arthur Mervyn* and other writings. Interestingly, after having grown up as Quakers in the increasingly diversified Philadelphia of the late eighteenth century, Brown and all his siblings married non-Quakers. Consequently, Brown was formally dissociated from the Quaker meeting in Philadelphia when he married Elizabeth Linn, daughter of a Presbyterian minister, in 1804.

Growing up the fourth of five brothers and seven surviving siblings in a merchant family,[1] Brown's life was shaped by the mercantile culture of Philadelphia during the revolutionary era. The merchant careers of Brown's father and four brothers made him intimately familiar with the circum-Atlantic import-export commerce that was the main business of Philadelphia's port and with the mercantile and financial institutions, practices, and legal concerns that are dramatized in *Arthur Mervyn*.[2] Brown's father Elijah, who, like the novel's central character Arthur, came to Philadelphia as a young man from Chester County, Pennsylvania, had a checkered business career mainly as a conveyancer, a broker and manager for real estate, mortgage, and other transactions. In 1770, as a young man, Elijah had voyaged as supercargo, or family commercial representative, on merchant ventures to the West Indies on behalf of his brother-in-law Richard Waln. Much like the complex legal and illegal schemes involving colonial trade restrictions that play an important role in this novel, Elijah's West Indian transactions involved smuggling and other quasilegal strategies for evading the Townshend Acts, which taxed American imports at the time.[3] In 1777–1778, during the American Revolution, he was arrested and interned in Virginia as one of a group of Quakers deemed "dangerous to the State" because they refused on religious grounds to sign oaths of allegiance. In 1784, he was humiliatingly imprisoned for debt. Through all this, the father struggled to continue in business, partly sustained by the real estate holdings and financial interests of Brown's maternal aunt, Elizabeth Armitt.

Brown's older brothers Joseph and James, and the youngest brother, Elijah, Jr.—like the Thetford brothers in this novel—were import-export merchants who bought interest shares in ocean ventures as early as the 1780s. Joseph traveled frequently to

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[1] Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution*, provides the numbers we use here, that is, five brothers and two sisters who survived to adulthood, plus three siblings who died at birth or in early infancy (45, 210, n36, 221, n25).

[2] See the accounts of Brown family business interests in Warfel, *Charles Brockden Brown,* 16–18, 23, 204; Clark, *Charles Brockden Brown*, 108–09, 194–95; and Kafer, 26–37, 45–46, 162, 214, n15.

[3] Kafer, 30–32. The Townshend Acts (1767) were an attempt to tax imports to the British North American colonies that aroused widespread colonial resistance and anger; they constitute a significant element of the context that led to the American Revolution ten years later. Smuggling and other forms of resistance to the acts were common.

the Caribbean, Northwestern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Levant to oversee his shipping interests; he died in Flanders in 1807 on one of these voyages.[4] Charles himself became a reluctant partner in the family import-export firm, James Brown and Co., from late 1800 (just as he was finishing *Second Part*) to the firm's dissolution in 1806. Brown's brother Armitt also worked in key financial and banking institutions, first in the Treasury Department (where he was a clerk for Alexander Hamilton in the early 1790s) and later at the Bank of Pennsylvania. Thus *Arthur Mervyn*'s detailed backdrop concerning colonial trade networks and the culture of commerce—inheritances lost and disputed, debt and bankruptcy imprisonment, risky export investments, long-distance credit transfers and banking practices, and revolutionary era trade restrictions and insurance technicalities—are drawn not just from Brown's wider knowledge of the world around him, but also from his own family business background and first-hand experience.

Although his family intended for him to become a lawyer, Brown abandoned his Philadelphia law apprenticeship in 1793 and moved toward the circle of young, New York-based intellectuals who helped launch his literary career and, with Brown as one of their group, enacted progressive Enlightenment ideals of conversation, intellectual inquiry, and companionship.[5] The key figure in this group was Elihu Hubbard Smith (1771–1798), a Yale-educated physician who met Brown in Philadelphia in 1790 and played a crucial role in encouraging his literary ambitions. Aspects of Smith's life, including his efforts to treat yellow fever victims and progressive political and social ideas, figure as models for characters and events in this and several other Brown novels. Smith was an abolitionist and deist dedicated to progressive sociopolitical engagement.[6] His early death occurred while he and Brown were sharing an apartment and helping treat yellow fever victims during the New York yellow fever epidemic of 1798.

The New York group included a number of young male professionals who called themselves The Friendly Club along with female relatives and friends who were equally invested in progressive intellectual exchange and enlightened models for

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[4] Warfel, 16–18.

[5] For discussions of this circle, see Waterman, *Republic of Intellect:* and Teute, "A 'Republic of Intellect'" and "The Loves of the Plants." The diaries of William Dunlap and Elihu Hubbard Smith provide detailed records of Brown's activities and relations within this circle.

[6] Deism was a progressive eighteenth-century response to Christianity. It affirmed the existence of a "supreme being" but rejected revelation, supernatural doctrines, and any notion of divine intervention in human affairs. Reason and science, rather than scripture and dogma, were the basis for religious belief. Late eighteenth-century writers often adopted a deistic stance as part of their general secular and rationalist critique of earlier institutions. Deism was associated with "natural religion" and the well-known metaphor of the deity as a "clock-maker" who creates the universe but makes no further intervention in it. Many leaders of the American revolutionary generation were deists, notably Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. See Walters, *Rational Infidels: The American Deists.*

same-sex and other-sex companionship. This progressive model of companionship based on "reason and desire"[7] expressed through a "republic of letters" is a crucial context for Brown's astonishing burst of novel writing between 1798 and 1801. As one of this circle, Brown developed his knowledge of like-minded British radical-democratic writers of the period—above all William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (whose books were already in Brown's household as a youth, before he met Smith)—as well as medical and physiological knowledges drawn from the Scottish Enlightenment (notably Erasmus Darwin), the French Naturalists, and other streams of Enlightenment thought. The circle was committed to abolitionist activism and many of the male members of the group were officers in abolition societies.[8] The circle's interest in similar groups of progressive British thinkers was strong enough that they established contact through correspondence with scientist Erasmus Darwin (via Smith), novelist Thomas Holcroft, and Godwin himself (via Dunlap and Godwin's ward Thomas Cooper, an actor who emigrated to the U.S. and moved in Brown's circles). Thus Brown's interest in European developments led him to participate in a network of like-minded endeavors, but his progressive, modernizing ideals meant that he felt little or no need to emulate Europe or the past as a superior culture.

If Brown's intellectual circle in New York constitutes one part of the context for his burst of novel writing, the other crucial element in this context is the explosive political atmosphere of the revolutionary 1790s as it culminated in the antirevolutionary backlash of 1797–1800. July 1793 to July 1794, the time period of this novel's action, was a crucial moment in the interrelated processes of the French Revolution (1789–1798), the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), and events leading to the Irish uprisings of 1796–1798. Refugees from these revolutionary events filled the streets of 1790s Philadelphia and New York with émigrés of every stripe and color, from Royalist French aristocrats and planters from the Caribbean fleeing ongoing revolutions to enslaved "French negroes" or "wild Irish" revolutionary activists and intellectuals. By the end of the decade a severe reaction against the progressive ideals of the revolutionary era spread through the Atlantic world and was especially powerful in England, Germany, and the recently formed United States. During the administration of the second U.S. president, John Adams (1796–1800), the ruling Federalist party presided over an authoritarian, partisan response to real and imagined threats of revolutionary subversion and potential conflict with France.[9] Enacting the now-infamous Alien and Sedition Acts (1798), for example, Federalists made it illegal to criticize the Adams administration and legitimated the arrest and deportation of those deemed "dangerous" state enemies (i.e., French and Irish radicals). Paranoid

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[7] Teute, "The Loves of the Plants."

[8] See "Three Abolitionist Addresses from Brown's Circle" and excerpts from Brown's "On the Consequences of Abolishing the Slave Trade to the West Indian Colonies" in this volume's Related Texts.

[9] See the discussions of this backlash and its implications in Cotlar, "The Federalists' Transatlantic Cultural Offensive of 1798"; Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism*; Miller, *Crisis in Freedom: The Alien and Sedition Acts;* and Elkins and McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism*.

countersubversive fantasies about conspiracies led by mysterious groups like the Illuminati (a European secret society ostensibly plotting to overthrow Christian government), as well as elite panic about newly articulated ideals of universal democracy, including female equality and slave emancipation, contributed to this crisis.[10] Although these excesses led to the Federalists' defeat and the election of their Democratic-Republican opponent Jefferson in the 1800 election that occurred just weeks after the appearance of *Second Part*, the larger early romantic, culturally conservative wave announced by this convulsion put an end to the revolutionary era and laid the foundations for the more staid cultural order of the early nineteenth century. The many slaves, bound servants, free blacks, and laboring-class whites who figure for the most part namelessly throughout *Arthur Mervyn* embody the period's tectonic shift toward new modes of class and ethno-racial social organization. Arthur Mervyn himself, as a disinherited Scots-Irish youth who survives exposure to the city's mercantile corruption and fever before ending as a future doctor engaged to a Jewish refugee from revolutionary turmoil, embodies Brown's intervention in debates about the possible futures of U.S. society in the revolutionary aftermath.

Brown's efforts to establish himself as a writer were impressive indeed. After several years of experimentation with literary narratives that remained unfinished, Brown's novelistic phase began with the 1798 feminist dialogue *Alcuin* and continued unabated through the composition of eight novels by late 1801. In addition to these novels, Brown was editing the New York *Monthly Magazine* and publishing numerous essays, tales, and reviews. As noted earlier, the four "gothic" novels for which Brown is best known—*Wieland, Ormond, Arthur Mervyn*, and *Edgar Huntly*—were all published between September 1798 and September 1799 (*Second Part* appeared in September 1800), and there was a period in 1798 when all four were underway at once. Although Cold War era commentators often presented Brown as a writer who renounces his literary and progressive political ideals when he stops publishing novels in 1801, a more plausible explanation for his subsequent shift toward other forms of writing is that his novels did not make money, the particular conditions that fueled the intense novelistic burst from 1798 to 1801 changed (who could sustain such a rhythm of production?), and he became interested in new literary outlets. Like his older counterpart Godwin in England, Brown moves away from the novel because he feels it no longer offers an effective mode of argumentation in the increasingly conservative cultural and political environment that emerges after 1800. Had Brown lived longer, he might conceivably have returned to novel writing, as Godwin did in the later 1810s.

Brown's later literary career builds continuously on the novels and earlier writings. Between 1801 and his death from tuberculosis in 1810, Brown edited two important periodicals: *The Literary Magazine* (1803–1807)—a literary and cultural miscellany

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[10] On the countersubversive fantasies that were a basic element of this crisis, see Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*; Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style"; and White, "The Value of Conspiracy Theory."

that renewed his experience with the earlier *Monthly Magazine* and that he filled with his own essays and fiction—and *The American Register* (1807–1809), a historical and political periodical that featured Brown's "Annals of Europe and America," a comprehensive narrative of Napoleonic-era geopolitics. In addition, he undertook a novel-length, experimental historical fiction known as *The Historical Sketches* (1803–1806) that was published posthumously, a now-lost play, and several lengthy, quasinovelistic pamphlets on expansion into the Louisiana territory and Jefferson's embargo policies (1803, 1809). These writings continue Brown's career-long concern with the link between historical and fictional ("romance") writing, and extend the earlier program of "reason and desire" that makes writing an instrument of progressive, educational principles in the public sphere. Rather than dramatizing the ways individuals are shaped by social pressures and crisis contexts, as he did in his novels, the later Brown explores forms of historical narrative and the larger historical world that made up the allusive backdrop of the earlier fiction. The critical perspective on global webs of imperial commerce, colonialism, and slavery that figures behind the frauds and fortunes of *Arthur Mervyn*, for example, becomes explicit and is explored in detail in the later histories and essays.

The Woldwinite Writers and Brown's Novelistic Method

The world of Brown's novels, with their gothic emotional intensities, disorienting psychosocial violence, and imbedded backstories and subplots, may be difficult to sort out on first encounter. Understanding some basics about Brown's primary intellectual and political sources and his well-defined novelistic method, however, can help the reader understand features of his novels that might otherwise seem difficult to grasp.

  Unlike many authors of eighteenth-century fiction, Brown had a well-developed methodology and set of themes for writing novels. His method draws on and further develops the ideas of the British radical-democratic writers of the period. Brown's enthusiastic reception of these Woldwinite[11] ("Anglo-Jacobin") writers—above all Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Thomas Holcroft, Robert Bage, Helen Maria Williams, and Thomas Paine—undergirds his entire literary project after the

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[11] We use the term "Woldwinite" to highlight, through an abbreviation of Wollstonecraft and Godwin, this group's special place among the British radical democrats of the 1790s. The term "Godwinians" erases the crucial role of Wollstonecraft and other women in this group, a role that was particularly important for Brown and many other writers. Similarly, these British writers are also discussed as "Jacobins" or "Anglo-Jacobins," a name used by opponents to link them to the most authoritarian and partisan faction of the French Revolution, but the group explicitly rejected the "Jacobin" position in favor of its own distinct set of cultural-political positions. For studies of literary Woldwinism, see: Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel;* Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel 1780–1805* and *English Fiction of the Romantic Period, 1789–1830;* Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas;* and J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800.*

mid-1790s. The British "Dissenter" culture of highly educated middle-class professionals and the clubs and academies from which these writers emerged was the wider context of Brown's own Philadelphia Quaker community. Brown was exposed to the Woldwinite writers through his father's copies of their works even before he moved into the New York circle and explored their writings in greater detail.[12]

   The Woldwinite agenda rests on three basic arguments that draw together the main strands of knowledge and critique in the late, radical Enlightenment. Drawing on well-established eighteenth-century arguments and themes, such as associative sentiment (the idea that emotions are communicated from one individual to another and may be used to encourage constructive, progressive behavior), these arguments sum up this group's rejection of the pre-revolutionary order, and their conviction that social progress may be achieved by altering dominant ways of thinking through peaceful cultural means such as literature. First, the social order of the old regime (monarchy and feudalism) is to be rejected because it is artificial and illegitimate, violating the natural equality of humanity by imposing coercive hierarchies of caste and faith. Second, given that the old regime maintained its domination through an obscurantist mythology of territorialized race, priestly tricks, and a politics of secret plots, conspiracies, and lies, a new social order will require the development of more rational, constructive, and transparent institutions and practices. Third, the illustration of progressive behavior in print and other media will multiply to generate larger social transformation because society works through chains of associative sentiment and emulation. These cultural relays will generate progressive change since the illustration of virtuous behaviors and results will spread through imitation, as each person learns new and improved ways of acting by observing others. Proceeding from these assumptions, the Woldwinites' critique leads to their antistatism, their distrust of institutions, and their use of cultural forms such as literature to advance their program. Because they believed in the natural propulsion of cooperative behavior and the guidance of critical reason, these writers see social change as resulting from the amplification of transformed local, interpersonal or intersubjective relations. Thus, as we say today, the personal is political.

   In their assumption that global historical change begins from the bottom up with the premeditated transformation of relations among a small circle, the Woldwinites are an early instance of cultural avant-gardism that aims to develop means of worldly social revolution through arts and manners rather than political parties or state institutions. In contemporary terms, the Woldwinites introduce a relatively straightforward, albeit limited, idea of environmental or social construction, the notion that individuals are shaped or conditioned by their social environments and circumstances. Their ideas about social construction are limited in that they position themselves as innocent participants and do not always recognize the dilemmas implicit in their own social program (particularly its assumptions about sentiment, benevolence,

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[12] For the Woldwinite writings in Brown's household, see Warfel, 17–18, 27; Clark, 16; Kafer, 46, 66–72.

and associative imitation) and insofar as they direct their critique mainly at the hierarchical inequalities of the old regime while neglecting the emergent structures of liberal capitalism. Brown adopts their environmentalist argument but also, as a second-wave Woldwinite, recognizes that their ideas about social construction and action are incomplete. His fiction attempts to think through these limitations and their implications in ways that we will explore in greater detail when we turn to the plot of *Arthur Mervyn* in what follows.

   Building on these basic Woldwinite ideas, Brown's fictional method is articulated in several key essays on narrative technique and the social role of the novel that appear at the height of his novelistic phase, most notably "Walstein's School of History" (August–September 1799) and "The Difference between History and Romance" (April 1800).[13] To summarize this method, we can say that Brown's novels combine elements of history and fiction, placing his characters in situations of social and historical distress as a means of engaging a wider audience with considerations of progressive behavior. His novels explore how common, disempowered subjects such as Arthur Mervyn respond to damaging social conditions caused by defects in dominant ideas and practices. Through their interconnected patterns of socially conditioned behavior, dramatic suspense, and gothic intensities, Brown's fictions urge readers to reflect on how to overcome corruption in order to construct a more "virtuous," more equal and fulfilling society.

   This approach begins with Brown's understanding of the relation between historical and fictional ("romance") writing. History and fiction, he argues, are not different because one deals with factual and the other with fictional materials. Rather, they are intrinsically connected as two sides of one coin: history describes and documents the results of actions, while fiction investigates the possible motives and circumstances that cause these actions. Fictions are thus narrative experiments that tease out possible preconditions for historical events or behaviors and that reason through social problems presented as hypothetical situations; they are a form of conjectural or counterfactual history. Whereas history describes events, romance analyzes and projects the probable causes, conditions, and preconditions of events. The "Walstein" essay builds on this distinction and develops a threefold plan for novel writing, providing a fuller account of the rationale and essential themes that inform Brown's fiction. Indeed, "Walstein" is keyed directly to *Arthur Mervyn* and provides implicit commentary on it. The essay's closing paragraphs illustrate Brown's method with a thinly disguised plot outline for *Mervyn*'s first part. The historian Walstein combines history and romance in such a way as to promote "moral and political" engagement while rejecting universal truths, stressing the situatedness of engaged political response in noble and classical figures such as the Roman statesman Cicero. Walstein's pupil Engel then modernizes and develops the theory by adding that a romance, to be effective in today's world, must be addressed to a wide popular audience and draw its characters not from the elite but from the same lower-status groups that will read

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[13] These essays are included in this volume's Related Texts.

and be moved by the work. History and romance alike must address issues and situations familiar to their modern audience, notably the common inequalities arising from relations of sex and property. Thus a modern literature will insert ordinary individuals like Arthur Mervyn, rather than elite actors like Cicero, into crisis situations in which they must negotiate contemporary conflicts involving money and erotic desire or gender relations. Finally, a thrilling style and form are crucial, since a romance capable of moving its audience to considerations of progressive action must, as Brown writes, "be so arranged as to inspire, at once, curiosity and belief, to fasten the attention, and thrill the heart." In this manner, Brown's method uses the twists and turns of his plots, and dramatic settings such as yellow fever epidemics, as ways to illustrate and think through interrelated social problems and encourage an engaged response to them.

Woldwinite Perspectives in *Arthur Mervyn*

Brown's use of Woldwinite ideas is particularly evident in *Arthur Mervyn*, for this novel (or "romance," to be precise) highlights plot points and arguments openly drawn from the group's two best-known fictions, William Godwin's *Things as They Are; or The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) and Thomas Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives* (1792). From *Caleb Williams*, Brown takes the tale of a secretary who finds that his investigation into the mysterious criminality of Falkland, his noble employer, leads to his own implication in deceit, to his subsequent incrimination, and to his being relentlessly pursued; the ensuing series of adventures provides a socially progressive exposé of inequality and political problems in England. From *Anna St. Ives*, Brown takes a socially progressive misalliance—a romance between an upper-class woman and a plebian man—as well as the dramatic decision to burn forged money. *Arthur Mervyn*'s relation to Godwin's fiction has long been recognized, but the relation to Holcroft is equally significant. In the period preceding Godwin's seminal publication of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* (1793), the most complete statement of Woldwinite principles, he and Holcroft had intensive discussions that were crucial in the development of that landmark work. Since Godwin himself recognized Holcroft's romance as an earlier fictional emplotting of the political science he was about to summarize in the *Enquiry*, Godwin's treatise may also be read as an attempt to systematize the ideas first portrayed in *Anna St. Ives*. That book's plot revolves around the successful attempt by Anna St. Ives, the daughter of the manor, and Frank Henley, the gardener's son, to overcome the class prejudice that would prevent their marriage, the demonic machinations of her libertine aristocrat brother, and the grasping avarice of Henley's father. Almost literally talking each other into having the confidence to break through obsolete, yet still-powerful barriers of status difference, Anna and Frank express rationalized desire for each other and insist that the marriage of two virtuous people can provide a beacon for emulation and function as a first step toward a generally more perfect civil society. Holcroft's tale expresses a generally optimistic belief that conversational

sincerity among friends can transform negative erotic passion into a socially productive performance and that a small cultural vanguard can catalyze larger historical transformation in ways that political economy and legislation cannot.

Although Brown's novels and their endings are usually relatively pessimistic or critical in tone, *Arthur Mervyn* provides the exception to this rule with a positive resolution that seems to affirm Holcroft and Godwin's earlier faith in the possibility of progressive change. *Arthur Mervyn*'s plot ends with the ribald foreshadowing of sexual union between Arthur and the heiress Achsa Fielding, an ending that is markedly different from the moody tone of anomie and marginalization that closes Brown's other tales. The other novels, from *Wieland* (August 1798) to *Jane Talbot* (December 1801), present these kinds of personal and social outcomes in far more troubling terms. Seen in the context of his other fictions, then, *Arthur Mervyn* relies on the behavioral predicates of Woldwinite thinking even more clearly than its companion novels, as Brown crafts a tale that is remarkably positive about the central character's ability to flourish, learn, and provide worthy models for emulation.

As suggested in the "Walstein's School" essay, Brown presents *Arthur Mervyn* as a tale about an untutored individual's response to a socially corrupt environment, following the Woldwinite slogan that humans are mainly conditioned by their social context rather than individual inclinations or inherited traits. Mervyn begins the novel as a disinherited Scots-Irish youth who enters the commercial city, survives the challenges of yellow fever and mercantile deceit, decides to become a physician and help those around him, and finally marries and looks forward to his future as a member of the professional classes. Although one generation of literary critics, trained within a modernist dedication to plumbing the psychic depths of literary characters, devoted great energy to evaluating the relative authenticity of Mervyn's inner self as he negotiates Philadelphia's cultural landscape,[14] Brown, as he makes clear, is not primarily interested in psychologizing or epistemological kinds of questions. We might say that, rather than understanding social structures by reference to problematic individual perceptions, Brown clarifies problematic individual perceptions by reference to social structures. The novel's characters are mainly bearers of social positions, and their often unstable mental processes are the results of manifold pressures and "circumstances," as the Woldwinites might put it, bearing down upon them. Mervyn, for example, is quite literally stripped down and disoriented as he enters Philadelphia so that Brown can dramatize the ways that social pressures and crises will shape and challenge him. The enlightened, and notably female-centric, circle of women and men that Mervyn builds around him as he labors to help others in the *Second Part* is

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[14] Cold War era discussions focusing on Mervyn's authenticity (with the implication that Brown is emphasizing psychologistic or skeptical epistemological models) include Warner Berthoff, "Adventures of the Young Man: An Approach to Charles Brockden Brown" (1957); Brancaccio, "Studied Ambiguity: *Arthur Mervyn* and the Problem of the Unreliable Narrator" (1970); Russo, "The Chameleon of Convenient Vice: A Study of the Narrative of *Arthur Mervyn*" (1974); Bell, "'The Double-Tongued Deceiver': Sincerity and Duplicity in the Novels of Charles Brockden Brown" (1974); and Elliott, "Narrative Unity and Moral Resolution in *Arthur Mervyn*" (1981).

precisely the kind of forward-looking group working to overcome obsolete social distinctions that Brown and his friends learned about and themselves enacted in their activities during the 1790s. The way Brown explains the fictional origins of the narrative (at the end of Chapter II.22), which is organized by the frame narrator Dr. Stevens for the first three-fourths of the novel and subsequently by Mervyn beginning in Chapter II.16, makes the novel itself an exemplary production of such enlightened modes of cooperation, designed, in the manner described in "Walstein's School of History," to encourage further emulation and public awareness of the problems it addresses.

Fever and Urban Crisis

Arthur Mervyn's best-known feature is its representation of the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of August–October 1793, which appears in Chapters 15–23 of the novel's first part and is closely related to the novel's influential depiction of the city's dense urban landscape. The novel follows the epidemic's timeline and urban topography precisely, from its beginnings in Water Street by the city's wharves in mid-August to its peak mortality rate of over one hundred deaths a day around October 9–13, the moment when Mervyn returns to the city to search for Wallace in Chapter 15. These chapters and the rest of the novel provide carefully chosen glimpses of particular aspects of the epidemic, such as the work of free blacks as nurses and undertakers or the emergency Bush-Hill hospital, which was organized in September as civil order broke down and thousands of refugees fled the city.[15] In connection with the emphasis on Caribbean commerce and slave revolt that runs through the novel's backstories, the novel alludes to particular Caribbean physicians who played significant roles in debates over fever treatment and the public response to the emergency, such as Jean Devèze and Edward Stevens, the likely source of the name that Brown introduces in Chapter 4 of *Second Part* for the novel's frame narrator.[16] The novel's depiction of the fever was sufficiently notable for contemporaries that it prompted

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[15] For general accounts of the epidemic, see Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793*; and the web-based resources in Arnebeck, *Destroying Angel: Benjamin Rush, Yellow Fever and the Birth of Modern Medicine* (www.geocities.com/bobarnebeck/fever1793.html). For historical discussions of the fever's social and political implications, see the essays in Estes and Smith, eds., *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*; Kornfield, "Crisis in the Capital: The Cultural Significance of Philadelphia's Great Yellow Fever Epidemic"; and Taylor, *"We Live in the Midst of Death": Yellow Fever, Moral Economy, and Public Health in Philadelphia, 1793–1805.*

[16] Since the historical Dr. Edward Stevens was appointed U.S. Consul to Haiti in early 1799, timing suggests that his reemergence on the public scene at that juncture was a factor in Brown's use of this name in *Second Part* (September 1800). On Edward Stevens, see Day, *Edward Stevens*, and Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*. On Jean Devèze, see Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead* and Arnebeck, *Destroying Angel*.

journalist Mathew Carey, author of the most popular account of the epidemic (see the excerpts from Carey in this volume's Related Texts), to write that *Arthur Mervyn* "gives a vivid and terrifying picture, probably not too highly coloured, of the horrors of that period" and later served as a model for Mary Shelley's depiction of an apocalyptic plague in her novel *The Last Man* (1826; Shelley had previously turned to Brown before beginning *Frankenstein* in 1818).[17]

In considering the fever's place in the novel, it is important to bear in mind that these well-known chapters take on their full significance in connection with the novel's underlying concerns with commercial corruption, Caribbean slave revolution and abolition, and the larger social transformations of the revolutionary 1790s. As Shelley understood, fever figures in *Arthur Mervyn* as a dramatic condensation of the period's multifaceted experience of social crisis and transformation. It constitutes a spectacular crisis context in which Brown dramatizes the effects of social behaviors and institutions.[18] The disease had great social and political consequences in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, especially as it devastated imperial armies attempting to regain control over valuable sugar colonies after the Haitian Revolution, and Brown and his circle were well-read in the period's literature on it. Brown himself lived through several epidemics and survived the disease when he caught it in August 1798, during the same New York epidemic that killed his close friend Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith and associate Dr. Giambattista Scandella, whom Brown memorializes as the heroic Maravegli in Chapter 16 of *Arthur Mervyn.* Brown likely began composition of the novel's fever scenes shortly after his 1798 experience of the disease, and earlier that same year he had already begun a series of narratives, which would culminate in *Arthur Mervyn*, that emphasize yellow fever epidemics as dramatic settings.[19]

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[17] For more on Mary Shelley's response to Brown, see Shapiro, "I Could Kiss Him One Minute and Kill Him the Next!"; and Steinman, "Transatlantic Cultures: Godwin, Brown, and Mary Shelley."

[18] Numerous later writers have used the 1793 epidemic in related ways, up to and including a recent spate of narratives and children's stories published at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Recent treatments generally focus on the epidemic's significance as a watershed moment for the Philadelphia free black community, part of the context for the emergence of the first African American public institutions. Most notable are John Edgar Wideman's fictions: the story collection *Fever* (1989), the novel *The Cattle Killing* (1996), and the related story "Ascent by Balloon from the Yard of Walnut Street Jail" (1996), all of which explore the moment's significance for African American experience. The recent emergence of children's narratives about the epidemic is a related phenomenon. See Ellen Norman Stern, *The French Physician's Boy; a Story of Philadelphia's 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic* (2001; fictionalizing the story of David Nassy, a Sephardic Caribbean doctor who worked in Philadelphia during the epidemic); Laurie Halse Anderson, *Fever 1793* (2002); and Jim Murphy, *An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793* (2003).

[19] Brown's interrelated fever narratives, all from 1798–1799, are the essay series "The Man at Home" (February–April 1798), the novel *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (January 1799), and *Arthur Mervyn's* first part (March or April 1799). The eleventh installment of "The Man at Home," later republished as "Pestilence and Bad Government Compared," is a separate fever narrative distinct from the larger fever setting of the series in which it appears and is included in the Related

Although the actual cause and nature of yellow fever were not understood at this time (scientific understanding of the fever was established only in the early twentieth century), the disease itself is a viral hemorrhagic fever carried by *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, a plague that probably entered Atlantic culture with the African slave trade that figures in so many of this novel's backstories. Late-summer yellow fever epidemics were a periodic feature of life in North American cities at this time, but the 1793 Philadelphia episode became the best known and most frequently invoked of all in American accounts.[20] This was partly because of its sheer magnitude and devastation (about 5,000 died, and about 17,000 fled the city, whose population was roughly 55,000 at that time)[21] but also, just as importantly, because it became a flashpoint for struggle over the function of public institutions (such as the hospitals and prisons depicted in *Arthur Mervyn*) and over attitudes about race, class, and immigration that intersected with the period's partisan anxieties. Because the disease's etiology and transmission by mosquitoes were not yet understood, for example, many debates racialized the fever, supposing that its nature and virulence varied according to race and that Africans were less susceptible than Europeans. A variant xenophobic fantasy even speculated that the French might be less susceptible than Anglos and other Protestant Europeans. The city's free blacks were on the front lines of emergency care, often pressed into service as nurses and undertakers on the mistaken assumption that they were immune to contagion. The arguments in this volume's Related Texts from Mathew Carey's popular account of the fever and from the reply to his racialization of the debate by African American ministers Absalom Jones and Richard Allen are now frequently studied elements of the contemporary literature.

Early debates about the origin of the fever were almost immediately politicized: a xenophobic contagion school believed the fever was contagious and resulted from the importation of infected goods and French, African, and other "foreigners," while a miasma (or environmental) school recognized that the fever was not contagious and argued that it was caused by poor urban design and hygiene. Scientifically speaking, both were far from the mark but partly accurate in intuitive terms. The mosquitoes that carry the disease were transported by shipping vessels from the Caribbean; but since the disease is not contagious and mosquitoes require warm stagnant water for breeding, the city's filthy docks, abysmal hygienic conditions, and late summer heat created ideal conditions for the outbreak. Similarly, ongoing debates about different approaches to medical treatment (between advocates of vigorous purging and

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Texts here. For a summary of the available information on Brown's experience of the fever and its relation to the composition of *Arthur Mervyn*, see Grabo, "Historical Essay."

[20] The 1793 Philadelphia event was the worst of many on the U.S. Atlantic seaboard during these years (Philadelphia 1793, 1797, 1798, 1799, 1802; New York 1791, 1795, 1798, 1805; Baltimore 1794; New Haven 1794; Boston 1798).

[21] Statistics concerning the 1793 epidemic vary significantly in different sources; we use numbers from Estes and Smith, *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation.*

bloodletting versus a rest-and-fluids school) became highly partisanized and led to widely publicized libel and malpractice suits after a later 1798 outbreak.[22]

  In addition to medically focused concerns, innovative responses to the public care emergency created by the epidemic had other important sociopolitical implications. As Brown suggests with the novel's interrelated subplots, efforts to cope with the emergency on all levels took place within the larger revolution-driven context of the year 1793, when Philadelphia was receiving large numbers of refugees from the French and Haitian Revolutions. The private property of a Loyalist was seized by an ad hoc committee of previously marginalized merchants and craftsmen to set up a hospital, the Bush-Hill facility, dramatized in the novel's Chapter 18. The laboring poor and nonwhites who could not afford to flee both used the crisis context to exert newly found collective authority in the absence of city elites, and died and suffered at far higher rates than the gentry elite who routinely waited out yellow fever epidemics in their country homes. The power vacuum that was created when the local, state, and national governments adjourned and abandoned the capital in early September, as the epidemic reached crisis proportions, gave political have-nots and previously marginalized class, trade, and ethno-racial groups sudden political opportunities to assert themselves in ways that were hitherto unavailable in the United States. This is one of the reasons that 1793 was also a year that saw the rise of new Democratic-Republican societies, which played an important role in the decade's subsequent political landscape.[23] George Lesher, for example, owner of the tavern that Mervyn visits in Chapter 3 on his first arrival in the city, was a well-known participant in these societies. The breakdown of civil order and social debates that occurred during the Philadelphia epidemic did not match the political turbulence of the French Revolution and Terror (1793 saw the executions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and the September 1793–July 1794 period of the "Reign of Terror" corresponds closely to the novel's July 1793–July 1794 time frame) or the Haitian violence that drove thousands of planters to flee that colony with black and mixed-race companions, servants, and slaves. However, the multiple struggles connected with this yellow fever epidemic are also distant parts of the same Atlantic waves of class, race, and ideological conflict that had their epicenters in these other sources of turmoil. Beyond the immediate and clinical dimensions of the epidemic, it is these wider social

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[22] On the politicization of fever debates, see Pernick, "Politics, Parties, and Pestilence: Epidemic Yellow Fever in Philadelphia and the Rise of the First Party System"; Miller, "Passions and Politics: The Multiple Meanings of Benjamin Rush's Treatment for Yellow Fever"; and the other essays included in Estes and Smith, eds., *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation.* The polemical Nones-Gazette exchange included in the Related Texts contains echoes of these fever-related libel suits and pamphlet wars.

[23] The Nones-Gazette exchange included in this volume's Related Texts takes place around racially charged responses to a Democratic-Republican Society meeting. On the ad hoc committees and extragovernmental efforts to cope with the breakdown of civil institutions, see Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead.* For the emergence of the democratic clubs, see Foner, *The Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790–1800;* and Koschnik, "The Democratic Societies of Philadelphia and the Limits of the American Public Sphere, circa 1793–1795."

struggles and "mysteries" of early U.S. and Atlantic social order that are literalized in the novel's presentation of the fever, for example when Mervyn is struck on the head by a mysterious black figure in a mirror scene in Chapter 16, which underlines the racial components and tensions of U.S. identity categories, or when the contagionist-environmentalist debate is explained to Mervyn by the enlightened character Medlicote in the first part's Chapter 18.[24] Seen from this perspective, Mervyn's decision to become a doctor and his ongoing medical training in *Second Part* are only the most evident aspect of his response to the fever and of the novel's engagement with the events of 1793.

The Vice of Commerce, the Heart of the City

Given the prevalence of fraud, vengeful creditors, and a range of mercantile concerns throughout the novel, it is not difficult to see that the underlying social malady that surfaces during the fever is corruption tied to commerce.[25] The early modern rise and revaluation of commerce—making a once-marginalized and suspect dimension of the social order into the central concern and structuring principle of the modern state—is a frequently told story and a crucial context for understanding *Arthur Mervyn.* Throughout the eighteenth century, writers and academics increasingly revalued commerce, providing new arguments about its nature and implications, and Brown's novel responds to these debates on several levels. At the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of the early modern period, commerce was generally viewed with suspicion and conceptualized with ancient ideas from Greco-Roman antiquity and the early Christian tradition. Although it was functionally and pragmatically clear that mercantile commerce was increasingly necessary for modernizing societies—monarchies and the Catholic church alike required the revenues that the merchant class generated and managed, if only to underwrite their internecine wars and imperial adventures—nevertheless in a doctrinal or "official" sense commercial institutions and practices were still considered morally questionable and culturally foreign to the late feudal order that prevailed up to the age of revolution in the late eighteenth century. The outsider status of merchants was amplified when early modern commerce utilized the kinds of long-distance networks maintained by religious

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[24] On the first part's twinned mirror scenes and their relation to the novel's wider concern with race and masculinist civic identity, see Smith-Rosenberg, "Black Gothic: The Shadowy Origins of the American Bourgeoisie."

[25] For perspectives on the novel's focus on commerce and corruption, see Baker, *Securing the Commonwealth: Debt, Speculation, and Writing in the Making of Early America*; Cohen, "*Arthur Mervyn* and His Elders: The Ambivalence of Youth in the Early Republic"; Hinds, *Private Property: Charles Brockden Brown's Gendered Economics of Virtue*; Samuels, "Plague and Politics in 1793: *Arthur Mervyn*"; Smith-Rosenberg, "Black Gothic"; Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*; and Weyler, *Intricate Relations: Sexual and Economic Desire in American Fiction, 1789–1814*.

and ethnic trading "nations" such as Jews and Armenians, communities whose very disadvantages—their political marginalization (outside the nation-state) and far-flung geographical exile and dispersal—worked to advantage when their family-based networks allowed them to safeguard the flow of money, credit, and commodities between distant regions.

By the eighteenth century, the social groups most closely associated with trade were coalescing to form a more self-aware commercial urban middle class, the bourgeoisie (derived from *bourg* or burgh, for "town").[26] As the early bourgeoisie gained prominence, it increasingly sought to replace older and mainly disapproving ideas and language concerning commerce with newer and more positive frames so as to lend commerce greater legitimacy and social status and to use ethical assumptions about marketplace behavior as a means of securing commodity and credit transfers in an age that still lacked strong national and international laws for policing and protecting trade. The steady efforts of representative bourgeois figures such as Benjamin Franklin, the most iconic early American booster of commercial society, gradually revised prevailing ideas about commerce to present it as a positive, modernizing force that could replace the "old regime" with forward-looking, presumably more egalitarian social energies and principles. In short, one of the great transformations of Brown's era was to legitimate commerce as a basic feature of the social order, transforming an age-old suspicion of moneymaking into a wholehearted celebration of its potential to generate new values and social relations. It is only after the revolutionary age that moneymaking has generally been regarded in Western societies as a "good" and honorable thing and that the forces involved in commerce have become conceptualized in political and cultural doctrines as liberalism, "possessive individualism," and so on.

A key aspect of this proliferating defense of commerce was the claim that while individual men may be harmfully selfish or greedy, the *collective* or overall result of commerce is to increase social fairness, harmony, and moral advancement. Many writers put forward aspects of these claims, but the Edinburgh writers of the "Scottish School," such as Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, were especially influential in shaping these arguments into what, by the end of the century, began to appear as a coherent common sense. Ferguson, in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), argues that human social development can be divided into ascending stages, from savagery and barbarism to civilization. The highest, "civilized" stage is commercial society because commerce epitomizes the evolution from a violence-based system of dominating concrete territory and property to a more advanced or "polite" form of social intercourse organized by a "moral community" of traders who trust one another, peacefully circulating intangible goods like credit. Because the nature of commerce and finance relies on virtual goods that cannot be forcibly handled (abstract values notated by money, credit, interest, etc.), commerce depends on inculcating a sense of shame and guilt regarding nonpayment of debts, a new morality that differs

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[26] See Wallerstein, "The Bourgeois(ie) as Concept and Reality."

from the warrior caste's belief that might makes right. For Ferguson, a commercial society run by the middle classes is the most "civilized" type; commercial society is therefore "civil," rather than military-feudal, society.

Adam Smith, still largely considered one of the authoritative writers on free market economics, provides a further explanation for the mechanics of bourgeois society. In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith holds that humans are naturally selfish and that we trade to satisfy our own desires, rather than for any general or common benefit. Yet for us to receive the goods we desire, we must be able to satisfy someone else's desires and convince them to trust and trade with us. As two traders learn that they achieve their own satisfaction only by helping others satisfy their partners in the mutual exchange of goods, they learn to moderate their otherwise aggressive and mistrustful behavior. The marketplace becomes a sphere in which men come together to teach each other how to trade peacefully in ways that are, in principle, different from belligerent exploitation by nobles and priests, whose institutions merely reinforce hierarchy and submission. The marketplace is thus a classroom of pacifism that balances and gradually corrects men's bullying animosity toward one another. Smith famously calls this regulating force the "invisible hand" of the market that trains humans softly, rather than by smacking them into sense. Although many later, neoliberal thinkers claim that Smith legitimates and celebrates a fundamentally individualistic model of competition, such claims profoundly misread his arguments. For eighteenth-century writers, competition is a passion-driven action that should be moderated, not amplified, by the civilizing fellow feeling of commerce. For Smith, Ferguson, and others, mercantile exchange provides both an experience and a model of a more polite and amiable society. In their thinking, each round of successful trade not only leads on to the next but also has a multiplier effect in establishing a larger, peaceful sphere of commerce. Ultimately, in this model, commerce's upward spiral creates a global domain in which the bourgeoisie functions as the dominant force in a new world of internationalized business, displacing the aristocracy and institutional religion, and driving a gradual evolution toward new and better forms of government.

These widely held claims came under attack by the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth. The Scottish thinkers' assumptions about ever-increasing trade and about the market's tendency to regulate itself harmoniously were challenged initially by figures such as Thomas Malthus, and later by utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. These writers claimed that the market's tendency to expand would soon bump up against the limits of natural resources and that the collision between consumer demand and the supply of goods would force negative social changes (an early instance of twenty-first-century concerns about overconsumption and global warming). These post-Smith writers saw crisis and exploitation, rather than cooperation and progress, as the main drivers of sociohistorical change and as the characteristic features of commercial society. Karl Marx, for example, later suggested that modern commerce stems from a desire to accumulate profit through exchange that structurally produces human misery and not, as Smith had argued, from mutually satisfying and cooperative trading. If profits result when

one group (the wealthy bourgeoisie) cheats and exploits another (the wage workers, women, colonial slaves, and other lower-status groups who supply them with labor and a market for their goods), then the expansion of commerce creates new emergencies of survival, not their prevention. In this argument, the nature of commerce further depends on its ever-increasing mysteriousness, which makes the source of profit in exploitative production more difficult to see and understand. For Marx, the invisible hand of the marketplace was the hidden hand of class warfare waged by the very bourgeois who celebrated themselves as peaceful agents of cooperation and progress.

The language of Marx's critique of Smith was, of course, not historically available to Brown. Nevertheless, Brown stands as another early dissenter from the belief systems of Ferguson and Smith, and his arguments connect with those of Marx and other critics of Smith in significant ways. Brown's depiction of a Philadelphia that is profoundly deranged by the activity of its mercantile elites differentiates him from the Woldwinite writers on whom he otherwise depends for arguments concerning social processes and the path toward a more perfect society. Although the careers of the Woldwinite writers coincide with the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, they rarely focus on the mechanics of commercial society.[27] They see the greatest obstacle to the creation of an egalitarian world as the then dominant order of the landed elites and institutionalized religion (nobles and priests, the sword and the cross, what Stendhal calls the red and the black). For example, while Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives* lampoons the entrepreneurial aspirations of Frank Henley's father (the gardener's efforts to get St. Ives to borrow money from him to finance landscaping is presented mainly for comic effect rather than as a substantial concern), the real threat lies with Anna's aristocratic brother and not with the emerging bourgeoisie. Similarly, Caleb Williams in Godwin's novel must fear the gentry landlord Falkland, but not the representatives of rising mercantile forces.

Writing from the social context of 1790s Philadelphia and New York, Brown shifts the Woldwinites' focus on the old aristocracy of landed elites to an examination of the rising merchant elite and new wealth of the early American republic. Rather than dramatizing Mervyn's entry into Philadelphia's world of commerce as an experience of fellow feeling and Franklinesque opportunity, Brown's narrative describes arrival in the city as a disorienting fall into webs of deceit and manipulation. Arriving at night and walking down the iconic thoroughfare of Philadelphia's Market Street in Chapter 3, Mervyn emphasizes gleaming street lamps and other urban improvements that were a point of pride for Benjamin Franklin, who cited their creation as a

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[27] Of the Woldwinites, Mary Wollstonecraft is perhaps the most notable for a concern with speculation, commercial intrigue, and the economic dimensions of the revolution debates of the 1790s; see, for example, the excerpts from her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) in this volume's Related Texts. Thomas Paine's *Agrarian Justice* (1795–1796), his most explicit work on class relations and socioeconomic structures, was also significant for Brown.

civic achievement.[28] The novel presents these lamps and their marketplace setting in a very different manner, however, when Mervyn cites lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost* that describe the blazing lamps of Pandaemonium in Hell and winds up at Lesher's tavern in the city's "Hell-Town" district. When the magical glare of the city's bright lights is examined more closely, Brown seems to suggest, it reveals a self-absorbed and almost demonic underworld. The source of this subterranean vice is the city's merchants, whose business, in this novel, is mainly to devise new ways to defraud each other. While Welbeck's counterfeits and lies in the novel's first part are the most obvious example, the novel as a whole makes it clear that his acts are more routine than not and that merchants like Thetford, or higher agents of commerce such as Old Thetford and Jamieson, in the novel's *Second Part*, are even more dangerous than Welbeck. Mervyn's first encounter with commercial "benevolence," when the clerk Wallace meets him in Lesher's tavern and offers him a meal and a room to sleep in, turns out to be a prank with potentially serious consequences. As Mervyn realizes he has been tricked and locked in a young couple's room in Chapter 4, he narrowly escapes being shot and circumstantially incriminated as a thief. Certainly Mervyn has a talent for getting boxed into situations by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet Brown's Woldwinite belief that human character is created by social circumstances, however, means that the basic problem is not that Mervyn has accidentally met damaged individuals, but that the individuals he meets have been taught to behave in damaged ways because of their social environment.

The immediate victims of commercial misdeeds are the wives and daughters of the commercial class. The novel's women, from Clemenza Lodi to Achsa Fielding, bear the initial burden of mercantile corruption, in the first instance as the ones who are left to pick up the pieces when men go broke, as they often do in this novel. Mercantile lust for goods and profits is literalized in the relentless seduction of women by male merchants, often resulting in illegitimate pregnancy. In the plot's many seductions and pregnancies, women are commonly treated as little more than objects to be consumed, a point Brown underscores in *Second Part* by highlighting recourse to prostitution by the novel's middle-class women. Even in a decade when the best-known American novels focused on related tales of seduction and ruin, this novel is notably replete with repeated episodes of seduction, pregnancy, suicide, and madness, all presented as systemic tragedies tied back to mercantile dynamics.[29]

As historian Fernand Braudel memorably put it: "Towns are like electric transformers. They increase tension, accelerate the rhythm of exchange and constantly

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[28] Franklin discusses the Market Street pavement and street lamps ("the Idea of enlightening all the City") in "Part Three" of the *Autobiography* in the passages around the paragraph beginning "After some time I drew a Bill for Paving the City."

[29] For the "Seduction Novels" of the 1790s, which form the general U.S. novelistic context for this and other novels by Brown, see the discussions in Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*; Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom*; Samuels, *Romances of the Republic*; Stern, *The Plight of Feeling;* and Weyler, *Intricate Relations*.

recharge human life."[30] Implicitly recognizing the urban mechanics of commerce, and linking commerce and its corruption to the representation of modern urban space, *Arthur Mervyn* helps inaugurate the nineteenth-century literary genre of urban gothic, a genre in which the city's superficial chaos makes it initially difficult to perceive its structuring and deeply commercial, systematizing order. Mervyn's experience of commercial vice is also, necessarily, an experience of its urban landscape and spatial networks. One of the novel's most arresting images, Dr. Stevens' reflection in Chapter II.4 on the "horrible corruption" of the body of Captain Watson, buried beneath a Society Hill mansion and encircled by a hidden fortune based on Caribbean slavery, locates this hellish image of commercial vice at the very foundation of the city's elite residential area, in the figural heart of the city. Thus the novel parallels the biological corruption of the fever and the subterranean urban commercial corruption of the Atlantic social order, literalized in the novel's web of streets, basements, mansions, markets, hidden attic spaces, and the wider regional topography that links the city's commerce to worldwide imperial networks. The subsequent tradition of nineteenth-century urban gothic tales—including the sensationalist "boulevard novels" of the 1840s, such as George Lippard's 1844 best seller *The Quaker City, or, The Monks of Monk Hall,* a novel dedicated to and clearly influenced by Brown—often argue that the metropolis' social dysfunction emanates from the covert influence of secret organizations and abnormal vices that infiltrate civil society like a cancerous virus. *Arthur Mervyn*'s complicated set of interweaving backstories certainly makes readers yearn for a master code that could explain the mystery in simple terms of conspiratorial agency or grotesque abnormality. But Brown, like Marx, suggests that the urban hieroglyph is best deciphered by following the money trail to discover that it is the nature of civil society itself, as formed by the commercial classes, that is the source of the social crime the novel registers.[31]

If commercial trust and credit are fragile in *Arthur Mervyn,* the problem lies not in financial instruments or institutions as such but with the men whose behavior ought

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[30] Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th–18th Century, I,* 479.

[31] *Mervyn* the novel and Mervyn the name reappear across the landscape of nineteenth-century literature in allusions and references that suggest that Brown's novel was a significant precedent for later versions of urban gothic. Brown's character is referenced with another "Arthur Mervyn" in Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering* (1815) and with two reformer-and-deist characters, both named "Arthur Dermoyne" in Lippard's *Empire City* (1849–1850) and *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* (1853). The name recurs in Britain in Samuel Carter's "Arthur Mervyn, A Tale of the Peasantry," a long poem of rural dissent set in 1795 that appeared in Carter's *Midnight Effusions* (1848); and Richard Ainsworth's romance *The Life and Adventures of Mervyn Clitheroe* (1851, 1858). In France, the name "Mervyn" makes a notable appearance attached to the naïve youth who is seduced, murdered, and flung across the urban landscape in book 6 of Lautréamont's protosurrealist *Chants of Maldoror* (1868) in scenes that are well known as a landmark avant-garde pastiche and destruction of the century's conventional urban gothic potboilers. Mervyn and Achsa's deflated twentieth-century avatars, urban Woldwinites no longer, are the repulsive suburbanites Achsa and Marvin in "Nude Croquet" (1957), a tale by Leslie Fiedler. For Fiedler's commentary on *Arthur Mervyn,* see his *Love and Death in the American Novel.*

to secure their underlying value.[32] The Woldwinites and Brown did not have a labor theory of value, which sees value as generated by the amount of work invested in the making of a commodity. They did recognize, however, that mediums of money are not the source of wealth but rather annotations or measures of the value of human social relations. When Welbeck convinces Mervyn that a fortune in banknotes has been forged, and then dizzily tries to convince him otherwise in Chapter 23, readers may wonder which statement is true. But from a Woldwinite perspective, the money is fraudulent in either case because its value depends on human reliability and transparency; in a world of deceptive men, there is no such thing as noncounterfeit currency. *Arthur Mervyn* thus charts the correspondence of virtue to value through the mutable characters of Welbeck and the novel's other merchants. When Welbeck floats through the cotillions and counting houses of the mercantile world in part one, he is selfish and destructive. When he falls within the sphere of Mervyn and Stevens, inside the debtor's prison in *Second Part*, Welbeck unexpectedly delivers back to Mervyn the missing bills of credit that Mervyn will return to their owners. From a Woldwinite perspective, the message here is that even the most corrupt individual may be reformed if placed in the proper environment.

Atlantic Slavery, the Crime Committed in Common

Responding to this question about the underlying origin of commercial wealth and behaviors—about "the causes of appearances" that Mervyn contemplates in Chapter 7 as he reflects on his new urban environment—Brown develops his strongest critique of commercial vice by systematically linking the novel's frauds, fortunes, and other commercial activity back to their roots in Atlantic slavery. Whereas Smith, Ferguson, and others argued that commercial contact and exchange were inherently civilizing, Brown's novel, through its coordinated web of subplots, juxtaposes these contemporary claims for commerce with the actual practice of Atlantic trade and its dependence on slavery, or in other words on the profit-driven kidnapping, rape, and coercion involved in the capture of Africans and their misery-inducing transportation to the Caribbean and United States.

In the most significant development to emerge in recent studies of this novel, scholars have increasingly explored the implications of the fact that virtually all of *Arthur Mervyn*'s financial dealings and searches for escaped value have their common origins

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[32] For the period's culture of commerce and its relation to the novel's representations of unreliability and deception, see, for example, Ditz, "Secret Selves, Credible Personas: The Problematics of Trust and Public Display in the Writing of Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia Merchants" and "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia"; and Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence*, which discusses the Prune Street debtor's prison that figures as an important setting in *Second Part*.

in slavery, in slave labor on Caribbean sugar and coffee plantations.[33] The novel's embedded subplots imply a virtual primer on Caribbean slavery and slave revolution, tying the novel's Philadelphia action to the period's slave economy and its implications throughout the wider circum-Atlantic world. Slavery not only generates the wealth that allows the novel's merchants to practice their guile but also provides the initial context for events that set off cycles of violence that begin far away but literally come home to roost in the novel's domestic relationships and spaces, which are filled with luxurious goods purchased with the profits of slavery and its associated economy. Welbeck, for example, is linked to slavery via his origins in Liverpool, capital of the period's slave trade, and his arrival in the U.S. via Charleston, the de facto capital of the U.S. slave industry in the period. The stolen wealth and circumstances leading to Welbeck's seduction and ruin of Clemenza Lodi originate in Caribbean slavery and slave revolt (in Chapter 10) because the Lodi family fortune was first imperiled and set into motion when the elder Lodi was assassinated on the French sugar island of Guadeloupe by a slave he had refused to free. Similarly, the Maurice family fortune that circulates in *Second Part* is set into motion by anxieties over slave uprising in British-controlled Jamaica and motivates the trip to Baltimore during which Mervyn reflects on slavery during the novel's stagecoach scene in Chapter II.17.

   The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) proceeded through a complicated series of often contradictory events, but its overall effect was to establish, for the first time, the rights of former slaves to self-control over their bodies and the lands on which they labored. In the wake of the French Revolution's call for "liberty, equality, and fraternity" (that is: freedom from the old regime of nobles and the Church, egalitarian citizenship, and open access to civil society), the mixed-race and black slaves of the French Caribbean rose up to demand their emancipation as well. This black revolution threatened European and U.S. systems of power on many levels, with many implications.[34] First, it deprived France of the island's tremendous profits from the sale of sugar in the global marketplace, thus threatening France's ability to pay for its

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[33] See Christopherson, *The Apparition in the Glass* (1993); Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (1997); Smith-Rosenberg, "Black Gothic" (2000); Mackenthun, *Fictions of the Black Atlantic in American Foundational Literature* (2004); Doolen, *Fugitive Empire: Locating Early American Imperialism* (2005); Goudie, *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic* (2006). Our discussion in what follows draws from Shapiro, *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel: Reading the Atlantic World-System* (2008).

[34] For the Caribbean revolution and its repercussions in the U.S. in the 1790s, see Blackburn, "Haiti, Slavery, and the Age of Democratic Atlantic Revolution"; Davis, "American Equality and Foreign Revolutions"; Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804*; Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint Domingue, 1793–1798*; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic;* Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti in North America: Black Saint Dominguans in Philadelphia"; and White, *"A Flood of Impure Lava": Saint Dominguan Refugees in the United States, 1791–1820.*

military defense against the British during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Second, it sparked unrest and fear in other Caribbean slave populations, thereby threatening British imperial interests as well. Britain tried to take advantage of the opportunity to occupy Haiti, but it lost tens of thousands of troops to yellow fever plagues in the unsuccessful attempt. While *Arthur Mervyn*'s action occurs in 1793 Philadelphia, Brown was well aware of the fever's devastating effects on the British army that sought to reestablish slavery in Haiti in the years between 1793 and 1798, when he began composing the novel. In this context, fever became a protector of liberty by functioning as a defense against foreign invasion. Third, the struggles in Haiti and related Anglo-French shipping restrictions were part of the context that allowed American merchants to establish the "reexport" economy of the 1790s. Their status as neutrals in revolutionary era Anglo-French conflicts allowed them to trade more actively in Caribbean goods. This increased traffic in the profitable goods of consumer sensation (primarily sugar and its main byproduct rum) was an important driver for the U.S. economy and its crises during the 1790s, bringing astonishing profits to American merchants in ways that shook up traditional hierarchies and allowed previously marginal or unknown merchants to become wealthy or, in some cases, fabulously wealthy. Welbeck's sudden arrival in the novel's Philadelphia is comprehensible to other merchants because it corresponds to the abrupt appearance of other nouveau riche "Nabobs" who were profiting from Caribbean trade and fleeing Caribbean unrest.[35]

  The final major consequence of the Haitian Revolution, from the novel's Philadelphia perspective, was to increase U.S. exposure to political, economic, and cultural consequences of ongoing European geopolitical conflicts, despite George Washington's presidential desire to isolate the United States. The Caribbean conflict produced waves of white, mixed-race, and black refugees who fled the Haitian violence for North American cities in 1793. As Brown suggests in *Arthur Mervyn* and related pieces such as "Portrait of an Emigrant" (included in this volume's Related Texts), these refugees brought radically different visual and behavioral styles to their new homes. Although often impoverished by revolutionary turmoil, the mostly professional and elite Catholic émigrés of the planter class brought new modes of behavior, dress, food, and sexual display to Philadelphia, accelerating the culture's development toward consumerism and displays of luxury that had been discouraged by earlier Quaker and other Anglo elites. Further, the exiles brought mixed-race mistresses and mixed-race relationships that were far more common in the Caribbean than in North American settings. The heightened visibility of mixed-race relationships in the city, subsequent to this influx of francophone refugees, may be part of the context for

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[35] See Dun, "'What Avenues of Commerce, Will You, Americans, Not Explore!': Commercial Philadelphia's Vantage onto the Early Haitian Revolution"; Chew, "Certain Victims of an International Contagion: The Panic of 1797 and the Hard Times of the Late 1790s in Baltimore"; and the aforementioned articles by Ditz.

Brown's affirmation of mixed-race unions in the novel's concluding romance between Arthur and the dark-skinned Achsa Fielding.[36]

Haitian émigrés to Philadelphia came from all four of the island's main racialized groups: wealthy white plantation owners, middling whites, African slaves, and a mixed-race population that was often free and had increasingly come to own their own plantations and black slaves. Just as wealthy nineteenth-century Americans married their daughters to bankrupted European nobility for the latter's aura or cultural capital, many wealthy mixed-race property owners married their daughters to less wealthy whites so that their grandchildren would gain the social prestige of whiteness. Many of these mixed-race women joined the émigrés, fleeing a revolution that in its early phases pitted mulattos against black slaves, and in Philadelphia these women often continued their search for white lovers or marriage partners. Haitian slaves, the "French negroes" that U.S. slave owners feared would seed rebellion among their own "human property," likewise arrived in significant numbers along with their owners.

In *Arthur Mervyn*, the effects of the Haitian Revolution and its reorganization of the U.S. and Atlantic economies disturb the profits that flow from the Caribbean plantations, forcing the capital previously fixed in Caribbean land and slaves to become remonetarized and perilously transmitted through commercial networks of credit, bills of exchange, import-export voyaging, and so on. As this fugitive wealth is set into motion through the period's channels of credit transfers, it appears to be nearly without ownership and thus open for the taking, for example when Welbeck appropriates the Lodi family fortune from the dying younger Lodi in Chapter 10, when Captain Watson is buried with the Maurice family fortune hidden on his body in Chapter 12, or when Mervyn carries half of the Lodi fortune on his person and destroys it on a momentary impulse in Chapter 23. The identity of the implicitly absent exchange partner who lies behind this wealth, the personal agent who ought to stabilize trade and stand at its origin to guarantee its motion, is that of the slave him or herself, who does not achieve satisfaction in trade, as Adam Smith had claimed, because he or she is the very object being traded.

In this light, Brown's more complete response to the earlier-mentioned contagion-environmentalism debate is implicit in his treatment of the novel's cast of characters tied to the Caribbean slave economy—a large group that includes Welbeck, Wortley, the Lodi family, Captains Watson and Williams, the Thetford and Maurice families, and, implicitly, the Claverings, Wentworths, and Mervyn himself—and their experience of the threat of slave rebellion and its consequences for the moral economy of commerce. Brown reformulates the question about yellow fever's origin by suggesting, with the novel's action, that the city's corruption is produced by a damaged social environment. The novel's underlying social malady is caused by the importation of violence against Africans, by a diseased environment in which the carriers of

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[36] For more on Brown's representation of mixed-race relationships, see the "Portrait of an Emigrant" sketch, as well as the Brown-edited excerpts on slavery from *The Monthly Magazine*, both included in the Related Texts.

destruction are not African bodies, not French refugees, but the merchants who traffic in the goods provided by slaves.

The novel's events also allow Brown to comment on closely related questions concerning the important post-fever pamphlet controversy between Mathew Carey and African American ministers Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. The city's free blacks were on the front lines of public response to the epidemic, and when Carey accused black undertakers of extortion and theft, the ministers replied with examples of the steadfast credibility and generosity of the city's blacks during the epidemic by way of contrast to the selfish and destructive behaviors of whites. Mervyn both recounts and hears analogous tales of white selfishness and cruelty in scenes that always include free black workers and servants who have stayed behind to help. The chief example here is the character Medlicote and his black servant Austin, whose knowledge and self-possession in Chapter 17's fever scenes are developed as a learning experience for Mervyn and in obvious contrast to the destructive panic and selfishness of the merchant Thetford and his clerk Wallace.[37]

Enacting Abolition, Ending with Achsa

If one strand links together the key groups in Brown's life—his childhood friends among the tightly knit Quakers, his adult associates in the New York circle, and later Philadelphia associates—it is a common commitment to the immediate abolition of slavery. Perhaps more than any other single issue, abolition provided Brown's circles with a direct, concrete goal and demand for the betterment of human society. During the 1803–1806 years when he was primarily occupied with editing and writing articles for *The Literary Magazine and American Register,* for example, Brown planned with lifelong friend Thomas Pym Cope, a wealthy Quaker businessman and civic activist, to write an abolitionist *History of Slavery,* but the project was never brought to fruition.[38] Eighteenth-century abolitionism involved a spectrum of ideas and approaches to slavery, but the positions that Brown and others in his New York group marked out, in a series of writings and speeches, are remarkable for their militant critiques of slavery and of underlying prejudices concerning race and racial

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[37] See the excerpts from Carey and Jones-Allen included in the Related Texts. For the pamphlet controversy and its importance for the emergence of the city's free black institutions, see Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840*; Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic"; Will, "Liberalism, Republicanism, and Philadelphia's Black Elite in the Early Republic: The Social Thought of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen"; and Lapsansky, "'Abigail, a Negress': The Role and Legacy of African Americans in the Yellow Fever Epidemic" in Estes and Smith, *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation.*

[38] On Cope's commission to Brown and efforts to provide him with abolitionist society records to help in this project, see *Philadelphia Merchant: The Diary of Thomas P. Cope, 1800–1851*, 137–139, 182, 192. Cope writes, on February 19, 1803, "Having lately, in the name of myself & colleagues, given C.B.B. the offer of writing the History of Slavery, he has this day accepted of it & is to proceed with all dispatch in that interesting undertaking" (139).

typology. A synthesis of their positions, as illustrated in the excerpts from the abolition addresses and other texts included in this volume's Related Texts, provides dramatic contrasts with the emergent affirmation of biological racialism that is a familiar feature of the period's thinking.

Brown's circle sees slavery in radical-Enlightenment terms as an illegitimate use of force that typifies premodern societies but that is not part of any eternal human order. As the forcible capture of individuals who should be free, slavery has no foundation in rational law. Although slavery has existed in older social formations in classical antiquity and feudalism, its prior existence neither justifies it nor provides any rationale for its continuation. A gradual approach to the abolition of slavery simply delays right and ultimately inevitable action. No past order, such as that invoked in Christian claims for African enslavement based on the curse of Noah's child, has any legitimacy on this question. Explicitly rejecting biological categories of race that were gaining prominence in late eighteenth-century arguments for polygenesis, the idea that separate races of humans exist and consequently that some are inferior to others, Brown's circle argued that there is only one human race. If New World slaves appear lazy or shiftless, as slavery advocates claim, they counter that this is simply an expression of the degraded life slaves have experienced. Once slaves are granted the conditions of dignity, this change of circumstances will gradually change their behavior. Slave uprisings in Haiti and elsewhere, for Brown's group, are the predictable expression of the human desire for freedom, events that are not dissimilar from the energies that motivated the American and French Revolutions. Drawing illustrations from earlier hierarchies of unjust domination, for example in the Turkish occupation of Greece, the history of Western Europe, and prior modes of slavery, Brown and his associates argue that there is no fundamental difference in kind between Africans and European peoples, who were likewise subordinated at different times in forms of coerced labor ranging from slavery to serfdom. The arguments of Brown and his circle affirm that Europeans are not intrinsically superior to Africans and indeed that the reverse argument could just as easily be made, given the sophistication of early modern African societies.

Calls for abolition are inherently models for what should be done to repair the damage of slavery. Here Brown's associates were clear: rather than advocate repatriation or recolonization, for the removal of Africans from a presumptively white U.S. culture (a position that was put forward by writers from Thomas Jefferson to Harriet Beecher Stowe), Brown and his circle felt that former slaves should be integrated into existing U.S. civil society through education, full and immediate enfranchisement into the privileges and protective rights of democratic citizenship, and a process of interracial union that they hoped would progressively remove racializing distinctions through miscegenation.

What are the implications of these abolitionist arguments for reading *Arthur Mervyn*? While previous commentators have differed in their interpretations of the novel's stance concerning slavery and race, and significant interpretations have argued that Brown's novel is symptomatic of the period's emerging ideas about biological racialism and polygenesis, our discussion in what follows takes the position that the novel is part

of and consistent with the larger system of arguments that Brown and his circle articulated in their antislavery addresses and other writings. We can approach the question by looking more closely at the novel's treatment of sympathy and its role in Mervyn's rise to middle-class status as well as at Brown's decision to conclude the novel with a romance between Mervyn and Achsa Fielding and, finally, by examining the interesting possibility that the novel refers to early Underground Railroad activity.

As Mervyn makes his way through Philadelphia's circles of mercantile corruption, questions related to ethno-racial status and abolition seem to become increasingly prominent in the narrative. For most of the novel's first part, Mervyn's tale poses the question: What happens if we abandon older social hierarchies based on family bloodlines and localized, monoethnic community ties? When Mervyn's Scots-Irish father disinherits his son and violates class boundaries by marrying the formerly indentured Betty Lawrence, a woman beneath his rank, Mervyn is expelled from his country home and discovers the paradoxical freedom of modernity, the precarious status of free-floating individuals set loose by the relentless dissolution of traditional community structures: "I was become, in my own conceptions, an alien and an enemy to the roof under which I was born" (Chapter 2). The now-landless Mervyn slinks toward the city's commerce and bright lights, like so many displaced farmers throughout modern history, and quickly realizes that he has precious few resources that might prevent him from descending even lower on the food chain of status groups. Mervyn's birth status was never high, but it was just high enough that he must fear losing its privileges as he flirts with abject poverty or unfreedom in bound labor, a possibility that surfaces immediately as he encounters the consequences of his new rootlessness in Chapters 2–5. On the one hand, Mervyn's newfound freedom looks like a poisoned gift that may destine him to a life of downward mobility in a pitiless commercial order. On the other, as he experiences the quasimagical transformations and disorientation created by urban commerce, Mervyn giddily entertains the possibility and fantasy that, once uprooted from the fixed referents of his rural background, he may float higher in the social realm, especially as the chaos of the fever epidemic and revolution scrambles the fixed structures of society.

Mervyn's aspirational energies proceed through two sequential and ultimately mutually exclusive strategies. The first, less successful one involves Mervyn's commitment to the optics of sympathy and sensibility, the eighteenth-century complex of ideas concerning immediate, physical-emotional ("sympathetic") bonds and responses between individuals that are often held to represent modern egalitarian relationships that supplant older hierarchical models of interaction. In Woldwinite and other late eighteenth-century narratives, bonds of sympathy are commonly linked to themes of visuality and problems of interpretation based on physical appearance, as is the case in *Arthur Mervyn*.[39] Shorn of family and other traditional relations,

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[39] For the visual dimension of this complex of ideas in Woldwinite and other period fictions, see Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s;* Juengel, "Godwin, Lavater, and the Pleasures of Surface"; and Rivers, *Face Value: Physiognomical Thought and the Legible Body in Marivaux, Lavater, Balzac, Gautier, and Zola.*

Mervyn rejects the option of physical labor and relies instead on the cultural capital of his good looks and bookish manners as they magnetize and charm the city's bourgeoisie. The strategy of "looks" becomes a class strategy that Mervyn uses to improve his position, as middle-class professionals literally *see* him as one of their own, despite his natal origins.[40] This visual sympathy is often literalized as Mervyn capitalizes on his uncanny physical resemblance to other promising young bourgeois men, such as Clavering or Clemenza's brother Vincentio Lodi. Even more broadly, Mervyn's ability to generate a sympathetic response to his face and body creates crucial opportunities, for example in the novel's first scene when his appearance is a key factor in Dr. Stevens' seemingly spontaneous enthusiasm for the unknown individual he sees lying ill on the pavement in front of his home. The benevolent Stevens continually defends Mervyn on the basis of his "sympathetic" appearance and self-representation, and stands in his support against skeptics like the creditor Wortley or the parochial matron Mrs. Althorpe, who insist that Mervyn should be evaluated according to older, more conventionalized grids of bloodlines and reputation. Perhaps because Mervyn's ascent is so dependent on this visualized logic of sympathy, he himself adopts and employs the approach to interpretation it implies, echoing and amplifying Stevens' dedication to this mode of relationship. The culmination of Mervyn's moral evaluation of others by means of an almost voyeuristic surveillance occurs in *Second Part*'s Chapter 17, during the stagecoach journey to Baltimore, as Mervyn gazes at the coach's other passengers: a Creole Frenchman, his pet monkey, and two female blacks. In this key scene, as several commentators have noted, the force of watching illustrates how quickly sympathetic viewing can become a means of projecting codes of racial taxonomy, a means of categorizing and classifying humans as if they were objects of natural history.[41]

While sympathetic codes, conveyed primarily through vision, are Mervyn's initial social strategy for empowerment and relating to others in the city, the novel suggests that they soon prove inadequate and even counterproductive. As the novel traces Mervyn's movement through the city's webs of commercial corruption, it illustrates the weaknesses and potential for structural prejudice and deception inherent in sympathetic or sentimental reflexes, in the absence of any rational consideration of their nature and implications. The overall trajectory of Welbeck's story, from his initial masquerade and theatrical deceptions to his murderous decline and final magnanimous gesture in *Second Part*, underlines the unreliability of appearances and, by implication, sympathy's inadequacy as a response to changing conditions and social

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[40] A similar tactic appears in the contemporary, "true-life" Mervyn-like rogue's tale, *Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs* (1798).

[41] For the iconic passage from Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* that Brown references in Mervyn's stagecoach scene, see this volume's Related Texts and the discussion in Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*. For discussions of Mervyn's stagecoach scene and its implications for understanding Brown's perspective on new codes of racial typology, see Mackenthun, *Fictions of the Black Atlantic;* Goudie, *Creole America*; Doolen, *Fugitive Empire*; Waterman, *Republic of Intellect*; and Shapiro, *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel*.

relations. The "causes of appearances" turn out not to be accessible through immediate impressions. Ultimately, the novel implies, sympathy produces results that are little better than the older mechanism of social status, for it assigns fixed identities that cannot be changed or improved.

As the inadequacy of "sympathetic" codes becomes increasingly evident, Mervyn gradually gains awareness of a second and more successful mode of new relations, and discovers that a "revolution" is occurring in his thinking and consciousness. Sometimes, with this oft-repeated image, Mervyn simply means epiphanies or sudden realizations, but, in the novel's *Second Part*, particularly after the introduction of the refugee and émigré character Achsa Fielding in Chapter II.12, the "revolution" taking place in Mervyn's mind seems to become related ever more clearly to the aftershocks of the Haitian and French Revolutions as they reach the shores of the early U.S.[42]

Mervyn's new modes of thinking and new approach to social relation appear most dramatically in the novel's conclusion, in the romance that affirms the émigré Achsa Fielding and at the same time overturns readerly expectations that Mervyn will marry the virginal Eliza Hadwin. The tremendous contrast between these two characters appears immediately in the differences between their associated origins. Whereas Hadwin initially appears on an idealized Chester County farm run by a benevolent agrarian patriarch, Fielding makes her entrance as a mysterious exile in a lurid, middle-class brothel run by an intemperate urban matriarch (Mrs. Villars' name evokes *ville* or city). A multitude of readers and critics, beginning with Brown's friend and biographer William Dunlap and the British poet Percy Shelley, have been perplexed, even angered, by Brown's anticonventional choice to end the novel by pairing Mervyn with a dark-skinned and decidedly nonvirginal ethno-racial other who seems to condense the novel's previous reflections on gendered relations of power, slavery, revolution, and troubled commercial networks.[43] The question of why Brown chose to end the novel with this pairing becomes even more intriguing when we consider that Brown's initial plan, noted in a letter to his brother James in early 1799, was to conclude *Second Part* with a marriage between Mervyn and

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[42] Mervyn's references to "revolutions" in his thinking or perception occur in Chapters 8, 20, II.7, II.9, II.11, and II.13. See especially the key passage in II.9 where Mervyn articulates the transformation of his thinking on the potentials of urban professional life.

[43] Dunlap, in his *Life of Charles Brockden Brown* (II, 40), interprets the conclusion as an abandonment of Eliza, which is manifestly not the case: ". . . Eliza Hadwin is the most worthy and artless and interesting creature of the author's creation, but in the conclusion she is abandoned both by hero and author, in a manner as unexpected as disgusting." Thomas Love Peacock, reporting Shelley's enthusiasm for Brown, writes that Shelley was particularly impressed with Brown's female characters, except for Achsa: "The transfer of the hero's affections from a simple peasant girl to a rich Jewess, displeased Shelley extremely, and he could only account for it on the ground that it was the only way in which Brown could bring his story to an uncomfortable conclusion" ("Memoir of Percy Bysshe Shelley," 409–10).

Eliza.[44] Why, readers have asked, other than greed for her wealth, does Brown have Mervyn choose the exiled and conventionally unattractive Achsa Fielding over the younger and clearly infatuated Eliza Hadwin?

Very late in the novel, in *Second Part*'s Chapter 23, Brown surprises the reader with the unexpected revelation that Achsa is a "Portuguese" or Sephardic Jew.[45] The revelation is intended to startle the reader in narrative terms but also occurs so late in the novel and with so little foreshadowing that the reader may wonder when, exactly, Brown decided to give Arthur's new romantic partner her Jewish ethnicity. Timing suggests that a likely context for the decision to make Achsa Jewish is the August 1800 newspaper polemic between Jewish democratic activist Benjamin Nones and Federalist journalists who attacked him and other activists with racial and other slurs as part of the period's partisan newspaper wars. Nones' well-known reply to his anonymous attackers is a landmark statement of Jewish identity in the U.S., and explicitly relates that community's struggles to those of other disenfranchised groups who sought inclusion in citizen status during the revolutionary period. By ending with Achsa, Brown highlights the period's "Jewish question," the debate about citizenship rights for Jews that asked whether a "foreign" and historically disenfranchised race could share citizen status within Christian republics.[46] By developing Achsa's backstory with a combination of allusions and references to Mary Wollstonecraft's troubled life story and the struggle for citizen status by the period's Jews, Brown makes Achsa a bearer of revolutionary era struggles for both gender and ethno-racial emancipation. By making Achsa Jewish, in other words, Brown takes a progressive position in immediate and more distant debates about race, citizenship, and gender that were occurring around him as he concluded the novel.[47]

There may be an even stronger reading of Achsa's role in the novel's conclusion to consider, however, if we connect it with the repeated emphasis on her "tawny" skin, a period codeword for black or mixed-race persons. As he teases Mervyn and encourages

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[44] Brown's letter of February 15, 1799 to his brother James, written just after finishing the novel's first part, explains his initial plan for a "sequel" to continue the plot lines of the first volume. Much of what he projected in that letter changed by the time he wrote *Second Part,* particularly the conventionalized, helpless roles for women and his plan for ending the story with a marriage between Arthur and Eliza. Referring to the Hadwin sisters, Brown writes that the Mervyn of this plan "relieves the two helpless females from their sorrows and fears. Marriage with the youngest; the death of the elder by a consumption and grief, leaves him in possession of competence, and the rewards of virtue."

[45] For a discussion of Achsa as a Jewish character, see Harap, "Fracture of a Stereotype: Charles Brockden Brown's Achsa Fielding."

[46] See "Benjamin Nones vs. the *Gazette*" in this volume's Related Texts.

[47] For the 1790s Philadelphia Jewish community, as well as the partisan, racialized context for the Nones-Gazette exchange and similar episodes, see Pencak, *Jews and Gentiles in Early America, 1654–1800*; Wolf and Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson*; Nathans, "A Much-Maligned People: Jews on and off the Stage in the Early American Republic"; and Schappes, "Reaction and Anti-Semitism, 1795–1800."

him to propose to Achsa in *Second Part*'s Chapter 24, for example, Stevens underlines her Africanized appearance by describing her as "unsightly as a *night-hag*, tawney as a Moor, the eye of a gypsey." The novel associates Achsa with blackness on several explicit and implicit levels. Beyond the "tawney" skin noted by Mervyn and Stevens, Achsa's Sephardic background may or may not imply Afro-Caribbean ethno-racial potentials, since the Sephardic trading networks from which Achsa emerges and which established the first Jewish communities in North America arrived via Portuguese and Dutch Caribbean slave colonies such as Curaçao and Suriname, where social mixture and interracial unions produced a subgroup of mulatto or black "Portuguese" Jews who, in turn, provoked early modern debates about Jewish identity and race in Amsterdam and London.[48] Achsa's positive association with African models is inscribed more allusively in affirmative Miltonic citations at the beginning of *Second Part*'s Chapter 22 that balance out the more ominous Milton references that Mervyn developed as he entered the city in Chapter 3. Whereas the novel's opening citations from Milton drew on his depiction of Hell in *Paradise Lost*, Achsa's concluding citations turn to Milton's *Comus* and *Il Penseroso* to suggest an unconventional role for herself, not as a helpmate or subordinated partner for Mervyn but as a powerful black figure of intellectualized desire who can guide his further development. Reversing the surface message of Milton's *Comus* by quoting from the swarthy Comus, rather than the chaste Lady, Achsa appropriates an invitation to erotic, non-Christian otherness that implies that Mervyn should marry her rather than the virginal and inexperienced Eliza Hadwin. Alluding to *Il Penseroso,* Achsa identifies herself with that poem's African, non-Christian muse, suggestively leading the pensive Mervyn toward an improved understanding of and engagement with the commercial and revolutionary social relations he has been exploring throughout the novel. In this light, the final romance between Mervyn and Fielding enacts the kinds of innovative relations that Brown's closest friends in abolitionist circles were arguing for: interracial sexual union and miscegenation as a means for overcoming phobic responses to ethno-racial others.[49]

If we approach *Arthur Mervyn* as a text grounded both in Woldwinite desires to break with unexamined patterns in order to change the cultural environment and

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[48] For the Sephardic background that informs Achsa's story, see Israel, *Diasporas with a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World Maritime Empires*; Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral: Anglo-Dutch Jews and Eighteenth-Century Trade*; Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714–1830: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society*; and Malino, *The Sephardic Jews of Bordeaux: Assimilation and Emancipation in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France*. For the debate on race and color that occurred within the Sephardic community after racial mixture in Caribbean colonies, see Kaplan, "Political Concepts in the World of the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam during the Seventeenth Century: The Problem of Exclusion and the Boundaries of Self-Identity."

[49] In this volume's Related Texts, see Brown's "Portrait of an Emigrant," "What Is a *JEW*?" and the excerpts from "On the Consequences of Abolishing the Slave Trade to the West Indian Colonies," as well as "Three Abolitionist Addresses from Brown's Circle" and "Two Perspectives on Slavery from *The Monthly Magazine*."

reform existing institutions, and in critical and even militant arguments regarding slavery and its aftermath, we can situate the text as an early and remarkable contribution to abolitionist fiction. The novel inverts the typical function of urban gothic, which shocks its readers with tales of corruption only to restore the conventions of "normal" society in conclusion. In Brown's tale of urban vice, it is so-called normal commercial society itself that is disturbing, in its largely unacknowledged dependence on Atlantic slavery and unquestioned set of related inequalities and prejudices regarding class, gender, and race. As historian Caroll Smith-Rosenberg argues, "Achsa Fielding's embodied fusion of the white middle-class man's two defining others (women / blacks) requires us to recognize not only the white middle-class man's dependence on them both to define and stabilize his own subjectivity but also their mutual interdependence. Only by tracing their complex triangularity will we begin to understand the ways power is produced, reproduced, and deployed in America's bourgeois world."[50] Rather than reinforcing dominant categories, the novel's final romance seems to suggest, there may be a way out of this mundane hell, or at least a way to moderate its damage.

Signposting the Underground Railroad

The novel's relation to militant antislavery arguments may be even more concrete, however, if we consider the possibility that *Arthur Mervyn* alludes to a very specific abolitionist project for black liberation: the Underground Railroad, which helped runaway slaves elude their masters and live as free individuals.

  Arthur Mervyn's first part ends with an intentionally intriguing omission, a secret that begs to be deciphered and leaves the reader wondering what it might imply. Just paragraphs before the end of the volume—and in this connection we need to remember that the first part had no sequel when it was published in early 1799, making this passage the end of the entire novel at that time—as he describes his attempts to escape hospitalization during his last moments in Welbeck's rented mansion, Mervyn explains that he discovered a hidden attic crawl space. He tells his listeners, Dr. Stevens and his wife Eliza, that he hid in this "recess" momentarily and that "one studious of concealment, might rely on its protection with unbounded confidence." Mervyn says that he saw startling and very significant objects in this crawl space but then refuses to explain what they were, dramatically insisting that "at present, it appears to be my duty to pass them over in silence." The novel never explains what Mervyn sees and infers in the crawl space or why he feels duty bound to keep this information secret. Given the emphasis Mervyn has already placed on honesty and keeping secrets under ethical obligation, however, it is worthwhile to consider what he might go to such lengths to suggest but not explain clearly.

  Is Brown suggesting that Mervyn has stumbled across a hiding place for runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad? Throughout the 1790s, Philadelphia was a

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[50] Smith-Rosenberg, "Black Gothic," 260.

magnet for runaway slaves who sought protection among the city's large free black population and in proximity to its mostly Quaker abolition activists. Besides everything else, the year 1793 was a critical moment in the history of U.S. slavery, the year that the first Fugitive Slave Act was signed into law by George Washington. This act provided a legal mechanism allowing runaway slaves to be apprehended in northern free states and returned to their masters. Abolitionists and leaders of the city's free black community, including the Reverends Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, had publicly and unsuccessfully opposed the Act. After they were defeated on the legislative front, they turned their energy to expanding the activity of the Underground Railroad, which hid escaped slaves from the pursuit of slave catchers.

Although the Underground Railroad seems to have existed in embryonic, improvised form for decades, it took on a more organized structure in the 1790s. The crucial figure in its 1790s development was Isaac Hopper (1771–1852), a Philadelphia Quaker tailor who was a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) and a key activist in the period's antislavery efforts. From his own accounts, commissioned and republished by Lydia Maria Child years later, we know that in the 1790s Hopper used a variety of means, both legal and illegal, to help fugitives challenge their slave status openly or to elude slave owners or slave catchers and escape northward. Hopper was famous for his detailed knowledge of Pennsylvania's slave laws, which he used to force the manumission of slaves who had lived openly in the state for a period of six months. Hopper was also a key figure in building bridges between the Philadelphia free black community, the middle-class, professional members of the PAS, and farmers in the outlying counties who cooperated in the process of moving runaways into and out of Philadelphia. Hopper's tailor shop became an unofficial antislavery office where threatened individuals and their friends could find help, and he became well known for his emergency interventions in sometimes violent situations involving the attempted recapture of fugitive slaves.

Brown could not have been unaware of Hopper's activity. They were the same age and circulated in the same circles of Quaker abolitionists, and Hopper had considerable notoriety as a result of his activities. Hopper's workshop and home on Philadelphia's South Second Street was only a few doors from Brown's own family address during the 1790s. If Brown grew up in a Philadelphia that still had open-air slave auctions off Market Street, he also saw free blacks congregate around Hopper's doorway planning illegal opposition to slavery and heard accounts of the often dramatic incidents in which Hopper became involved. By all accounts, Hopper was not someone easily overlooked. A gregarious man with a magnetic and idiosyncratic personality, he was well known for his ability to confront and disarm hostility with his quick wits, and to use his opponents' conventional expectations to his own advantage, much as Arthur Mervyn does in *Second Part* as he confounds Mrs. Althorpe, Philip Hadwin, and Mrs. Villars (Chapters II.2, II.10, and II.11–12).[51]

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[51] For more on Hopper, see the excerpts from his tales in Related Texts, and Meaders, "Kidnapping Blacks in Philadelphia: Isaac Hopper's Tales of Oppression."

During the 1793 yellow fever epidemic, both slave catchers and fugitives attempted to use the confusion of the moment to their advantage, and the city's urban space was a field for their attempts to discover and elude one another. It is therefore likely that Hopper and his associates used the event as a cover to transport slaves at a time when government structures were suspended and when remaining city officials, many of whom were abolitionists themselves, were preoccupied with other pressing matters and would have turned a blind eye even if they had been aware of efforts to obstruct and evade the Fugitive Slave Act. A scenario of active resistance to recapture may help clarify what seems initially to be one of the most racially mysterious episodes in the novel. When Mervyn enters a house searching for the clerk Wallace during the fever in Chapter 16, he sees the mirrored reflection of a scarred African in livery, who strikes him unconscious. Is this violence unmotivated aggression on the part of an undisciplined black, in the kind of scenario suggested in Mathew Carey's accusations, or is it a rational, albeit hasty act of self-defense against a possible slave catcher? Mervyn, at this point, is behaving like a slave catcher as he roams through houses unannounced searching for a man who might be avoiding discovery. The black figure's facial scars may be the trace of an injury, a whipping, or possibly an African ceremonial marking, all of which suggest the man's former status as a slave. From this perspective, this individual instance of black violence may recall the wider view of black revolutionary struggle articulated by Theodore Dwight, Brown's New York Friendly Club associate. In his abolition address, Dwight memorably insists that slave violence against plantation owners in Haiti is simply the "language of freedom; but . . . also the language of truth . . . Indeed, from individuals, the spirit is generally communicated to states, and from states to nations."[52]

The more time Mervyn spends in Philadelphia, the more he begins to perceive the "causes of appearances" and the structure of the city's activities, especially as these relate to networks of commercial crime and fraud. But the same is true of Mervyn's developing perceptions of racism and racial domination. On his first arrival in the city, Mervyn seems to regard blacks as little more than the invisible furniture of his middle-class contacts. As the tale progresses and culminates with his impending marriage to the dark-skinned Achsa, Mervyn becomes increasingly aware of the unfreedom that afflicts the blacks and women around him and moves toward an ever greater understanding of the implications of the racial domination that is part of Philadelphia's commercial order. Mervyn initially seeks primarily to survive, rise, and ingratiate himself, to participate in bourgeois freedom and privilege through the mechanism of sympathy. But as he learns more about the world he inhabits, the novel's subtitle, "Memoirs of the Year 1793," comes to refer to more than that year's famous epidemic and more even than the momentous events of the Haitian and French Revolutions. By the novel's conclusion it refers to the revolution in Mervyn's thinking and consciousness regarding race and slavery, as he increasingly seems to

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[52] See excerpts from Dwight's *Oration* in this volume's Related Texts, "Three Abolitionist Addresses from Brown's Circle."

reject the common sense of racial difference and its retarding influences by uniting himself with the nonwhite Achsa and possibly by refusing to divulge secrets of the early Underground Railroad. By the end of *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown has used the core set of Woldwinite beliefs to craft a programmatic story of property and sex about how individuals might overcome class, gender, and racial prejudice and communicate their changing consciousness to others. Linking narrative tension to international political and social activism, Brown crafts a political romance that deserves to make young Mervyn an iconic figure, like John Steinbeck's Tom Joad, who illustrates how the rural poor can teach urban elites something about the concrete enactment of political liberty.