THE MIDDLE PASSAGES
OF ARTHUR MERVYN

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[any text will the more inevitably take on the characteristics of a palimpsest the more openly it allows the voices of the dead to speak, thus—in a literary transcription of our cultural heritage—bringing about a consciousness of the presentness of the past.

Claus Uhlig, “Literature as Textual Palingenesis: On Some Principles of Literary History”

The palimpsest—as both a literal agent of history that was appropriated by Western palaeographers from Eastern monasteries during the nineteenth century, and as metaphor—represents “history” not as natural evolution or progress but as the history of colonial expansion, the violent erasure and superimposition of cultures, and defiant and subversive persistence.

Sarah Dillon, “Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies”

Charles Brockden Brown approached the art of writing with a feverish dedication, restless intellect, and gothic imagination. Between 1798 and 1801, Brown wrote six novels, a book-length philosophical dialogue, and numerous shorter works. The gothic dramas of the four principal novels (Wieland, Ormond, Edgar Huntly, and Arthur Mervyn) are invested with philosophical and political significances that tantalize readers with suggestions of momentous implications without, in fact, becoming straightforward allegories or polemics. Brown’s novel-writing career occurred within the highly contentious political climate surrounding the final years of John Adams’s presidency. The hyperbolic rhetoric that seemingly charged all public speech in the era culminated in the 1798 passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, a desperate attempt by the Federalists in Congress to control the circulation of conspiracy, critique, and accusation. Although all of Brown’s novels, set as they are in the nation’s erstwhile capitol of Philadelphia and its outskirts, reflect the ideological turbulence that the nation underwent during these years of domestic and international crisis, one work,
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*Arthur Mervyn*, comes closest to expressing how partisanship, self-interest, and an atmosphere of crisis distorted the idealistic, virtuous, and democratic stories that the nation preferred to tell about itself.

Since the novel was composed in stages throughout the three years of Brown’s most prolific period, the various plot and character developments can be seen as self-conscious reflections on the varying prospects Brown saw for his career as a writer and for political and philosophical speculation during the period of the novel’s composition. These reflections form layers of textual meaning which are best approached through the interpretive metaphor of palimpsest, as suggested by my choice of epigraphs. Sarah Dillon defines palimpsestuous as a “neologistic adjective” that serves as a “shorthand for the logic and structure on the palimpsest” (244): “Where ‘palimpsestic’ refers to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest, ‘palimpsestuous’ describes the structure with which one is presented as a result of that process, and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script” (245). Dillon’s use of the term is particularly useful in approaching *Arthur Mervyn* because she emphasizes “the complex (textual) relationality embodied in the palimpsest,” as opposed to other descriptions of palimpsestic figures that do not posit any necessary relation or commentary between the layers of textual production (Dillon, 245). As a textual palimpsest, *Arthur Mervyn* betrays evidences of erasure and revision in both self-conscious and subtle ways, suggesting that the novel’s palimpsestuous narrative style is as much a part of its ideological critique as its plot development. To clarify what I see as the novel’s particular contribution to our understanding of both Brown’s vocation as a writer and the uses to which he put that vocation, I focus on the ways that Brown uses the novel as a textual forum for exploring the moral and socio-political effects of the growing American dependence upon racialized economies.

The eponymous hero of *Arthur Mervyn* moves from the countryside into the city as he seeks his place in the social milieu of a Philadelphia that is about to undergo the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Mervyn, a penniless country boy like so many ambitious young Americans of the time, becomes associated with Welbeck, a man of underhanded financial dealings, as he makes his way in a strange urban environment. When the yellow-fever stricken Mervyn falls under the care of a new benefactor, he is forced to account for Welbeck’s and his own questionable acts before the epidemic in order to preserve his freedom and reputation as the social order of the city reconstitutes itself in the epidemic’s aftermath. The chiastic structure of the novel places the depiction of Philadelphia during the epidemic at its center, and this central event is flanked by two mirroring social milieus, one of the city as it functioned before the epidemic and one which depicts the social and economic context of Mervyn’s pursuit of wealth and respectability. The first nine chapters of Volume One were composed and serially published in 1798 and end before the full onset of the epidemic. Brown resumed the novel after publishing *Wieland* and *Ormond*, completing the first volume in May of 1799. Then Brown wrote *Edgar Huntly*,

and did not complete the second volume of *Arthur Mervyn* until the summer of 1800. Consequently, the “trials of fortitude and constancy” which Brown alludes to in the novel’s preface, are not confined to the extreme circumstance of the yellow fever epidemic (3); rather, Brown’s narrative exposes similar extremity in the quotidian transactions of the new republic, particularly those which linked the increase of American wealth to the appropriation of labor by free and enslaved African Americans.

In describing his reasons for writing the novel, Brown states that “[m]en only require to be made acquainted with distress for their compassion and their charity to be awakened” (3). In a characteristic example of Brown’s ambiguous literary style, the dual meaning of “acquaint” leaves indeterminate whether a personal experience of affliction or a narrative representation of it are sufficient to arouse compassion and charity. Brown further complicates the representation of “distress” by couching the narration of the novel in a succession of nested first-person addresses. The simultaneous production of Arthur as victim and victor, subject and author, foregrounds the problematic mechanisms by which objects of charity are identified and succored, or elided and exploited. Given the prevalence of moral crisis and distress throughout the novel, readers are faced with a range of possible responses to Arthur’s story, from hostility or skepticism to qualified acceptance or approbation.1 “It is every one’s duty to profit by all opportunities of inculcating on mankind the lessons of justice and humanity,” says Brown in the preface, another ambiguous sentiment which encapsulates neatly the interpretive dilemma of Arthur’s experiences. The universality of Brown’s claim is underscored by the multiplicity of its possible interpretations. Certainly, one form of the “profit” which Brown claims he is duty-bound to seek would be the income derived from the sale of *Arthur Mervyn*; another might be the more benign pleasure of contributing to humanitarian causes; an even more profitable possibility would be the Franklinian adaptation of “lessons of justice and humanity” to the advancement of one’s personal welfare. In this interpretive landscape, the choices of a reader are likely to be as reflective of his or her prior ideological investments as they are a response to Brown’s creative intentions. In an effort, then, to explain why Brown crafted the novel with its claustrophobic hermeneutic puzzle, I emphasize the ways in which the latter portions of the novel depict American investment in domestic slavery and slave-based Caribbean economies. I do so in order to make the reader better “acquainted with [the] distress” that Brown’s America and his characters profited by and to emphasize the hidden “lessons of justice and humanity” that are exasperated by the nation’s and novel’s exculpatory first-person narratives.

Arthur’s narration of his adventures, first filtered through the sympathetic Stevens and then continued in his own voice two-thirds of the way through the novel, is riddled with lacunae and partial admissions. Regardless of whether one chooses in the end to trust Arthur or not, significant portions of his life and his observations are not included in the final version of his narrative.
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presented for public consumption. At times, Arthur is explicit about his desire to leave certain events out of his narrative, such as the evidence that his father was a drunkard and that he was a lazy and disobedient son:

I did not detain you long, my friends, in pouring [sic] my parents, and recounting domestic incidents, when I first told you my story. What had no connection with the history of Welbeck and with the part that I have acted upon this stage, I thought it proper to omit. My omission was likewise prompted by other reasons. My mind is enervated and feeble like my body. I cannot look upon the sufferings of those I love without exquisite pain. I cannot steel my heart by the force of reason, and by submission to necessity; and, therefore too frequently employ the cowardly expedient of endeavoring to forget what I cannot remember without agony. (343)

Arthur justifies his frequent use of the “cowardly expedient” of intentional forgetting by appealing to his auditors’ desire for concision and attempting to manipulate their empathy for his suffering. Whether characters in the novel acknowledge these repressed narratives or not (several, such as his family background, are interrogated, but most are left to the critics), the frequency with which unexplained events are suggested or implied by misdirection creates the potential for an enormous back-story behind the authorized text. Edward Watts argues that this element of Arthur Mervyn’s elusive indeterminacy highlights the novel’s “decolonizing potential” (102). Watts’s description of “a split between the authoritarian authorial voice” adopted by Mervyn and Stevens’s and Brown’s “empowerment of the reader’s ability to challenge that voice” is an intriguing application of postcolonial theory to the development of the American novel. Watts’s analysis depends on a distinction between “colonized” and “colonizing” modes of discourse, in short, between passive readers and manipulative story-tellers. Watts’s reading describes Arthur’s moral expediency and narrative proficiency as part of Brown’s strategy of engaging readers: “If the reader does not decolonize his or her own interpretive skills, Arthur will gain control” (104). This paranoid rendering of Arthur Mervyn is quite insightful in the way it highlights the political work that could have been accomplished through Brown’s narrative strategy. However, I believe that the implied backstory of Arthur Mervyn is more than simply a revelation concerning the character of the narrator. I view Arthur Mervyn’s colonizing mode of narration as a textual strategy of evasion and a literary palimpsest purposefully constructed over the years of the novel’s composition that Brown uses to implicate other scenes of American story-telling. If Brown and his readers behaved as Watts suggests, then the novel’s palimpsestic narration made it possible for Brown to woo a reflective readership who would be predisposed by their hermeneutic frame to accept his indictment of America’s wealth as based on racist foundations.

In the final chapter of Volume One, Brown includes an incident which serves as a Jamesian “figure in the carpet” for the erased elements of the novel.
The first nine chapters of the novel end with Welbeck’s declaration that he will turn to forgery in order to escape his poverty. When Brown resumed the novel in 1799, he dispenses with that plan in a paragraph and instead launches Welbeck by means of embezzlement and seduction. At the point where Arthur begins to succumb to yellow fever, he must rebuff the villain Welbeck in a scene notable for its mixture of good intentions and poor reading strategies. “Maniac! Miscreant! To be fooled by so gross an artifice!” exclaims Welbeck upon learning that Arthur has burned the bank notes which Welbeck claimed were forged (210). The notes had been discovered by Arthur when he was carefully reading a book in which they were concealed between the pages of the written text. This image of concealed story and concealed cash held within an otherwise open narrative illustrates both Brown’s writing strategy and Welbeck’s “gross . . . artifice.” On the hermeneutic level, careful reading is shown to be very profitable indeed, especially as Mervyn’s careful reading is inspired by his desire to translate the manuscript from Italian to English and use it to launch a literary career. The bank notes concealed in the book, while authentic, are illicit profits that Welbeck has stolen from Vincentio Lodi, a Caribbean slaveholder. Arthur’s careful reading is not to be confused with interpretive skill because Welbeck is able to bank on Mervyn’s credulity by recasting the true bank notes as counterfeit. Welbeck, however, is unable to control this fiction as Mervyn succumbs to Welbeck’s corrosive storytelling power by virtuously and naively destroying the notes. Yet what Mervyn destroys is, in fact, valuable, and he is directly responsible for impoverishing Lodi’s daughter and heir. This incident underlines the important effects of fiction, truth-claims, and interpretation even as its convoluted logical sequence undercuts the reader’s confidence in the possibility of correct interpretation.

On the socio-political level, this incident establishes a firm connection between the novel’s central event of the yellow fever epidemics and the idea of illicit gain. The first mention of yellow fever in the novel comes when Welbeck relates how he came into the possession of Vincentio Lodi’s money, possessions, and daughter. Lodi emigrates from Italy, where he was a merchant, to the island of Guadeloupe in order to become a planter. Discovered by Columbus in 1493, Guadeloupe was one of the first islands colonized by the French in North America. A mixture of indigenous and African slave labor facilitated the island’s sugar economy. Like Saint Domingue, the island was conquered and reconquered by British and French forces in the late eighteenth century, and in 1793, Guadeloupe also experienced a slave revolt in conjunction with the return of the French forces. According to Welbeck’s narrative, Lodi determines to transfer his wealth from the politically unstable island to the United States and had already effected the sale of his plantation and slaves when a slave whom he had “flattered . . . with the prospect of this freedom” murders him in retaliation for being sold along with the estate (92). Although reinforcing some elements of the Saint Domingue motif of violent insurrection, the violence of slavery in Lodi’s narrative is contained in Guadeloupe, whereas the profits of slavery are
imported to United States. Lodi’s wealth is transferred to his son along with the yellow fever which the younger Lodi contracts while traveling to meet his sister in Baltimore. There he encounters Welbeck, already on the run from a previous scandal. On his deathbed, the younger Lodi entrusts Welbeck with $20,000 in banknotes and the book with an additional $20,000 concealed between its pages. Welbeck’s subsequent career is subsidized by this influx of slave revenue, and he appropriately reinvests part of this money in another trading venture to the West-Indies.

Arthur’s resurgent naivete prevents him from making full use of his initial reading discovery of hidden cash, and Welbeck’s condemnation of his gullibility should alert the reader to an impending test of his or her own interpretive faculties. In disgust, Welbeck leaves Arthur to be captured by undertakers searching the city for plague victims. Desperate and weakened by the yellow fever to which he is moment by moment succumbing, Arthur flees to a secret hiding place he has observed in Welbeck’s mansion, “a trap door opened in the ceiling of the third story . . . at a sufficient distance from suspicion” (211, emphasis mine). As with the concealed fortune of banknotes, this “third story” is located in the transition between part one and part two of the novel, a temporal lacunae during which Brown published Edgar Huntly, a novel that can be read as a fictional indictment of how Philadelphians have exploited and persecuted Native Americans. Arthur does indeed escape detection in his secret hiding place, but he becomes trapped in the “musty, stagnant, and scorchingly hot” space and nearly suffocates. Only a flaw in the building’s construction, “a nail that was imperfectly driven into the wood,” enables him to escape the dark and suffocating recess (212). Once assured that he will not die in his hiding place, Arthur investigates the space that was “large enough to accommodate an human being,” and what he discovers “was sufficient to set [him] afloat on a sea of new wonders and subject my fortitude to a new test—“ (212).

This momentous preamble, echoing as it does the “trials of fortitude” Brown described in the preface, promises a revelation which the narrative never fulfills. Instead, the narrative deflects the attention away from the concealed space and towards Mervyn as the narrator. What is being hidden? The description we are given is tantalizing. The obvious pun of architectural and literary stories is only the most glaring suggestion that the repressed revelation relates materially to the novel itself. The space is big enough for a body. It is dark, hot, and suffocating. It is an intentionally hidden space, accessed by a ladder, and the experience of it introduces the metaphor of a ship “afloat on a sea of new wonders.” From other parts of the narrative, we know the house is owned by the wealthy widow Wentworth; it has been rented by means of money embezzled from the sale of Vincentio Lodi’s slaves and estate in Guadeloupe; a man carrying the funds from the sale of another slave plantation has earlier been secretly murdered and buried in the house’s basement; and the home is regulated by means of black servant named Gabriel who has disappeared since the beginning
of the epidemic. Although Arthur is resolute in refusing to elaborate on what he’s seen, his demurral contains as much enticement as denial:

I might indeed have precluded your guesses and surmises by omitting to relate what befell me from the time of my leaving my chamber till I regained it. I might deceive you by asserting that nothing remarkable occurred, but this would be false, and every sacrifice is trivial which is made upon the altar of sincerity. Beside, the time may come when no inconvenience will arise from minute descriptions of the objects which I now saw and of the reasonings and inferences which they suggested to my understanding. At present, it appears to be my duty to pass them over in silence, but it would be needless to conceal from you that the interval, though short, and the scrutiny, though hasty, furnished matter which my curiosity devoured with unspeakable eagerness, and from which consequences may hereafter flow, deciding on my peace and my life. (213)

Arthur “might have” avoided mentioning this event, but the pace of his story construction betrays him, much like the “imperfectly driven” nail that gives Arthur access to the hidden recess. The minute detailing of how Arthur could have concealed this whole incident from his readers highlights the narrative practice of expurgation which has been in effect throughout Arthur’s tale, making it the paradigmatic moment of Arthur’s storytelling. Recalling Edward Watts’s argument about Brown’s decolonizing writing strategy, the moment of Arthur’s unapologetic refusal to elaborate on the repressed elements of his tale is the reader’s invitation to the informed guess which Arthur’s narration has failed to preclude. The metaphors and physical descriptions that Brown uses to describe the dark, airless space of scorching heat, fevered visions, and cramped limbs richly evoke the experience of a slave’s “middle passage” from Africa to the Americas. By causing Arthur to suggest and avoid the direct representation of this “middle passage,” Brown associates his evasive narration with other hidden transactions in the New World that profit from the repressed stories of African American labor.

**Hidden Bodies and Foreign Coins**

Prior to the scenes in the first volume where he begins to succumb to yellow fever, Mervyn meets the benevolent Medlicote who supplies him with information and repose. Besides helping Mervyn determine the fate of a man he is seeking, Medlicote provides him with a picture of domestic tranquillity in the midst of the chaotic city and explains how he is able to maintain his refuge:

I remain to moralize upon the scene, with only a faithful black, who makes my bed, prepares my coffee, and bakes my loaf. If I am sick, all that a physician can do, I will do for myself, and all that a nurse can perform, I expect to be per-
formed by Austin. . . . He [Medlicote] was surrounded by neatness and plenty.

Austin added dexterity to submissiveness. (161, emphasis Brown’s)

Like the “moral observer” which Brown claims to be in *Arthur Mervyn*’s preface, Medlicote “moralize[s] on the scene” of the yellow fever in order to lay bare “lessons of justice and humanity” which should give birth to “schemes of reformation and improvement” (3). In his conversations with Mervyn, Medlicote fulfills the role of the author claimed by Brown as he “pourtrays examples of disinterestedness and intrepidity” (3). Medlicote’s moralizing, however, is buttressed by the domestic labors of a black servant whose “submissiveness” constitutes part of the healthful atmosphere which Medlicote expects will preserve his life. Food, drink, and repose result from the relationship between Medlicote and Austin, and together they form a community capable of weathering the social and physical dangers of the epidemic.

The “neatness and plenty” which characterize Medlicote’s domestic arrangements rely as much on his participation in a particular racial economy as on his understanding of the yellow fever’s pestilential qualities. In contrast to Arthur’s “casually formed” opinion that the epidemic came from “imported” substances, Medlicote attributes the disease to “a morbid constitution of the atmosphere, owing wholly, or in part to filthy streets, airless habitations and squalid persons” (161). The remedy to such a disease lay in orderly and sanitary domestic conditions and relations. For Arthur, the effects of a harmonious environment like Medlicote’s are nearly immediate: he revives his strength and soon afterward settles on a “scheme” to reform the beleaguered plague hospital in accord with the principles learned from Medlicote. Despite the significant role played by Austin in Medlicote’s domestic arrangements, both Medlicote and Arthur fail to acknowledge his importance to the scene. Arthur dreams of reforming the hospital by his own efforts, and Medlicote spends his praise on white servants, while criticizing a lack of attentiveness on the part of a “black woman” who served as a nurse for another family (160). The strategies of both men exemplify the elisions that in his preface Brown suggests occur when people fulfill their “duty to profit.” By refusing to acknowledge the relationship between racialized subjects and Philadelphia’s social and physical wellbeing, Arthur and Medlicote undercut the social relations that create the beneficent social environment which can keep the plague at bay, a mistake also made by Philadelphia’s leadership during the epidemic.

The “faithful black” who brings domestic order serves as the narrative counterpart to the “tawny” looter “habited in livery” who had nearly brained Arthur earlier in the day (147-49). Bill Christophersen suggests that Arthur’s encounter with the black looter is a subliminal portrayal of “America’s fever-stricken vision of racial vengeance, dimly hinted at in the black presence that broods elsewhere in the background” (106). Christophersen argues that the scenes in *Arthur Mervyn* of healthy blacks presiding over dead or stricken whites, as nurses, servants, and undertakers, enact “a suddenly inverted social
order,” a grim evocation of the possibility that blacks in America might follow the lead of insurrectionist slaves in Saint Domingue (105). Christophersen’s analysis of Brown’s use of black characters leads him to question whether Brown might have considered slavery to be America’s “constitutional defect,” the source of its feverish nightmares and a weakness which can be exploited by foreign enemies. While Christophersen successfully links Brown’s literary representation of blacks in *Arthur Mervyn* to his later political writings which also present slavery as a threat to American tranquillity, his analysis does not capture the complex racial politics which appears to have informed Brown’s fictions. As the incidents I discuss below demonstrate, there are as many suggestions of racial harmony in the novel as there are of discord. Most significantly, Christophersen’s conflation of blacks and slavery elides Philadelphia as the site of the most prominent free African community in the United States. In reading more closely across the historical grain of *Arthur Mervyn*, a complex image of racial interdependence emerges, one in which the absence of exploitative social relations serves as an indicator of moral and physical health.

To begin with, Austin, the “faithful black,” is both a dutiful servant and a bearer of the spiritual value of faithfulness. Austin is one among several characters in *Arthur Mervyn* who stands in for the significant service of African Americans during the yellow fever epidemics of 1793. The faithfulness of blacks like the fictional Austin was a constituent element of the efforts of the free black community in Philadelphia to raise their standing in the eyes of white Philadelphians by heeding Benjamin Rush’s misguided call for blacks to serve as nurses and public servants during the epidemics. Through his brief depiction of Austin, Brown reveals and critiques the dismissive attitude that contemporary Philadelphians had towards the service of free African Americans. In fact, the plot of *Arthur Mervyn* displays a sustained engagement with Matthew Carey’s account of the 1793 epidemics, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia*. Carey briefly mentions the “very great” services of Jones, Allen, and “others of their colour” only to discount them by a much longer description of how “the vilest of the blacks” took advantage of the demand for their services as nurses by charging exorbitant wages (Carey, 63). Some, he contends, were even “detected plundering the houses of the sick” (63). While most who could abandon the infectious atmosphere of the city during the epidemic did so, the poor were unable to afford this expedient. Nor could they afford to hire nurses and personal physicians as the wealthier citizens who remained were able to do. Their only hope, as the city leaders who had been appointed guardians of the poor recognized, would be the intervention of the government to provide a more healthful environment and shared medical care. William Hamilton’s mansion at Bush Hill, a less urban area on the northern edge of the city, was requisitioned for “reception of the infected poor” (Carey, 20). In a remarkable reversal of social privilege, indigent and afflicted Philadelphians were removed from the stricken quarters of the city to a spacious mansion vacated by one of the city’s elite. After two weeks of operation, however, the Bush Hill hospital
became a concentration of the worst of all possible environments, where “the sick, the dying, and the dead were indiscriminately mingled together. The ordure and other evacuations of the sick, were allowed to remain in the most offensive state imaginable. . . . It was, in fact, a great human slaughter house” (Carey, 32). Brown adapts his descriptions of the Bush Hill hospital from this period of the hospital’s organization. Wallace, Susan Hadwin’s fiancé, gives a description of the hospital that conforms closely to the ones given in Carey’s account, down to the carousing attendants, and the indiscriminate mixing of the dying and the dead."

Blacks were not the only important contributors to Philadelphia’s epidemic relief efforts slighted by the characters in *Arthur Mervyn*. At Bush Hill’s lowest point Stephen Girard, a French immigrant, volunteered to manage the hospital. Soon after, he called in Jean Deveze, another French immigrant, to bring order to the medical procedures of the hospital. The “human slaughter house” became transformed, in David Nassy’s words, into a scene of “gladness”: “the situation, the cleanliness, the neatness that reign in every room, the contented and satisfied looks of the patients, who seem to bless their benefactors from the bottom of their hearts. . . . has moved my sensibility, in such a way, as to shed tears” (45). Under the supervision of the half-blind, scrappy merchant Girard, the hospital avoided “prodigality,” and yet it became a scene of plenty for the poor. In place of daily privations which had been followed by the scourge of yellow fever, the poor were treated to “[t]he most valuable medicines, the most exquisite wines, the nicest and most suitable diet; in short, everything . . . in abundances” (Nassy, 45). The bucolic excess of this description is remarkable given that it was written on October 10, 1793, when nearly 100 Philadelphians were still dying each day. Nonetheless, by Nassy’s account, the charnel house had become a garden of Eden capable of stopping the spread of the yellow fever in the same manner as Medlicot’s harmonious household with Austin. *Arthur Mervyn*, narrated initially by a doctor without a French name but who advocates French methods—“cleanliness, reasonable exercise, and wholesome diet”—focuses upon the initial period of Bush Hill’s operation (234). Brown incorporates Stephen Girard’s effective management of the hospital within the text as Arthur’s humanitarian fantasy of undertaking the reform of the hospital himself, a good intention which he not surprisingly fails to follow through on. This disparity between fiction and history would have been apparent to *Arthur Mervyn*’s first readers, and Brown’s overt substitution of Arthur’s fantasy for Girard’s heroism contributes to the interpretive tension surrounding Brown’s strategy of partial or misleading representation, further clarifying that the novel’s revisionism should be attributed to various narrators of the tale rather than Brown.

The uneven representation of France and French immigrants in the novel also derives significantly from differences in attitudes towards the French during the periods of the novel’s setting and composition. Between 1793 and 1798, American attitudes towards France underwent numerous transformations.
As with the case of blacks and slavery, the tradition of scholarship on *Arthur Mervyn* has tended to simplify the historical context by making a misleading equation between France and revolutionary excess, both in the slave insurrections of the French West Indies instigated by the 1791 abolition of slavery in France and the Reign of Terror inaugurated by Robespierre in September, 1793. However, attitudes towards France were much more mixed throughout this period than a narrow focus on revolution can convey. Beginning in 1793, France’s wars with England and Spain elicited considerable excitement among Americans, most notably in the South where restrictive Spanish trade policies made the possibility of a French victory desirable. Most important, however, to the plot of *Arthur Mervyn* is the difference between Caribbean trading rights and navigation hazards in 1793 and 1798. In 1793, nearly a thousand American sailors were at sea in French privateers attacking British vessels in the Caribbean. By 1798, however, this maritime alliance had ended, and tensions between the United States and France resulted in a naval conflict known as the Quasi-War. Nonetheless, Brown anachronistically casts Frenchmen and French influences as the evil afflicting Philadelphia during 1793, overlooking the prominent French presence in Philadelphia and the positive roles taken by French immigrants during the 1793 epidemic. Brown thus exploits the anti-French sentiment generated by Federalist hawks in 1798 who were hoping to force America into a war with France in response to the XYZ Incident. By ironically transforming British villains into French ones, Brown utilizes a writing strategy of forgery and represion that results in a denaturalization akin to that accomplished by the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. For example, though Welbeck is carefully associated in the novel with French manners, he is actually the son of Liverpool “trader” (85), a patrimony that, as Gould observes, references the principal port of England’s slave trade (Gould, 167). Only Welbeck’s facility in the French language separates him from the English cultural roots of other characters depicted as more “native” Americans. Arthur’s conversion of English villains into French ones thus enables a more immediate condemnation of Welbeck for his contributions to Philadelphia’s moral climate, an indictment that the subtext of the novel reveals could be applied more broadly to Philadelphia’s white elite because of their involvement in the slave-based economies of the Caribbean.

Although Brown’s close friend and literary collaborator Elihu Hubbard Smith may be the model for the benevolent Dr. Stevens, the first narrator of *Arthur Mervyn*, the idealism which bound Brown and Smith merges with more questionable traits in Stevens, among them the same tendency towards self-exoneration and fatuous reasoning which several critics have remarked in Arthur. A number of contradictions emerge in the opening pages of *Arthur Mervyn* that raise questions about Dr. Stevens’s willingness to forthrightly express all of the important details related to his story. The narrator, not yet revealed as a doctor by the name of Stevens, explains by not explaining why he has remained in Philadelphia during the yellow fever epidemics of 1793. Though it would have been plausible for the doctor to claim that a humanitarian desire to fulfill his
profession had motivated him, Stevens does not take this expediency. By refusing to “enumerate these motives, or to dwell on my present concerns and transactions,” Stevens draws a veil over his reasons for endangering his family by remaining in the pestilential city (5). Thus the reader is enabled to question whether a desire for the profitable “transactions” which would come from doctoring rich Philadelphians has motivated Stevens to remain in the city, rather than merely assuming the charitable motivations that Stevens implies in his description of his profession. While this interpretation may not seem consistent with the subsequent benevolent action of Dr. Stevens in rescuing the plague-stricken Arthur Mervyn, Stevens intimates in his remonstrations with Arthur that he may have undisclosed reasons for these actions: “all we ask in return is good spirits and compliance. . . . as for recompence [sic], we will look to that” (7). Stevens also relates in these opening lines the story that the family’s “servant maid had been seized three days before by the reigning malady, and, at her own request, had been conveyed to the hospital” (6). Yet when Stevens asks his wife if she will consent to have Arthur enter their house as an “inmate,” she brushes off his suggestion that the hospital might serve as an alternative refuge for the sick youth: “Nay, said she, talk not of hospitals. At least let him have his choice. I have no fear about me for my part, in a case where the injunctions of duty are so obvious. Let us take the poor unfortunate wretch into our protection and care” (6). Given the horrifying description of the hospital later in the text, it is a mystery why anyone would have chosen to go there if they had a reasonable alternative. Since Stevens and his wife have to persist through “considerable difficulty” to persuade Mervyn to accept their offer of refuge, one wonders why the “injunctions of duty” were less clear in the case of their servant girl (7).

Nonetheless, little else occurs in the early parts of the novel to cause a reader to question Stevens’ prepossession in Mervyn’s favor, that is, until Mervyn relates a tale by Medlicote about the merchant Thetford’s inhuman treatment of his “faithful and heroic” servant girl. Thetford, like Stevens, had been “detained [in the city] by a regard to his interest,” and he manages to retain several of his servants and one of his clerks to assist him in his business (158). The servant girl resolves not to abandon Thetford’s family despite the “remonstrances of her parents and friends” who retreated from the city (158). Eventually, she succumbs to a “slight indisposition.” Without even confirming that her illness was pestilential, Thetford hustles the girl off to the hospital, despite her “unconquerable dread” of the place (159). In Revolutionary Writers, Emory Elliott calls into question Medlicote’s exculpatory remarks regarding Thetford’s treatment of the servant girl, that her “rank and education . . . might be some apology for negligence.” Arthur absorbs this “cruel indifference” from Medlicote as well, and it bodes ill for his relationship with the simple Eliza Hadwin, a love interest from the laboring class introduced midway through the novel (Elliott, 244-5). If the “conduct of Thetford was as absurd as it was wicked,” what should be inferred about the good doctor Stevens (159)? Like Thetford, Stevens has kept his wife and child in the plague-infested city despite ample opportuni-
ties to leave. Though he claims that his servant girl chose to go to the hospital willingly, the numerous resemblances between his situation and Thetford’s suggests that “cruel indifference” towards the servant classes may be a more uniform characteristic of Philadelphia’s white elite than its members care to acknowledge. By providing the evidence that Stevens is an evasive narrator like Arthur, Brown expands the scope of the novel’s back-story to encompass even those who appear to be benevolent bystanders. In his response to Arthur, Stevens is the ideal reader invoked by Brown in his preface—one who needs only to be “acquainted with distress” to be galvanized into action. Consequently, the reminder that readers also have interests that may predispose them to overlook the gaps in the exculpatory stories of others points us back to Brown’s ambiguous claim that readers of his novel will find in it a stimulus towards acts of self-interested benevolence.

Although Philadelphians engaged in trade with many parts of the world, *Arthur Mervyn* evinces an almost obsessive focus on the economic relations between Philadelphia and the slave-based economies of the Caribbean. Although the transfer of slaves from the West-Indies to the United States as a source of *contagion* has been much remarked in Brown criticism, the trading *relationship* between the two sites appears to be a more important concern in the Welbeck-Lodi story. Once it has been embezzled by Welbeck, the Lodi fortune circulates in and through American coffers as part of an economic system of usury and corruption. A related connection between the United States and the Caribbean is shown in the story of the Maurices, “an English family, who formerly resided in Jamaica, and possessed an estate of great value, but who, for some years, have lived in the neighborhood of Baltimore” (241). After the Maurice patriarch dies, his wife decides to “sell her husband’s property in Jamaica, the Island becoming hourly more exposed to the chances of war and revolution, and transfer it to the United States” (241). Jamaica, a British possession, is as prone to “revolution” as Saint Domingue, and the Maurices, like the Lodi family, view the United States as a safe harbor for the profits extracted from slave labor. The Maurice’s story illustrates the economic connections between the United States and the Caribbean even more effectively than the Lodi’s saga because of the manner in which their capital is transferred from slavery into American society. Amos Watson, an upright American sailor of good repute and noble family sentiments, serves as the courier for both the proceeds of Maurice’s estate sale and the news of Welbeck’s failed investment. He is also, coincidentally, the brother of a woman who was earlier seduced and ruined by Welbeck. Watson returns from the West Indies to confront Welbeck regarding his sister’s defamation and death. Welbeck murders him and buries him, with Arthur’s assistance, in the basement of Welbeck’s Philadelphia home. Unbeknownst to Welbeck, Watson has been buried along with the proceeds of the Maurice’s estate sale. When Welbeck discovers his mistake, he recovers the “four bills of exchange, drawn upon opulent merchants of London” from Watson’s shallow grave (242). However, he is arrested before he can spend the money, and in a
repetition of Lodi’s story, Welbeck on his deathbed entrusts the money to Arthur in order to be restored to the Maurice family. Significantly, in both the Lodi and the Maurice story, Americans stand to gain an enormous profit from Caribbean slavery in transactions that appear more like piracy than legitimate trade. The wholesale transfer of assets from Jamaica and Guadeloupe to the United States in *Arthur Mervyn* emphasizes the equivalence between traders from the United States and “opulent merchants of London,” a connection that further implicates virtuous-minded Americans like Amos Watson in support and extension of slavery. That Watson is twice despoiled by Welbeck, through his own death and that of his sister, is indicative of the true costs that such an affiliation incurs.

Once Arthur has been entrusted with ten thousand pounds sterling, “the whole patrimony of a worthy and excellent family,” the novel undergoes a significant transformation (242). Up until chapter sixteen of the second volume, *Arthur Mervyn* has been narrated by Dr. Stevens. However, once Arthur enters the class of Philadelphians who safeguard the proceeds of Caribbean slavery for the good of the American economy, he picks up the pen on his own right and proceeds to narrate the rest of the novel himself. Immediately, Arthur, the empowered author, embarks on a stagecoach ride between Philadelphia and Baltimore where he encounters the Caribbean “other”: “a sallow Frenchman from Saint Domingo, his fiddle-case, an ape, and two female blacks” (370). “Prenez garde!” exclaims the Frenchman as Arthur contemplates the similarities and differences between the four “companions” (370). “Diable noir!” The confined space of the stagecoach in which passengers move from one social space into another is another of the unacknowledged “middle passages” in Arthur’s narrative. For Brown’s readers, Arthur’s journey from Philadelphia to Baltimore meant more than just a change of scenery; it was a passage from a state with a largely free African American population to one which had six times as many slaves as Pennsylvania had freedmen. Furthermore, the journey from Philadelphia to Baltimore was also an immediate and urgent necessity for the French slaveholder if he intended to retain the two African Americans as slaves because Pennsylvania’s gradual abolition act of 1780 required that any slaves brought into Pennsylvania be emancipated six months after their arrival. Refugee slaveholders from Saint Domingue unsuccessfully petitioned the Pennsylvania legislature for an “exemption from the law for ‘their domestic Negroes,’” and by the middle of 1793, as many as 450 freed French slaves from Saint Domingue were residing in Philadelphia (Nash, 142).

Arthur’s journey to Baltimore also subtly references other legal events of 1793. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 allowed Africans to be seized and returned to their purported owners without the apprehended person being given an opportunity to plead his or her case before a court. By returning the illegally obtained “bills of exchange” representing the Maurice’s Jamaica plantation, Arthur emblematizes the preservation of slaveholder property rights which the federal act enforced. However, the repatriation of “fugitive” slave revenues which Arthur undertakes nearly has disastrous and unexpected consequences. In
an ironic commentary on the legal and social mores which motivate Arthur to return the notes of exchange to their rightful owners, Mrs. Maurice, still attended by two Africans who are parodically deferential to whites, proves to be an unworthy beneficiary of Arthur’s service. Arthur’s eager expectations of a reward for his complicity with the Caribbean slave economies is thwarted by the cupidity and arrogance of Mrs. Maurice and one of her daughters. When Arthur finally receives a bounty of $1,000 from Mrs. Maurice’s lawyer, Brown leaves it unclear whether the money originates in the lawyer’s outrage at the Maurice’s ungrateful behavior and his sympathetic desire to protect Arthur from the consequences of his naïve trust, or whether the money has been wrested from Mrs. Maurice by the threat of legal action. In either case, Arthur’s eager complicity with the ugly side of the American economy’s dependence on the slave trade, while not as disastrous as that of Watson, nearly results in his own personal ruin, and this lesson is not ultimately lost on the determined social climber.

Marrying “Mamma” and the Discourse of Charity

Although Arthur doesn’t follow through on his fever-fantasy to reform the Bush Hill hospital, he does a creditable job of pursuing charitable aims that fall within his more immediate sphere of influence. Arthur accosts passers-by to obtain help for Wallace in escaping plague-stricken Philadelphia; he intercedes on the orphaned Eliza Hadwin’s behalf before her uncle, and then sponsors her into Achsa Fielding’s household; he attempts to rescue Vincentio Lodi’s daughter from a house of prostitution and repeatedly pleads her case with Mrs. Wentworth and Achsa Fielding; he visits Welbeck in prison; he sends money to Watson’s widow and personally delivers the Maurice’s delayed bequest. He is not in the least surprised to find his own condition improved by this course of action. Arthur’s enthusiasm for charitable works is mirrored by his own eagerness to receive charity, whether from Welbeck, Stevens, the Maurice’s solicitor, Mrs. Wentworth, or even his future wife, Achsa Fielding. This last transaction reveals the full complexity of Arthur’s education into the exigencies of Philadelphia’s economic and social relationships, as Achsa’s Jewish background connects repressed histories of social and economic exploitation with the romantic resolution of racial interdependence in a vision of domestic harmony.

With the exception of the scene where Arthur bursts in on Achsa when she is “arrayed with voluptuous negligence” and there is only an aging bawd with whom to compare her, Achsa is portrayed as physically unattractive (318). Though Arthur claims that he finds her to be “lovely,” he describes her “personal defects” in detail: “in stature, she is too low; in complexion [sic], dark and almost sallow; and her eyes, though black and of piercing lustre, has a cast, which I cannot well explain” (414). Stevens describes her in even more extreme terms when he attempts to goad Arthur into admitting that he is in love with her: “she is unsightly as a night-hag, tawney [sic] as a moor, the eye of a gypsey, low
in stature, contemptibly diminutive, scarcely bulk enough to cast a shadow as she walks, less luxuriance than a charred log, fewer elasticities than a sheet pebble” (432). Despite these drawbacks, Stevens acknowledges that “no creature had ever more power to bewitch” (433). Stevens is, of course, going to extremes in his depiction of Achsa for the comic effect of provoking Arthur to a romantic defense of his paramour. An entirely ironic dismissal of his diatribe is precluded, however, by the numerous other physical descriptions of Achsa in the text that concur with Stevens’ litany in some details. Many of the descriptions given of Achsa associate her with African Americans, including Stevens’s telling exaggeration that she is as “tawney as a Moor.” Though Freudian interpretations of Arthur’s predilection for addressing Achsa as “mamma” have proven irresistible for many critics, a racial interpretation of the appellation might be more appropriate (429). Since Achsa’s “ugly” lineaments are the markers of race, Arthur’s attraction to her is, in part, a reminder of the “faithful” Austin in Medlicote’s harmonious household. Arthur chooses to marry Achsa despite the considerable drawbacks of her appearance, her age, her prior marriage, and her child still living in Europe under her father-in-law’s care. While there are many reasons why Arthur might choose Achsa over the young and fair Eliza Hadwin, the chief among them is her reputation of great wealth. The resultant marriage of capital and poverty, wisdom and beauty, racialized subject and white American, is a narrative resolution which speaks to the novel’s back-story of racialized economies more than it does its front-story of social mobility.

By means of an unlikely marriage, the reader is again jarred into a realization that there are repressed aspects of Arthur’s narrative that demand accounting. “Yellow,” of course, describes many more things than just a fever. It can describe gold and it can be used as a synonym for sallow, the modifier which Arthur uses to describe the complexion of both the Frenchman in the stagecoach and his future wife. In addition to its depiction as a dangerous infection, then, “yellow fever” is a trope which Brown uses to express obsession in its many forms: greed, romance, and international economic relations. The relationship between racialized subjects and Philadelphia’s social and physical wellbeing suggested by the dynamics of Austin’s association with Medlicote does not explicitly address “schemes of reformation and improvement” that would impact the whole of Philadelphia society, and not just individual agents like Arthur (3). Consequently, the implications of Brown’s rendering of Philadelphia’s connection to the slaveholding economies of the Caribbean and the various scenes of African American service within Philadelphia remains to be accounted for through an explication of what shape a reform of American racial economies might take in contrast to the xenophobic practice of expelling slaves as the source of literal and metaphoric contagion or a more feasible but equally racist quarantine of African American freedmen. Brown achieves this through Mervyn’s marriage to his “mamma.”

Were it not for the context of Arthur’s tutelage into domestic harmony by Austin and Medlicote during the yellow fever epidemic and the racial asso-
Arthur recurs to the importance of “fidelity and skill and pure morals,” a cataloging which reminds the reader not only of Austin but also, in negation, of the lascivious dairymaid, Betty Lawrence, who seduces Arthur’s father and denies him his meager patrimony. The “light and regular” activities also hail back to the prescriptions for avoiding or recovering from the yellow fever. For Arthur, “generous recompences” for “domestic service” become the indispensable key to “true happiness.” Brown’s surprising and unpopular resolution of the love triangle between Arthur, Eliza, and Achsa intimates that an economically just interracial household would contribute to both the economic and physical health of its residents and that of the surrounding society. Although the reader may question whether Arthur will persevere in this high-minded pursuit with more diligence than he gave his dream of reforming the Bush Hill hospital, the economic and social implications of Arthur’s proposed household would be truly revolutionary. Taken as an example of how the nation should best pursue “true happiness,” Brown’s parable of plague and plunder suggests that adopting of Arthur’s “scheme of reform” at the national level would force “generous recompences” for the suffering of African Americans that had been relegated to hidden social spaces in America’s middle passage from colony to wealthy republic.

Such a moralizing and politically radical suggestion could hardly be made in direct terms by an author who hoped to profit from the sales of his novel. In his survey of writers in the early republic, Emory Elliott argues that novelists like Charles Brockden Brown wrote in a publishing environment in which “the relationship between the American writer and his readers would have to be one in which the author appeared to have no lesson to teach, indeed in which he seemed not even to be speaking for himself” (Revolutionary Writers 47). Brown’s strategy in Arthur Mervyn of situating evasive storytellers within narrative and historical contexts that suggest their unacknowledged culpability within a racialized economy allows him to evoke the sufferings of African Americans in their ongoing middle passage from slaves to citizens in a manner in which “he seem[s] not even to be speaking for himself.” By approaching the difficult topic of racial injustice through evasions, indirections, and false starts, Brown bequeaths an ambiguous literary inheritance to his readers, a palimpsestic text that, in Claus Uhlig’s terms, “allows the voices of the dead to speak” (502). At the same time, Brown chose to abandon fiction as a vehicle for political and philosophical speculation when he concluded Arthur Mervyn. What had begun as searching exploration of the hermeneutic and racial politics of 1790s...
ended with a farewell to daydreams that could too easily be evaded or refuted. The metaphoric promise of Mervyn’s concluding humanitarian fantasy, unfulfilled in Brown’s day, remains a challenging evocation of economic justice and racial harmony even when uttered, as it is, by a newly moneyed aspirant to Philadelphia’s white elite. Although the multiple instances of Arthur experiencing or observing middle passages associate his rise from country peasant to urban property owner with domestic and transatlantic slave economies, the type of “profit” which may be taken from these glimpses behind the palimpsestic screen of American storytelling is left for the reader to calculate.

Notes

1. Elliott provides a balanced account of Arthur Mervyn as an archetypal American navigating the extremes of opportunism and idealism in his pursuit of social and economic enfranchisement in Revolutionary Writers, 234-65. His suggestion that Arthur’s inconsistencies may be attributable to unconscious motivations helps resolve the tension many readers have in weighing the evidences for Arthur’s guilt or innocence. Readings of Arthur Mervyn which treat Arthur as a scoundrel tend to focus on his role as narrator, while those which exonerate him from the more troubling aspects of his story commonly remark on Brown’s intentions as a moralist. See also Traister’s discussion of libertinism as a model for Mervyn as an unreliable narrator (1-6 and 17-24).

2. This investment is forfeited through the fiction that two French mulattos had attempted to smuggle contraband on Thetford’s ship, which was then impounded by a British vessel, Britain and France being at war in this period. The remainder of the money is discovered by Arthur and disposed of in the manner described earlier.

3. See Sivils and Hinds for two discussions of the Native American presence in Edgar Huntly.

4. Jared Gardner makes a similar negative argument about Brown’s racial politics in his Master Plots. Pointedly nationalist writers like Brown faced a problem that founding “a national literature involved not simply cultural difference from Europe, but a complicated defensive relation to African Americans and Native Americans as well” (2). See his chapter on Edgar Huntly for more on Brown’s “essentially political” understanding of American race relations (53).

5. In 1793, nearly five percent of Philadelphia’s population was composed of free blacks. By 1800, that number would grow to ten percent. Despite the negative treatment of blacks in the press and the national legislature, Philadelphia remained the most attractive destination in United States for free blacks.

6. Rush believed that blacks would not be affected by yellow fever to the same degree as whites, and he was able to convince Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, leaders of Philadelphia’s black Christian community and the Free Africa Society, to use their influence among Philadelphia’s free blacks to recruit nurses for ailing whites (Nash, 122-4). Within two weeks it became apparent even to Rush that his ersatz racial prognostications had been wrong, but Jones and Allen continued to urge blacks to take up their civic burdens as Good Samaritans because “the meek and humble Jesus, the great pattern of
humanity, hath commanded us to love our enemies, to do good to them that hate and
despitefully use us” (qtd. in Nash, 123). Black Philadelphians served as nurses in the
Bush Hill hospital and as attendants to Rush’s patients throughout the months of the epi-
demic despite the evidence that blacks were as likely to die from yellow fever as whites.

7. Philip Gould effectively argues that Carey’s account and the refutations of
Jones and Allen show “how the subjects of enlightened manners and human sympathy
were not only social but distinctly political categories through which white and black
Americans disputed the racial constitution of early republican America” (179) Gould
views Carey’s account as less prejudicial to African Americans than I am characterizing
it. See 161-67 of his “Race, Commerce, and the Literature of the Yellow Fever in Early
National Philadelphia” for more on the schematizing of yellow fever literature as split
between contagionist and climatist positions.

8. Arthur’s brief transformation into the image of Frenchman when he adopts
Lodi’s wardrobe suggests that the America represented by Arthur was significantly in-
vested in French commodities and policies. See Christophersen, 107-8, for more on this
interpretation of Arthur’s mirror encounters.

9. Watch out! Black devil!

10. Given that Arthur is the “image” of his mother and he is conventionally
very attractive, the resemblance between Achsa and Arthur’s mother cannot be physical
(343).

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