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in his framed narrative in *Edgar Huntly* has a fatal encounter with his enemy in a narrow and dark alley in labyrinthine Dublin. Perhaps it is no surprise to find lone walkers on narrow streets in Brown's works, since Brown is widely recognized as the first significant practitioner of the Gothic novel in America, and since confinement within tight, enclosed spaces is a convention of genre.

However, the manner in which Brown's narratives unfold conspicuously and exclusively within claustrophobic spaces such as caves, underground cellars, and closets bears close attention. Narrative viewpoints in Brown's major novels never reflect the wide perspectives afforded by high, open places. On the contrary, vision itself seems inhibited and space is perceived largely through touch and other semi-direct sensations. In the darkness, a narrator suddenly stumbles into contact with a dead body. "[T]he malignant vapor" from the putrefying bodies of plague victims surrounds the narrator.[2] Sound waves emanating from unidentified sources impinge upon the narrator's hearing. Such tactile and quasi-tactile sensations characterize the Brownian space.

Thus feeling their way through space rather than seeing it clearly, characters in Brown's works have difficulty imagining spaces they do not directly experience. That is, they cannot grasp the whole of the spaces they inhabit, whether the spaces are cities, houses, or woods; rather, the particulars of the spaces directly before them dominate their perception. Furthermore, Brown's characters seldom imagine that these particulars are representative of either particular or more general matters occupying a larger (for example, national) space. Nor do Brown's novels, with the notable exception of *Wieland*, evince any sense of regular, objective time that might serve to index a larger common space.

Critical discourse on *Arthur Mervyn* has long focused on whether Mervyn, as his author asserts, is an honest young man exemplifying Republican virtue, or a self-centered materialist despite not only Brown's but also his own claims as narrator to the contrary. Dana Luciano observes that although Brown did not see "himself as writing novels that would have been termed 'depraved' and nihilistic in his day . . . there is something in literary eloquence that ultimately limits its usefulness. In his own novels, that something works to turn rationality against itself and subordinate it to the body and its desires."[3] The unique topography of Brownian space provides strong support for this view: because Mervyn, like many of Brown's characters, is incapable of imagining a coherent, structured public space shared by his fellow citizens,

he can be understood to inhabit a space quite distinct from the community of Republican virtue.

## II

The quintessentially Brownian space is the closet, as exemplified by the closet in which Mervyn finds himself on his first night in Philadelphia. Alone in the city with neither friend nor money, Mervyn falls victim to a youth who tricks him into a merchant's bedroom, abandoning him there without a candle. When the merchant and his wife return, Mervyn feels compelled to hide himself in the closet, wherein— "[i]mmersed in palpable darkness" and "lurking like a robber"[4] and unable to get out because he naturally knows "not in what manner to demean himself"[5] if confronted with the occupants of the room—he listens to "[m]any facts of the most secret and momentous nature."[6] Only when the couple falls asleep does Mervyn manage to slip out of the bedchamber and leave the darkness of the closet behind.

At first this seemingly farcical episode may bring to mind the scenes in *Wieland* in which Carwin steals into the closet adjacent to Clara's bedroom to exert his ventriloquist power on her from his position in hiding; however, the cave in which Edgar Huntly finds himself upon waking after a somnambulistic walk bears a closer resemblance to Mervyn's closet. Both Arthur and Edgar are ignorant of the circumstances and reasons that have led them, respectively, to the closet and the cave; both are thus "in the dark" both literally—it is quite dark in both locations—and figuratively as well.

Indeed, the darkness inside the closet is so profound that when Mervyn finally emerges, he notes that "the light admitted into three windows, produced, to my eyes, a considerable illumination."[7] Edgar also feels his vision to be affected by the darkness of his cave:

> I turned my head to different quarters, I stretched my eye-lids, and exerted every visual energy, but in vain. I was wrapt in the murkiest and most impenetrable gloom.
>
>    The first effort of reflection was to suggest the belief that I was blind; that disease is known to assail us in a moment and without previous warning. This surely was the misfortune that had now befallen me. Some ray, however fleeting and uncertain, could not fail to be discerned, if the power of vision were not utterly extinguished. In what circumstances could I possibly be placed, from which every particle of light should, by other means, be excluded?[8]

Both characters are immersed in darkness, but there is more to Edgar's situation than the simple absence of light. In suspecting that his "power of vision" is "utterly extinguished," Mervyn inverts the logic of his reality, that because there is no light there is no vision, imagining instead that because there is no vision there is no light.

The sense of darkness resulting not from the absence of light but rather from the inhibition of the visual sense is basic to the works of Brown, and it is through vision thus compromised that space is perceived. Thus Mervyn panics in Welbeck's basement—where he is reluctantly helping to bury Watson's body—when Welbeck departs with their only candle, leaving Mervyn alone with the body and without his primary means of grasping the space around him. In his panic, Mervyn resorts to other, more direct means of spatial perception:

> I extended my hands and went forward. . . . Notwithstanding the danger of encountering obstructions, I rushed towards the entrance with precipitation.
>
> My temerity was quickly punished. In a moment, I was repelled by a jutting angle of the wall, with such force that I staggered backward and fell. . . . I now proceeded with greater wariness and caution. I had lost all distinct notions of my way. My motions were at random. All my labour was to shun obstruction and to advance whenever the vacuity would permit.[9]

Notably, information about the surrounding space comes to Mervyn, who is at the focus of perception, through physical contact with obstacles.

This mode of spatial perception predominates in Brown's major works, wherein the sense of vision is generally inhibited and at times totally lost. To take another example, when Edgar pursues Clithero into a cave in the wilderness after his confession in *Edgar Huntly*, Edgar finds himself "immersed in the dunnest obscurity."[10] Edgar then makes his way in exactly the manner of Mervyn in Welbeck's basement:

> In a short time, my progress was stopped by an abrupt descent. I set down the advancing foot with caution, being aware that I might at the next step encounter a bottomless pit. To the brink of such an one I seemed now to have arrived. I stooped, and stretched my hand forward and downward, but all was vacuity.
>
> Here it was needful to pose. I had reached the brink of a cavity whose depth it was impossible to ascertain. It might be a few inches beyond my reach, or hundreds of feet.[11]

In a fundamental sense, objects and the spaces they occupy exist only when physically touched in Brown's works; if not touched, their

existence is less definite. Direct physical contact in total darkness thus comprises a primary condition of Brownian reality, and the visual spaces perceived by Brown's characters are invariably informed by this condition, though to varying degrees.

Thus even after emerging from the cave, Edgar becomes aware of significant objects in the surrounding space by direct physical contact. During a bloody encounter with Indians, Edgar loses consciousness. When he comes to his senses, he rapidly takes visual note of "the cottage and the neighbouring thicket, illuminated by a declining moon." Yet Edgar notices the most significant aspect of his surroundings not through vision but through physical contact: "My head rested upon something, which, on turning to examine, I found to be one of the slain Indians."[12] In a similar encounter as he makes his way back to Solebury, Edgar stumbles as he is crossing a meadow, saying, "I lighted on something which lay across the path, and which, on being closely inspected, appeared to be an human body. It was the corse [sic] of a girl, mangled by an hatchet."[13]

Not only human bodies and the walls of caves and basements serve as objects of direct, non-visual contact in Brownian space; one also encounters islands of "a vapour, noisome and contagious,"[14] a vapor believed to be issuing from the bodies of yellow fever victims. Such victims are an important focus in novels purporting to promote—at least in their author's mind—civic virtue, insofar as such virtue plays a critical role in their rescue.[15] In *Arthur Mervyn* and *Ormond*, Brown's heroes and heroines cannot in good conscience abandon yellow fever victims to their fates, though attempting to rescue them entails physical contact with extremely unpleasant matter. For example, Mervyn, who is in general exemplary in attempting to fulfill his civic duty to help others, visits a room formerly occupied by an acquaintance and inadvertently witnesses the unfortunate end of the foreigner who is its current occupant. But before reaching the room he must experience something noxious:

> I mounted the stair. As I approached the door of which I was in search, a vapour, infectious and deadly, assailed my senses. It resembled nothing of which I had ever before been sensible. Many odours had been met with, even since my arrival in the city, less insupportable than this. I seemed not so much to smell as to taste the element that now encompassed me. I felt as if I had inhaled a poisonous and subtle fluid, whose power instantly bereft my stomach of all vigour. Some fatal influence appeared to seize upon my vitals; and the work of corrosion and decomposition to be busily begun.[16]

It is as if the disgusting effluvium of disease has solid substance. Mervyn has the impression of tasting rather than smelling this effluvium because he feels it to be a kind of "poisonous and subtle fluid" with the power to physically affect his stomach, beginning its "work of corrosion and decomposition." Olfactory sensation, which thus bears an uncanny resemblance to tactile impressions, is indispensable in defining the spaces in which Brown's characters wander.

The plague-stricken city of brotherly love does not only produce smells in relation to rescue missions; it is more generally a city that smells of fear. In Philadelphia, people's senses are constantly alert for the intrusion of invisible yet almost tangibly evil-smelling "vapours" into their immediate spaces, though their alertness does not necessarily help them. When one of Constantia's neighbors in *Ormond*, for example, discovers that his sister is infected with the disease, the neighbor abandons her, fleeing to the barn of a farmhouse in the country. However, this man himself falls victim to the disease, and since the inhabitants of the farm have as great a fear of the plague and as little care for humanity as he does, the man dies alone. Yet the episode does not end there:

> When dead, no one would cover his body with earth, but he was suffered to decay by piecemeal.
> The dwelling, being at no great distance from the barn, could not be wholly screened from the malignant vapour, which a corpse thus neglected could not fail to produce. The inhabitants were preparing, on this account, to change their abode, but, on the eve of their departure, the master of the family became sick. He was, in a short time, followed to the grave by his mother, his wife, and four children.[17]

In sharp contrast to a public sphere where "humanity" is constantly invoked, a private sphere is jealously guarded against "the sphere of the contagion."[18] This private sphere is both structured and maintained by direct contact through tactile and olfactory sensation, that is, by smells that one encounters semi-directly as physical substances.

### III

Although Mervyn is always looking into the private spaces of other people's lives, he fails to locate these within the larger space surrounding these private spheres; Mervyn's rude invasion of the house of Mrs. Villars is demonstrative. When he enters the house to look for Clemenza

Lodi, a victim of Welbeck's selfishness, Mervyn justifies his actions in the name of "the rescue of an human creature from distress and dishonor."[19] Thus feeling entitled to seek the satisfaction of his curiosity, which is "only to be gained by searching the house,"[20] Mervyn judges that he has "only to mount the stair, and go from one room to another." Mervyn succeeds in finding Clemenza hidden in one of the many rooms,[21] but the reader never gains a clear view either of the house as a whole or its mistress, Mrs. Villars, who understandably becomes enraged with Mervyn and drives him off with a pistol.

Mervyn's experience is essentially repeated in his exploration of Welbeck's house, which remains a mystery to Mervyn even after he has stayed there for some time. One night, Welbeck is late in returning home. Mervyn waits for his master in a cool bath on the first floor, but discovers that the candle he has left in the parlor has disappeared. Mervyn leaves the bath to procure a new candle, and ascends the stairs with the intention of going to the library on the third floor. However, he changes his mind regarding his destination, deciding en route to enter Clemenza's room and examine it:

> The chamber was now desolate: perhaps it was accessible: if so no injury was done by entering it. My curiosity was strong, but it pictured to itself no precise object. Three steps would bear me to the door. The trial, whether it was fastened, might be made in a moment; and I readily imagined that something might be found within to reward the trouble of examination. The door yielded to my hand and I entered.[22]

Here, in contrast to Mrs. Villars's house, Mervyn's only rationale for injudiciously entering the room is his "curiosity," that is, his ignorance and his desire to rid himself of it. Because he cannot see, he wants to see.

Yet although Mervyn always manages to discover some new aspect of whatever he investigates, he never sees it in its entirety. As late as the conclusion of the First Part—in the aftermath of his final confrontation with the villain Welbeck—Mervyn still finds occasion to search "an asylum in the remotest corner of the house" through "a trap door opened in the ceiling of the third story," where he hides himself in "a narrow and darksome nook, formed by the angle of the roof." Before descending, Mervyn casts "a curious eye over this recess" and sees "a sea of new wonders."[23] What exactly this "sea" contains, however, is never revealed, and remains to this day one of the most prominent loose ends in this narrative of unresolved enigmas. It is as if the house is itself capable of generating new recesses.

In *Arthur Mervyn* and Brown's other novels, narrow and dimly lit passages, alleys, corridors, and stairways with small cell-like spaces branching off one after another comprise a conspicuously recurring spatial structure. Whether these cells are plague-stricken houses, rooms with mysterious occupants, basement recesses littered with dead bodies, or nooks with obscure "wonders," they are invariably structurally disconnected from one another, and consequently a comprehensive three dimensional spatial impression has difficulty emerging. The significance of this spatial pattern is best considered in view of recent criticism of *Arthur Mervyn*, criticism that interrogates the novel and its protagonist in its historical and cultural context.

## IV

*Arthur Mervyn* has a long history as a subject of serious critical attention, one that is, as Cathy Davidson observes, "a history of how the novel has been interpreted." Although in Davidson's view this history is "as labyrinthine and contradictory as anything in a Gothic novel . . . [m]ost of the debate centers on the character of Arthur Mervyn. . . . [R]eaders of the novel have. . . insistently asked, 'Who is Mervyn?' This is indeed the central question of the novel."[24] In approaching this question, critics must consider whether Mervyn is innocent or guilty of complicity in Welbeck's crime; whether or not he is sincere in replacing Eliza Hadwin, who is young and poor, with Achsa Fielding, who is much older and very rich, as the object of his love; and whether Brown does or does not approve of Mervyn's shift from a moral position based on simple Republican virtues to a more cosmopolitan outlook. Brown's attitude towards Mervyn's ostensible virtue is perhaps the most important of these considerations, particularly in view of Brown's considering Mervyn capable of membership in a national community composed of enlightened, well-intentioned, virtuous individuals.

A number of critics have addressed this issue. Emory Elliott, in his *Revolutionary Writers*, states that although "on first examination the story appears to present the struggle of a virtuous country boy against the corruption of the city,"[25] closer examination—particularly of the Second Part, wherein Mervyn jilts Eliza for Achsa—reveals that "Mervyn's various assertions that he has dreams of living as a Jeffersonian gentleman-farmer, [and] that he has a warm-hearted affection for humanity . . . fail to be supported by his actions. . . ."[26] In Elliott's

view, Mervyn becomes a rather materialistic and "calculating oppor-
tunist"[27] over the course of the novel, and thus Brown distances himself
from "Mervyn, a near anagram of Everyman," who must be read as "a
symbol of the amoral, unschooled but intelligent individual struggling
to survive in the social turmoil of the post-Revolutionary age."[28] For
Elliott, Brown's attitude toward Mervyn is, in a word, ironical. Although
Mervyn himself does not believe strongly in the Republican ideal of
human virtue, a similar lack of strong belief cannot be ascribed to Brown.

Jane Tompkins presents a sharply contrasting view in her *Sensational
Designs*. For Tompkins, the structural and paradigmatic kernel of *Arthur
Mervyn* is "benevolence," conveyed in the form of Mervyn's multiple
rescue missions, as considered above. A rescue is not simply an act of
benevolence benefiting an individual, but is also "for the good of the
community," and Mervyn—especially in the First Part—engages him-
self busily in this form of benevolence, in keeping with the "ideal of
republican virtue which based the prosperity of the state on the charac-
ter of its individual citizens." According to Tompkins, however, Brown's
concept of virtue differed from "Jefferson's ideal of virtue" that com-
prised "honesty, industry, and frugality flourishing uncorrupted on the
farm." In contrast, Tompkins contends, "Brown's ideal reflects the
Federalist . . . concept of America as a nation for which commerce with-
in and without its borders is the lifeblood," and thus Mervyn's transfor-
mation in the Second Part does not incur a loss of the author's sanction;
on the contrary, "Arthur Mervyn exemplifies benevolence" by "obeying
the rules of exchange."[29] In Tompkins's understanding, Mervyn no
longer believes in Republican virtue by the close of the novel, and nei-
ther does Brown.

In contrast to both Elliott and Tompkins, Cathy Davidson maintains
that it is impossible to determine whether or not Mervyn is virtuous
according to some Republican or similar standard. It is certain that, as
Davidson contends, "Mervyn tries to make his tale . . . true by making
it . . . mythic," that is, a mythic tale in which "[a] poor boy from the coun-
try" overcoming "the dangers of the city" by virtue of his "shield of per-
fect innocence," and thence traveling "the road to riches." Stevens, the
ostensible narrator of the story until Mervyn "takes up the pen" and com-
pletely supersedes him in the last half of the Second Part, apparently
believes in these myths, which were "already part and parcel of American
popular culture and the larger ideology of individualism."[30] Stevens at
least is completely persuaded of Mervyn's virtue, and as such can be

understood to act as the trusting reader. Yet in this novel of multiple and contradictory first person narratives, Stevens "accept[s] Arthur's story mostly on faith," a faith that ultimately derives from "faith in the land whose story Arthur's story at its best sets forth—the land of opportunity, the country of the free."[31] It follows that belief in Mervyn's virtuousness depends on belief in the future of the young Republic. Since the reader may or may not hold this belief, the novel admits of several interpretations. Totalizing readings are thus neither desirable nor possible.

Michael Warner offers yet another approach. Locating early American fiction within the wider context of eighteenth-century print culture, Warner emphasizes how even novels, though difficult to subsume completely under the Republican paradigm, were basically subservient to that paradigm: "if we read Arthur Mervyn's behavior in the context of the rhetoric of republican literature, we can see the novel as figuring . . . culturally dominant assumptions and desires about the value of printed goods. Doing so would clarify the standards of value implicit in republican publication; all the more because their extension to the novel was uneasy."[32] Warner maintains that Brown can be interpreted to claim "that by showing *how* ignorance may be overcome and benevolence actualized, the novel itself helps to effect" virtuous goals. On this basis, Warner reasons that "if *Arthur Mervyn* is the kind of object that Brown describes, then its value is that of an exemplary public instrument."[33] In this interpretation, even Mervyn's obnoxious habit of entering other people's rooms without permission emerges as fundamentally virtuous conduct:

> If there is a door, Mervyn will walk through it. If there is a book, Mervyn will open it. Because of this trait he avoids the traps of ignorance and attains a secure liberty. . . . The result may resemble headlong idiocy, but since Mervyn's adventurous behavior is the unmediated result of his need for knowledge, Brown is able to regard that direct translation of knowledge into virtue as evidence that learning . . . is inherently virtuous.[34]

In contrast to Elliott, among others who argue that Brown cannot but disapprove of this kind of behavior and hence regard his character with irony, Warner sees a tension that displaces any "disparity between Brown's judgment and Mervyn's."[35] Specifically, this tension arises between "a possibility of full, surveying enlightenment at the end" of the work, which comprises the novel's beneficent instrumentality, and Mervyn's "dark, adventurous path"[36] —that is, between the author's final goal and the transitional and temporary state that is the duration of the narrative.

Warner's reading is persuasive, especially in arguing for Brown's benevolent intentions. Apart from a possible difference in outlook between Brown and Mervyn, there is certainly an unmistakable tension between the novel's overall intentions and its constituent narrative meanderings. Yet Warner ultimately places too much stress on the "moment of enlightenment interpreted as transcending or escaping the narrative condition" at the end of the novel.[37] The tension is thus finally resolved, and Warner attributes Mervyn's ignorance to the "narrative condition" in general, regarding it as an accidental, if unavoidable, eventuality.

V

From a spatial and sensory, as opposed to a narrative and temporal, point of view, ignorance is a constitutional characteristic of Mervyn and many other Brown characters. Not only does Mervyn fail to attain the "moment of enlightenment" until the end of his narrative, if ever, he also fails to grasp his spatial environment beyond the understanding permitted by means of direct and semi-direct sensation, as discussed above. The narratives that constitute *Arthur Mervyn*, which is comprised of independent tales and tales-within-tales, are typically first person narratives, and as such are necessarily limited in the information they can convey. Furthermore, these narratives are unusually nearsighted, so to speak, in the dearth of visual information they provide. As if to compensate, they are extraordinarily rich in tactile and olfactory sensation. In more abstract, sociological terms, the narratives lack the capacity to evoke the space of community.

Probing "the obscure genesis of nationalism," the anthropologist Benedict Anderson proposes in his much-celebrated *Imagined Communities* a triangular relationship between the modern concept of simultaneity, the space of a national community, and the novel. According to Anderson, the mediaeval conception of simultaneity was "wholly alien to our own," entailing a connection "established between two events which are linked neither temporally nor causally," but rather "are vertically linked to Divine Providence." As Anderson explains, "If an occurrence like the sacrifice of Issac is interpreted as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ, the here and now . . . is simultaneously something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future." The concept is akin to "what Benjamin calls Messianic time, a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present."[38] Anderson contrasts this

mediaeval conception of simultaneity to the modern understanding that succeeded it:

> What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultane-ity-along-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of "homogeneous, empty time," in which simultaneity is . . . marked not by prefiguring and ful-fillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.[39]

Along with the appearance of "homogeneous, empty time," there also emerged the capacity to imagine that even as one particular thing is happening in one place, another thing is happening elsewhere. Even if one does not witness both occurrences—even if one does not know their details or even that they occurred—the modern subject is always convinced of the ongoing, "simultaneous" occurrences of a body of such particular things. As an example, Anderson notes that "an American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his . . . fellow-Americans. . . . But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity."[40] Thus, the word "meanwhile" takes on key importance when the modern conception of simultaneity supplants the mediaeval. Space fills with comparable things, becoming a "world of plurals: shops, offices, carriages . . . and gas lamps."[41]

Anderson further maintains that the novel and the newspaper, "which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century," provided an analogue to the space of this emergent world, serving to situate it geographically and thereby constructing the "national." Much as citizens in a national space have faith in the ongoing, simultaneous existence of unknown people and events, readers of these printed forms have faith in the ongoing existence of the represented world.

Jonathan Culler succinctly reformulates Anderson's argument, suggesting that "it might be more pertinent to speak of novels that present 'the space of a community' than to emphasize 'homogeneous, empty time.'" Culler maintains that "in Anderson's account what is crucial to the role of fiction in the imagining of nations is . . . that the world evoked by the novel include events happening simultaneously, extend[ing] beyond the experience of particular individuals. . . ."[42] That is, to present the space of community, the novel must evoke a world extending "beyond the experience of particular individuals." For Culler, what "is necessary is that the narrative provide a point of view exterior to and superior to that of any particular character." Given that not every novel fulfills this criterion, Culler argues that what Anderson has in mind is

"the old-fashioned novel," and that what is "excluded is the limited point of view that developed in the novel during the course of the nineteenth century." Brown's novels, though obviously not products of nineteenth-century developments, are nonetheless narrated in the first person and thus restricted in their point of view. Yet in itself, this fact does not automatically disqualify Brown's novels from membership in the club of novels that evoke Anderson's imagined communities.

Indeed, every one of Brown's six novels, by virtue of their epistolary or semi-epistolary forms,[43] has the appearance of seeking to communicate with others; with the exception of *Jane Talbot* and *Clara Howard*, each of Brown's novels offers prefatory materials which speak of Brown's intention that it be of service to the community. In *Wieland*, Brown's "Advertisement" asserts that the work aims to contribute to the development of human knowledge by "the illustration of some important branches of the moral constitution of man."[44] In *Edgar Huntly*, Brown's introductory notice, "To the Public," states that "America has opened [a] new view to the naturalist and politician, but has seldom furnished themes to the moral painter,"[45] thus indicating Brown's intention of depicting morality in a uniquely American way. In the introductory letter in *Ormond*, "To I. E. Rosenberg," the narrator gives a conventional and pro forma guarantee that it is "an authentic, and not a fictitious tale,"[46] yet one that promises to provide an illustrative and instructive case. Finally, in the "Preface" to *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown writes of the responsibility of the author "to weave into an humble narrative, such incidents as appeared to him most instructive and remarkable" from among those incidents accompanying "the evils of pestilence" which had recently afflicted Philadelphia; Brown viewed it as "every one's duty to profit by all opportunities of inculcating on mankind the lessons of justice and humanity."[47] As these passages amply demonstrate, Brown embraced the civic ideal of overcoming ignorance and acting on benevolent intentions. In Tompkins words, "there can be no question how he himself conceived [his novel]: he wrote in order to benefit the mass of men . . . and he saw himself as a servant of 'benevolence' rather than of the Muse."[48]

## VI

Thus, on one hand, Brown explicitly states his aspiration of conveying a point of view greater than that of any particular individual, that is, a perspective of service to the community. On the other hand, Brown's

narratives prove incapable of evoking any space larger than that which a lone individual can directly sense. The tension between Brown's aspiration, which demands the imagination of a community space inhabited by unseen but simultaneously existent community members, and the limited perspective of his narratives can be translated into spatial terms.

In *Arthur Mervyn* in particular, but elsewhere in Brown's works as well, this tension is manifested in the contrast between a public space of virtuous individuals whom Mervyn wishes to help, and the dark, limited sphere of direct sensation within which he is confined as narrator. In spite of Brown's explicit and laudable intention that his novel benefit mankind, the author cannot maintain a convincing sense of a larger space of community. Once characters exit Mervyn's sphere of direct sensation, they effectively cease to exist.

Eliza Hadwin is exemplary in this respect. Almost every reader of the novel feels uneasy when Mervyn deserts Eliza Hadwin to pursue Achsa Fielding. Elliott observes that "from Percy Shelley and William Dunlap to the most recent critics, even Brown's sympathetic readers are bothered by his decision to have Arthur marry Achsa Fielding."[49] Donald Ringe locates the problem in Mervyn's character, deeming "his ability to attach himself to an older person who can provide him with the means for material success. . . [as] nothing short of uncanny."[50] The real scandal, though, is not that Mervyn chooses Achsa instead of Eliza, but that Mervyn completely forgets about Eliza after he leaves her. Davidson considers the disappearance of Eliza to be a typical Brownian "gap" of the sort that both baffles and exhilarates modern critics:

> . . . we might notice how regularly seemingly significant characters simply vanish from the narrative. There is Wallace, who gets Volume 2 going and then is himself gone . . . Miss Carlton . . . Miss Fanny Maurice. . . . But the most significant disappearing act . . . is Eliza's. She drops from the novel just before what should be the climax of the subsidiary love story in which she supposedly stars. . . . Arthur proclaims that "there is nothing upon earth more dear to me than my *Bess,*" and then never even notices dear Bess's response when Achsa proves dearer.[51]

It is as if these "seemingly significant characters," in staging their curious disappearing acts, are dispatched into some non-spatial, non-existent nowhere.

For example, Mervyn is intent on rescuing Clemenza Lodi, but after the death of her baby and several failed attempts by Mervyn to secure her protection, she is never mentioned again. In the last of these

attempts—at the end of Chapter XVI of the Second Part—Mervyn asks Achsa Fielding to look after Clemenza, then leaves for Baltimore on a mission to return a sum of money to its rightful owners. When Mervyn returns to Philadelphia four chapters later, he seems not even to remember Clemenza; her name is never again mentioned.

In addition to such "seemingly significant characters" as Clemenza, a number of minor characters also emerge from and disappear into the nowhere beyond Brownian space. These include such characters as Maravegli and Lodi, as well as the Walpoles, who arrive in America from abroad but immediately fall victim to the plague and die. Two hundred pages into the novel, Stevens casually introduces another such character as "[o]ne of my friends, by name of Carlton"[52]; Carlton plays the perplexing and superfluous role of drawing Stevens and Mervyn to the debtors' prison where Welbeck is preparing to die, then simply drops out of the picture.

Small wonder, then, that Brown's readers find it a challenge to make sense of these and other inconsistencies. Those who resist finding fault with Brown's technique have often searched instead for some consistency within these inconsistencies. Norman S. Grabo is typical of those taking this approach, addressing Brown's flaws as follows:

> Among the very first things readers note about Charles Brockden Brown's fictions is their curious and sometimes painful dependence upon coincidence. When Edgar Huntly needs a weapon, his hand just happens to fall upon a tomahawk in the darkness. Threatened women vigorously defend life and honor with penknives that pop out of nowhere just when most needed. Surely these are the classic signals of a naïve, clumsy, even childish, storyteller.

Yet Grabo goes on to defend Brown's use of coincidence as "part of a pattern of significance," a pattern reflecting "both a complex mind and a sophisticated art."[53]

Tompkins argues along similar lines. Contending that "[i]f plot in the accepted definition has no place in *Arthur Mervyn*, so character, in the sense of individual identity, is nonexistent," Tompkins maintains that "*Arthur Mervyn* is a novel that must be read structurally—that is, as a series of abstract propositions" presented in various "permutations and combinations." For Tompkins, the relationship of an episode to the plot as a whole, or the position of one character relative to another, signifies less than abstract structural repetitions within the narrative. In asserting that such "permutations and combinations spell out a message to the reader, a message whose intent is to change the social reality which the

narrative purports to represent," this interpretation attempts to reconcile textual fact with the author's intention of benefiting society.[54]

Tompkins's argument for the necessity of a structural reading is compelling, but two significant structural properties of the novel make her attempt at reconciling Brown's text and social intentions problematic. First, characters regularly emerge from and disappear into the non-spatial, non-existent nowhere beyond Brownian space, as if their ongoing existence outside of the narrator's sphere of direct sensation cannot be imagined. Second, the experience of the limited, personal space of direct sensation is remarkably intense. As a result of these two structural properties, the imaginative power of the novel to evoke a space of community extending beyond the individual—a prerequisite to realizing beneficent communal purposes—is quite weak, and spatial perception dependent upon an individual's point of view, or perhaps point of touch, is disproportionately strong. Within *Arthur Mervyn,* itself a kind of dark, narrow closet accessible primarily through tactile and olfactory sensation, space remains walled off from the space of public discourse in the wider world.

## NOTES

[1] Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* in *Charles Brockden Brown: Three Gothic Novels*, ed., Sydney J. Krause (1799–1800; New York: Library of America, 1998), 251–54.

[2] Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness*, ed., Mary Chapman (1799; Petersborough, Canada: Broadview Pr, 1999), 74.

[3] Dana Luciano, "'Perverse Nature': *Edgar Huntly* and the Novel's Reproductive Disorders," *American Literature* 70.1 (1998): 23.

[4] Brown, *Arthur Mervyn* 263.

[5] Ibid., 264.

[6] Ibid., 265.

[7] Ibid., 267.

[8] Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, eds., Sydney J. Krause and S. W. Reid (1799; Kent: Kent State UP, 1987), 160.

[9] Brown, *Arthur Mervyn* 329–30.

[10] Brown, *Edgar Huntly* 99.

[11] Ibid., 99–100.

[12] Ibid., 197.

[13] Ibid., 230.

[14] Brown, *Arthur Mervyn* 363.

[15] In her structural reading of *Arthur Mervyn*, discussed below in Section VI, Jane Tompkins contends that "all of the episodes [in the novel] are transformations of a few paradigmatic situations," and that these situations exemplify "benevolence, figured as the rescue of one man by another." See Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 66–67.

[16]  Brown, *Arthur Mervyn* 360.

[17]  Brown, *Ormond* 74–75.

[18]  Ibid., 78.

[19]  Brown, *Arthur Mervyn* 522.

[20]  Ibid., 521.

[21]  Ibid., 516.

[22]  Ibid., 302–3.

[23]  Ibid., 423–24.

[24]  Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 240.

[25]  Emory Elliott, *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725–1810* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 235.

[26]  Ibid., 244.

[27]  Ibid., 238.

[28]  Ibid., 240.

[29]  Tompkins 69.

[30]  Davidson 244.

[31]  Ibid., 250.

[32]  Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1990), 155.

[33]  Ibid., 154

[34]  Ibid., 161.

[35]  Ibid., 162.

[36]  Ibid., 163

[37]  Ibid.

[38]  Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; 2nd rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991), 24.

[39]  Ibid.

[40]  Ibid., 26.

[41]  Ibid., 32.

[42]  Jonathan Culler, "Anderson and the Novel," *Diacritics* 29.4 (1999): 23.

[43]  Specifically, *Wieland* is written in the form of Clara's letters, *Ormond* in the form of letters to its narrator's German friend, *Edgar Huntly* in the form of Edgar's letters, and *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot* in the conventional epistolary form of a series of letters exchanged between characters. Only *Arthur Mervyn* is not explicitly epistolary, but its final chapters comprise letters from Mervyn to Stevens.

[44]  Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland; or, The Transformation* in *Charles Brockden Brown: Three Gothic Novels*, ed., Sydney J. Krause (1798; New York: Library of America, 1998), 3.

[45]  Brown, *Edgar Huntly* 3.

[46]  Brown, *Ormond* 37.

[47]  Brown, *Arthur Mervyn* 231.

[48]  Tompkins 64.

[49]  Elliott 239.

[50]  Donald A. Ringe, *Charles Brockden Brown* (New York: Twayne, 1966), 77. Donald A. Ringe, *Charles Brockden Brown* (New York: Twayne, 1966), 77.

[51]  Davidson 248.

[52]  Brown, *Arthur Mervyn* 458.

[53]  Norman S. Grabo, *Coincidental Art of Charles Brockden Brown* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1981), ix–x.

[54]  Tompkins 67.