

2014

# Banknotes in a Book: Money and Texts in Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793*

Elena Yurievna Perminova  
eyp002@bucknell.edu

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## Recommended Citation

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**BANKNOTES IN A BOOK: MONEY AND TEXTS IN CHARLES  
BROCKDEN BROWN'S *ARTHUR MERVYN, OR MEMOIRS OF THE  
YEAR 1793***

by  
Elena Perminova

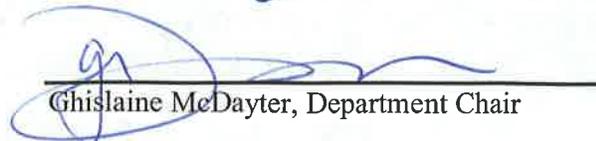
A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of  
Bucknell University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in English

Approved by:



Michael Drexler, Advisor



Ghislaine McDayter, Department Chair

May 6th 2014

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between money and writing in the novel *Arthur Mervyn*, written in 1799 by one of the most prominent early American novelists, Charles Brockden Brown. I show how writing in Brown's book is closely tied with the world of commerce, being portrayed as a means of earning money, as both physical and intellectual property, and as money itself (paper bills, checks, promissory notes). Moreover, money and texts often accompany each other, and are similar in the way they are circulated and treated: they fail to reach their recipients, they are lost and found, destroyed, and forged.

Drawing on poststructuralist theory in general, and on Jean-Joseph Goux's theory of "symbolic economies" in particular, I demonstrate, through close-readings of a number of episodes, that both paper money and written or printed texts in the novel form a symbolic space detached from reality. This detachment facilitates manipulation and fraud, so both paper money and writing are portrayed as unreliable in *Arthur Mervyn*. I also argue that Brown's view of money and textual production is reflected in the form of the novel. I use Roland Barthes' idea of "contract-narratives" and Frederic Jameson's theory of genre as a social contract to show how Brown undermines the reader's expectations and makes the text of *Arthur Mervyn* ambiguous and unreliable, just like the texts depicted in the novel.

I also view this analogy between writing and money in *Arthur Mervyn* as a product of the historical configuration Brown lived in. The 1790s saw two interrelated processes: the emergence of individual and professional authorship, and a growth in the use of paper currency. Brown was, without any doubt, acutely aware of these changes in both financial and literary spheres. Despite being born into a family of

import-export merchants and forced to join their company, he aspired to become a professional author, making money solely by writing. Hence his sensitivity to the profound analogy between the world of finance and the world of literary production that he registers and explores in *Arthur Mervyn*.

## INTRODUCTION

The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When the simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires – the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise – and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time the fraud is manifest, and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections.

Ralph Waldo Emerson “Nature”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, like all transcendentalists, believed in the absolute truth inherent in humans and nature and easily accessible to simple and benevolent souls. For every “thought,” for every truth, he thinks there is a “proper symbol.” Commerce and “the desire of riches” corrupt the soul, depriving it of the love of good. Consequently, language is perverted too, emptied of its initial meaning in order to make it “stand for things which are not” (36-37). Tellingly, Emerson connects this corruption to the transition to paper money and, more specifically, to paper money not supported by gold. Transcendentalists believed in a direct link between nature and language; in other words, that language, used properly, is directly linked to the natural world. No wonder Emerson condemns paper currency that is not backed up by gold bullion – a sign system that is not rooted in material reality, according to his logic, is

false and unreliable. As Jennifer Baker brilliantly shows in her book *Securing the Commonwealth: Debt, Speculation, & Writing in the Making of Early America*, concerns about paper currency's unreliability had been growing since 1690 when "the Massachusetts legislature became the first government in the Western world to issue a paper money" (6). By Emerson's time paper bills had become so prevalent that he lists "[t]he paper currency" and "[j]oint stock companies" among "Peculiarities of the Present Age" in a 1827 journal entry (487-488). Transcendentalists may have disliked the commercialization of life and the dominance of paper money, but they may not have realized that their works were influenced by it too. First, they often use economic metaphors to describe their writing: "This Book is my Savings Bank" (492), Emerson says in his journals. Second, their emergence – like the emergence of any other author in 19<sup>th</sup> century America – was in some respect the result of the very commercialization they despised.

At number two in the same list of peculiarities, Emerson writes, "It is said to be the age of the first person singular" (488). And he is right because the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the age of authors with strong individual voices, like Emerson himself. The previous century in America was much different in this respect, and the reason for that was the republican notion of writing as common property. Everybody could write and even publish – anonymously and, therefore, without receiving any royalties.<sup>1</sup> The change came in the 1790s when the first attempts were made at writing professionally. Charles Brockden Brown (1771 – 1810) was one of the trailblazers of professional authorship in the early States. Although he did not fully disclose his name in his

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<sup>1</sup> For authorship in the early States, I consulted Michael Gilmore's "Letters of the Early Republic" in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, and Kenneth Dauber's *The Idea of Authorship in America: Democratic Poetics From Franklin to Melville*.

published works (he only published his initials on his major novels), he tried to make a living entirely by writing, and, at the same time, authored some highly original literary works. In my thesis, I argue that this new authorial consciousness and presence we can see in Brown's works is related to the changes in the U.S. financial system. I am going to examine how his novel *Arthur Mervyn* reflects this connection through a strong association between money and texts on the plot level, and also through the form of the novel itself.

The 1790s were a time of great changes in both Europe and America. The French and the Haitian Revolutions brought masses of immigrants to the American shores, diversifying more fully the ethnic and linguistic scene of big port cities. This scene had already been somewhat diverse, due to the increasing international trade the early republic conducted with Europe and the Caribbean. While Britain and France, at war with each other, were placing embargoes on each other's trade, the U.S. took advantage of being a neutral ground and started re-exporting goods from the West Indies to Europe. Some scholars, like Stephen Shapiro, think that the growing importance of re-export trade was one of the factors that led to the rise of the novel, as it "highlighted the poverty for laborers," and "framed the problem of establishment for the next generation of middle-class youth in times of changing stratification" (139). According to Shapiro, "[t]hese two crises of social reproduction would fuse to ignite the early American novel's rise as images of rising class inequalities became used to represent infraclass competition" (139). Besides the increase of Transatlantic trade, some other important events happened in the 1790s that also fostered the emergence of national literature.

For the recently-formed United States, trade was one of the ways to establish its economic independence from Europe. Another step in this direction was the Coinage Act of 1792 that authorized construction of the first U.S. Mint, which started issuing silver dollars the following year. It also established the dollar as the national currency, even while allowing, for the circulation of Spanish milled dollars that were still in use throughout the former colonies. National currency was a symbol of economic self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, distrust of paper money developed in a period of over sixty years, during which the government did not issue any bills, but rather all paper money was issued by banks and other private entities. In this light, we can understand Emerson's laments about paper currency: the rich variety of bills, banknotes, promissory notes and bills of exchange might have created a sense of paper money's relativity and ultimate unreliability. However, this did not prevent all of these notes from circulation that was becoming more and more prevalent, suggesting the power of symbol, or fiction not grounded in reality.

The suspicion of paper currency was a symptom of the deeply-rooted belief that every symbol needs to have a direct referent in reality. As Baker notes in her book, "[e]ighteenth-century Americans ... cared deeply about the moral and representational implications of their own monetary experiments" (8). The origins of this belief may lie in Christianity and, more specifically, in Puritanism that required every sign to have a direct reference to the reality. The same belief may account for eighteenth-century fiction's pretences at being fact-based. Letters, diaries, and other first-person narratives were used to create an illusion of real documents that described the events that had taken place in real life – what Michael Gilmore calls "the devotion to factuality" (544). The 1790s in America saw the emergence of influential third-

person narratives that did not conceal their fictional nature. Brown's novels, although still written in first person, nevertheless, employ unreliable narratives that make the reader question their "factuality" and truthfulness. Moreover, in the prefaces to his novels, Brown never tries to conceal his authorial agency. Therefore, we see the process of detachment between the symbol and its referent in literature too. One of the symptoms of this process was the Copyright Act, passed by Congress in 1790. As American literature was slowly becoming less factual, it was also becoming more individual, as Kenneth Dauber shows in *The Idea of Authorship in America*: before the 1790s anyone could potentially become an author – write and publish anonymously and gratis. When literature proclaimed itself fiction, as compared to fact-based personal stories that, according to Dauber, dominated the literary scene before, writing began to require certain skills. Hence the necessity to protect individual authors, who, nevertheless, still received next to nothing for their literary works. Thus, these two laws passed within two years, the Copyright Act and the Coinage Act, marked the early States' search for symbols that could constitute the new country's national identity. Money and literature were two powerful media that could become such symbols.

Charles Brockden Brown was one of the first authors who aspired to make writing his profession, and one of the first to attempt at the creation of a distinctly American novel. His background also made him acutely aware of the interrelation of finance and writing, two major themes in his works, and especially in *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799). Born into a merchant's family, Brown himself worked for the import-export firm of his father, James Brown and Co. So did his brothers, one of whom also worked in the Treasury Department and at the Bank of

Pennsylvania. Brown was consequently well-informed about the commercial culture of the early States that involved foreign trade, export and re-export investments, and both old and emerging credit and banking systems. However, he only participated in family business half-heartedly, being more attracted to the career of an author. Indeed, he could have safely pursued his passion while making money as a merchant or a lawyer, following the example of numerous other authors of the period. Instead, Brown went down into the history of American literature as one of the first professional writers. This attempt to “marry” trade and literature, that is to make money by writing, can explain the association between money and texts in Brown’s own novels.

Both financial issues and writing occupy a very important place in all of Brown’s novels, and in *Arthur Mervyn* in particular. I will show how these two themes are intertwined in this novel, and how exactly the analogy between money and texts works in *Arthur Mervyn*. This analogy is established at the very beginning of the novel, when we discover that the protagonist has worked as a copyist, that is, earned money literally by writing. Later we come across many scenes that establish a direct link between texts and money. The most telling example is Lodi’s manuscript that Welbeck wants to publish under his own name to profit by it, and between the pages of which Arthur later finds banknotes. The first chapter is dedicated to a close reading of the episodes related to this manuscript and introduces problems that I elucidate in later chapters.

In the next chapter, I further examine the scenes where the analogy between writing and money (especially paper money) comes into full view. My discussion of the diversity of forms in which money and texts come in the novel, and their

unreliability, is largely informed by Jean-Joseph Goux's interpretation of the symbolic as it is expounded in his book *Symbolic Economies*. He brings together Marx's theory of money with the poststructuralist theory of language. Comparison of language to money has been a commonplace of literary theory since Saussure's *Course of Lectures in General Linguistic* declared that words, like money, have their use value and exchange value, and function in the exact same way as coins (The Norton Anthology 858). Goux elaborates this comparison, showing how both linguistic signs and money function as "general equivalents" and belong to the sphere of the symbolic (Lacan's term, appropriated and reinterpreted by Goux). Brown anticipates this theory in *Arthur Mervyn*, showing how money and texts of all sorts meet and almost converge in a symbolic space as the former becomes fictionalized, and the latter commercialized.

Finally, in the last chapter, I concentrate on the form of the novel itself to see how the narrative structure chosen by Brown reflects his new authorial awareness and engages the reader in new ways in order to make him or her realize the relativity of the paper media. In this chapter, I draw on the works of Roland Barthes and Fredric Jameson, who regard narratives as contracts, made between the writer and the reader, where the former undertakes to fulfill certain promises, and the latter either consents or lays the book aside. This way of reading places narratives within the economic system and construes them as products. Viewing the money/writing relationship in *Arthur Mervyn* and correlating it with the contract conditions of the novel itself will, therefore, shed light on how Brown imagined the "consumers" of his novel, that is, its readers, and what kind of relationship he hoped to establish with them. I argue that in *Arthur Mervyn* Brown breaches the contract with the reader, never fulfilling all of his initial promises.

Applying these different approaches to *Arthur Mervyn*, I hope to elucidate the relationship between money and narratives as it is both presented and performed in this dense and multi-layered work. *Arthur Mervyn*, although it belongs to the transitional period of the 1790s, the period of great changes and the search for new symbols and new identities, still looks modern and even postmodern. It speaks to us not only as a work that explores the origins and the implications of the modern vision that sees no direct reference between the world and its representations. It is also a highly experimental and revolutionary text that plays with genres and literary conventions and deserves more thorough attention from both scholars and ordinary readers.

## CHAPTER ONE: "THE CONTENTS OF THIS INESTIMABLE VOLUME":

### LOOKING AT AN EPISODE

The first question that needs to be answered is: Is there any connection between writing and money in *Arthur Mervyn*? Indeed, Brown pays special attention to the world of finance and mentions paper money of different kinds more often than any sentimental or gothic novel of his times. However, this does not necessarily mean that he sees any similarity between money and literature. Promissory notes and checks share the same material, paper and ink, with literary productions, and are themselves texts, not to mention contracts and other documents, but what do literary texts have to do with money? And does Brown actually realize the analogy between them? I will analyze an episode that brings this analogy to light and proves money and literature not only similar, but also interchangeable in some ways. This episode, or rather, a series of episodes, are centered around Lodi's manuscript, "inherited" by the main villain of the novel, Welbeck, from the son of an Italian plantation owner and later appropriated by Arthur. The key episode in this series is, without a doubt, Mervyn's discovery of banknotes for twenty thousand dollars between the pages of the book.

A number of scholars have sought to extrapolate Brown's views on both the high-paced commercialization of the U.S. life and the proliferation of writing and print, using episodes related to Lodi's manuscript. Written by an Italian plantation owner Vincentio Lodi and given to Welbeck by Lodi's dying son, it reappears several times in the novel, but each scholar focuses on just one of the episodes. Jennifer Baker, for instance, discusses the scene in which Mervyn discovers banknotes between the pages of this Italian manuscript, while Louis Kirk McAuley is more

interested in a later episode when Arthur burns these banknotes, made to believe that they are forged by Welbeck. Such selectivity can be explained by the fact that both critics use these episodes to prove a larger claim. Baker seeks to support the idea that the reader's interest is prompted by his or her "economic standing" (133), and suggests that the money found in Lodi's manuscript heightens Arthur's curiosity. McAuley, in his turn, makes a case for the association between print and criminal behavior, and uses the banknotes as an example of how print facilitates forgery (331-333).

I suggest that it is necessary to consider all of the episodes related to Lodi's manuscript together in order to better see what Brown wanted to say about the connection between money and print/writing. It frames Arthur's tale of his adventures in Part One of the novel, being the reason why he is hired by Welbeck in the first place (to copy the book), and then making an indirect appearance at the end when the banknotes it contained resurface in the narrative. Moreover, the manuscript functions as a link between different events, characters and themes. Lodi's book is a point of convergence of such themes as the reading experience, literature's relation to reality, copyright, property issues, print and writing, forgery, and paper money as opposed to gold. In what follows, I will trace what can be termed the adventures of Lodi's manuscript, paying attention to how it is perceived by the characters and what it can tell us about the money-narrative relationship as it is understood by Brown. Below are the main legs of the manuscript's "journey" through various characters' hands:

*1) Lodi's manuscript is one of the major driving forces of the plot. Due to the complex chronology of the novel, we only learn about the book's existence from Welbeck's first tale, that is, when Mervyn's adventures are already underway.*

*However, this very tale makes it clear that Mervyn would never have been hired by Welbeck if the latter had not needed a copyist for the book. Mervyn's fatal association with Welbeck is thus facilitated by this literary text. What do we know about it? In Chapter X of Part One Welbeck recounts the story of the manuscript: it is written by Vincentio Lodi, an aristocrat from Northern Italy who owned a slave plantation in Guadeloupe. His son inherits all of his fortune that "consisted in Portuguese gold" (73) together with a volume that "contained memoirs of the Ducal house of Visconti, from which the writer believed himself to have lineally descended" (74).*

In this physical proximity between the book and the money, in their common designation as Lodi's inheritance, we see the first hint at the association between the two that will be developed later in the novel. The father wants to pass on his money, the result of his successful business, and his narrative, the story of his family. These appear to be the two most important things Lodi wishes to leave after him, to preserve within the family, which is already telling of equal importance of money and written narratives, at least, in this particular case.

*2) With the goal to find his sister who has moved to the United States, and to snatch her from poverty, the younger Lodi comes to Philadelphia, but contracts yellow fever. Before dying, he gives both the money and the book to Welbeck who happens to be near, begging him to find his sister Clemenza and pass it on to her as a rightful heir. Welbeck seeks out Clemenza only to seduce her, and then squanders the money and appropriates the book. Moreover, he plans on appropriating it not only physically, but intellectually too, translating it into English and enlarging it "by enterprising incidents of my own invention" (79).*

I will discuss Welbeck's fraud plans in more detail later, but it is necessary to make some explanatory remarks here. The events, described in the novel, as we know, are set in 1793. However, if *Arthur Mervyn* were set before 1790, Welbeck's scheme would not make any sense, because even if he had published the book under his own name, it would not have brought him any royalties. The Copyright Act that protected American authors' rights was passed by Congress just three years before the time at which the novel is set. Welbeck, inexplicably conversant with American laws, seizes upon the possibility and decides to assume the authorship of the book hoping to receive a royalty and get himself out of debt. This episode suggests that, as one of the first American authors who aspired to write professionally, Brown construed his works not as public property, but as products launched into the market, contrary to the notion of (mostly anonymous) authorship prevalent in the U.S. at the time. This curious detail is a symptom of the process of the commercialization of literature in the U.S.A., that started in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

*3) To accomplish his task, Welbeck hires Mervyn, who like Welbeck, desperately needs money, "as an amanuensis" (79).*

Here we can see another example of literature's commercialization: even simple copying, writing becomes an occupation, a paid job.

*4) All of the events described above are related by Welbeck when shocked Mervyn discovers both the former's bankruptcy and the scene of his murderous duel with Watson. Later, Welbeck disappears in the waters of Schuylkill river in a suicide attempt. After his former patron's alleged suicide Arthur goes back to the mansion to change clothes, and takes the manuscript because technically it does not belong either*

*to Welbeck or to Mrs. Wentworth (the house's owner), and, therefore, Mervyn cannot be accused of robbery.*

Here, the book is again involved into property issues. However, this time it is no longer intellectual property, but a commodity that could probably be sold to a bookseller.

*5) When Arthur comes to live with the Hadwins, he finally gets to read the manuscript. It is in Italian, but Mervyn's previous knowledge of Latin helps him to understand the meaning, even though with "impediments" (97). As he gets to the last pages he realizes that they stuck together. After carefully separating them, astonished Arthur finds banknotes for the sum of twenty thousand dollars inside the book. Clearly, the elder Lodi divided his forty thousand dollars, and hid one half between the pages of the book, supposing that his son or daughter would find it there. After his initial fascination subsides, Mervyn makes up his mind to restore the money to Clemenza.*

A close examination of this episode leads to a number of important observations.

- First of all, the fact that the banknotes are hidden in a book signals about the changes brought about by the advent and the increased use of paper money. Converted into paper, currency undergoes a process of symbolization – something I will discuss in the next chapter. Unlike a piece of metal, a bill weighs almost nothing, and is, therefore, easy to carry around. Therefore, money becomes much more mobile, or, in Brown's words, "transferable" (44). After all, Lodi would never have been able to hide golden coins in the book. That Brown emphasizes the fact that money and

literature have come to share the same material, seems to suggest that both are, in a certain sense, fiction.

- Moreover, both “items” are foreign: the “money consisted in Portuguese gold” (73) while the manuscript is written in another language, Italian. In order to enter the market, both have to undergo a conversion, to be “translated” into forms pertinent to American culture. Lodi changes the gold into “bank-notes” (73).

Similarly, when Welbeck decides to assume the authorship of the manuscript, he plans to first translate it into English, and then print it. Only then will the book become marketable and bring profit. In both instances an object has to undergo a substitution, a sort of recoding, in which print plays a crucial role, serving as a means of adaptation of both foreign money and foreign literature. Of course, it makes us question Mervyn’s reasons for undertaking the translation of the same manuscript: are his goals educational only? Or does he, like Welbeck, pursue other goals too? I will talk about it later.

- Through the process of conversion into paper, money becomes almost homogeneous with the book’s pages. Beside that homogeneity, the episode also reveals money’s liminal position between the real world and the fictional one. It is easy to notice that the pages that conceal the money have been, probably, deliberately chosen by Lodi as a receptacle for the banknotes. It is hardly an accident that they are hidden right between the pages describing Francesco Sforza unexpectedly finding a treasure in a “Roman fortress” (98). Arthur’s discovery, therefore, mirrors the fictional one, and the money is found at the intersection of the two worlds. The reader (both the reader of the novel and the reader of the manuscript) may even wonder if Lodi wrote the memoirs with the purpose of hiding the money there.

- Regardless of what made him take up the pen, Lodi's trick with the money, from our standpoint, can be seen as a literalized metaphor for the 'reward' that awaits a patient reader at the end of any book. At the end of a text, we usually expect to find, depending on its genre, an explanation of all mysteries, a resolution of all problems characters have faced, a happy end to the story, or a revelation that would give us new wisdom and knowledge. Here, this climatic point is superseded with a monetary "reward." Thus, money in this episode successfully replaces part of the text, performing its function, that is, satisfying the reader's expectations. To justify this reading, let us look closer at Arthur's account of his purpose and process of reading.

- Mervyn is very precise in explaining why he has started reading Lodi's book. First, - and we should keep it in mind - reading for him is a sort of sublimation of sexual energy. In love with Eliza Hadwin, but conscious that her father will not give his consent to their marriage, he thinks it "indispensable to fix my thoughts upon a different object, and to debar myself even from her intercourse" (97). Second, he too, like Welbeck, wants to somehow use the book for his own ends, even though his goals are not openly mercenary. They may even be called educational: Mervyn intends to teach himself Italian. But later he mentions that "the translation of its [the book's] contents into English" was "the business and solace of my leisure" (97). He never explains why he wants to not just read, but also to translate the book, but the reader still remembers Welbeck's plans, and cannot help noticing the parallel. However, at this point, Mervyn, unlike his former patron, still seems interested in the book itself. After initial problems with the language, he finally starts enjoying it: "[h]aving arrived near the last pages, I was able to pursue, with little interruption, the thread of an eloquent narration" (97). Arthur's efforts are finally rewarded with an

“unspeakable pleasure” (97) as he begins to understand the text. It is hardly a coincidence that as soon as he begins to experience readerly “pleasure” he finds banknotes between the pages.

On a metaphorical level, the discovery of the money is a continuation, or, rather, a climax of Arthur’s reading experience. It becomes clear if we look at the way he describes it himself. “It may be thought that I took up the thread where it had been broken; but no” (98), – says Mervyn, and the reader may think that the plot simply takes an unexpected twist. “The object that my eyes encountered, and which the cemented leaves had so long concealed, was beyond the power of the most capricious or lawless fancy to have prefigured” (98), - the same fancy that was at work at the time of reading, now finds a new “object.” Arthur’s gaze here is purely Lacanian in that it betrays his desire. And, as in Lacan’s theory,<sup>2</sup> his gaze is just a reflected gaze of the text: it is the text’s desire to find a recipient for the money it contains. The text was actually leading up to it, “offering” the money at the most fitting turn of the plot, the discovery of treasure by Francesco Sforza. The transition from fiction to reality is, therefore, less abrupt: “...it [the object] bore a shadowy resemblance to the images with which my imagination was previously occupied. I opened, and beheld – *a bank-note!*” (98) Curiously, banknotes here serve as substitutes for the culmination of Lodi’s narrative. In a certain sense, they *are* the culmination. Mervyn does not go back to the story to learn the end of Sforza’s adventures – moreover, he never even mentions the manuscript again. As soon as the banknotes come into his possession, he forgets about the book he has spent quite a lot of time with, and can only think about the money.

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<sup>2</sup> See Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, especially chapter two, “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*.”

Ultimately, it is the banknotes that actually help Mervyn distract himself from thinking about Eliza, not the book. The money triggers a sort of sublimation that transfers his desire onto a different object: “I gazed at the notes in silence. I moved my finger over them; held them in different positions; ... They are mine, and by such means!” (98). Arthur’s reaction is somewhat surprising since his return to the countryside is motivated by an intention to get away from the temptations and wealth of the city. Contrary to his previous resolution to lead a simple life, his mind suddenly goes wild fantasizing about riches and luxury: “My fortune had been thus unexpectedly and wonderously propitious. How was I to profit by her favour? Would not this sum enable me to gather round me all the instruments of pleasure?” (99). Mervyn then carefully enumerates all of these “instruments” only to proclaim them “abhorrent to my [his] taste, and my principles” (99) in the next sentence. He then resists the first impulse and takes it upon himself to return the money to Clemenza. However, as we learn later in the novel, it never happens: he eventually burns the banknotes, and consequently, their direct function is never fulfilled in the novel. They remain a pure symbol, just another “text” incorporated into the text of the manuscript, its finale and the symbolic “reward” for the reader.

The above analysis of the series of episodes shows that Brown was aware of the association between money and writing, and expressed this awareness in his book. The subplot with Lodi’s manuscript as its focus, - just one among a multitude of others in *Arthur Mervyn* – brings to light many different ways in which writing is closely bound up with money, to the point where they become almost indistinguishable both in their appearance and even in their function. I would like to reiterate that this episode is just one among many others that depict money as texts. I

will discuss some of these episodes in the following chapters. However, the manuscript is also unique in that it is the only literary text that is given so much attention in the novel.

The fact that Brown touches on economic, or even financial questions in the only detailed episode dedicated to a reading of a literary work in *Arthur Mervyn* is particularly important, and invites us to think about the economy of the novel itself. Especially since there is an analogy between Lodi's manuscript and Brown's novel -- although the former is not an "(auto)biography," like *Arthur Mervyn* -- the text is nevertheless indirectly related to its author, being the story of his ancestors. Further, the content of the book -- amidst political turmoil in Milan, one of the warlords hides in the ruins of a Roman fortress -- sounds pretty much like a romance, or even a Gothic novel. Political turmoil could be compared with the yellow fever epidemic, while Sforza's "refuge ... in a tomb" (98) recollects numerous episodes of Mervyn hiding in narrow spaces and finding all kinds of things in there, from babies to dead bodies, not to mention treasures. Of course, Arthur's position with regard to the manuscript is not completely identical with the one in which we find ourselves reading the novel, but there are still a number of striking similarities. If such analogy exists, therefore, how does it extend to the readers of the novel? In other words, how is our position as readers similar to Arthur's? Brown was definitely conscious of his authorship, which suggests that he knew what kind of relationship with the audience he wanted to build, and which of *their* desires and expectations he was -- or was not -- going to satisfy in *Arthur Mervyn*. I will also examine this problem in the following chapters.

Indeed, some scholars have already discussed the episodes analyzed above and have offered their own explanations of the connection between money and literature. Baker, for example, uses it to support her theory that Brown “perceived an intimate relation between a kind of reading practice and the reader’s economic standing and outlook” (125). The analysis of the episode leads her to conclusions, similar to those made in the present chapter, that “the tumultuous curiosity generated by Lodi’s tale coincides with another curiosity about the undisclosed banknote between the glued pages” (134). However, Baker claims that it is Mervyn’s financial vulnerability that makes him economically interested in Lodi’s narrative. She also extends this to all narratives in the novel, saying that they find audience only inasmuch as they can be of economic interest to characters. In her view, such self-concern is not necessarily bad, but, to the contrary, leads to more attentive and sympathetic readership: “... the commercial-minded are uniquely positioned to investigate and identify with the misfortunes of others, and this positioning governs how they process narratives as well” (132). Baker, therefore, believes that Brown wanted to promote the emerging credit system among his readers, demonstrating both through the content and through the form of his novels, how this system leads to stronger bonds between individuals. While I agree that Brown was definitely responding to the economic situation of his time in *Arthur Mervyn*, and that there is a connection between narratives and money in the novel, some of Baker’s conclusion may need qualification. Not all cases of interested readership/listening in *Arthur Mervyn* can be explained by characters’ financial interests. Stevens and his wife have no stake in Mervyn’s story, and neither does Mervyn in Eliza’s letters. Brown’s opinion about credit-based banking cannot be easily pinned down either.

Many critics hold the opposite opinion, that Brown was actually condemning the U.S. economy of the time. I have already mentioned Louis McAuley who interprets the novel as Brown's condemnation of print, journalism, and capitalism. He claims that Welbeck's schemes of plagiarism seek to "capitalize on authorial disembodiment or, to borrow Roland Barthes' terminology, the death of authorship" (327). That Welbeck hires Mervyn as a copyist is considered by McAuley to be another example of the dangerous "impersonality of writing" (330), fostered by print and used by "con-artists" as Welbeck for malicious purposes. When Arthur burns the banknotes, found in the book, however, "he intends to decisively draw Welbeck's career of con artistry to a close — to completely disentangle print and capitalism" (330). McAuley's interpretation of the novel is shared by an array of scholars. For instance, Carrol Smith-Rosenberg claims that in *Arthur Mervyn* "Brown probes the dark side of the new capitalism and the seductive nature of the new consumerism" (416). This is one of the most interesting characteristics of this novel, namely, that it lends itself to such different, sometimes directly opposite interpretations. It is more likely, though, that rather than celebrating or condemning anything, Brown was just registering the changes that were happening around him and was exploring new possibilities they allowed. In what follows, therefore, I will not try to detect Brown's views on the changing economy of the country, but rather examine how these changes are reflected in *Arthur Mervyn*, and how they affected its form.

## **LOOKING AT THE CONTENT: MONEY AND WRITING AS THE SYMBOLIC**

Lodi's manuscript is not the only example of the conjuncture of money and texts in the novel. They are consistently paired throughout *Arthur Mervyn*: contracts and wills regulate the distribution of money; private letters discuss financial affairs, people make money by writing, legally and illegally. The novel reflects the actual connections and, at times, interdependence between trade and writing, that existed in Brown's time. Many scholars point to the simultaneous boom of commerce and print culture in the 1790s: Carroll Smith-Rosenberg mentions that "[European American merchants] founded the nation's first banks, insurance companies, and stock markets. They pioneered, as well, the role of liberal republican citizen. They learned to manipulate the press to their political advantage" (33). Jennifer Baker claims that certain "writers responded to, and participated in, the dramatic financial changes of the eighteenth century" (4). Brown was definitely one of these authors. As I showed in the introduction, he was right in the center of Philadelphia's urban life, with its flourishing commerce, fast developing banking system and print culture, which enabled him to explore the connections between writing and finance in his novels. However, can the particulars of this connection found in the novel, reveal a more profound analogy between money and writing? In this chapter, I will show that such an analogy can definitely be traced in *Arthur Mervyn*.

My close reading of major episodes that establish parallels between money and texts is largely informed by the structuralist/poststructuralist approach to the problem of money and language, as well as by the Lacanian theory of the three orders of the

subject. Ferdinand de Saussure lay the basis for the structuralist view of language as analogous to money: he compares linguistic signs to currency, and talks about use value and exchange value in relation to language. Since then, this analogy has become a commonplace in structuralist and poststructuralist studies. The theory I find most compelling and relevant to my own analysis of the topic is suggested in *Symbolic Economies* by the former *Tel Quel* member Jean-Joseph Goux. He undertakes to weld the ideas of the three major contemporary schools of thought – Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism – into an all-encompassing theory of ‘symbolic economies.’ If “economies” here are interpreted according to Marx’s ideas, the “symbolic” leads us back to Lacan’s theory of the three orders. Developed and revised over time, this theory distinguishes between the real - the chaotic and fragmented realm that resists signification; the imaginary - the visual field in which the fragmented subject finds unity; and the symbolic - the order of language that structures the relationship between the other two realms. Goux effectively shows how both money and language belong to the realm of the symbolic that orders and governs the reality. In this chapter, I will draw upon his conclusions and directly upon Lacan’s theory.

However, while Goux focuses on the isomorphism of language and money in general, I will make a case for the more specific analogy between written language and paper money. The early States, as Jennifer Baker shows, were very much concerned with the distinction “between representing and constituting money” (7), that is, between paper money and coins. The eighteenth century in America was the time of hot debates on whether or not the government should issue paper bills, especially if they were not backed by gold. The transition from metal to paper money

revealed the monetary symbolism: Baker argues that contemporary authors referred to bills as to “imaginary money” (7), contrasting them unfavorably to coins. She explains the reason for their complaints as “the complete detachment of symbol and referent” (10). Therefore, what they called “imaginary” perfectly corresponds to the Lacanian symbolic, while metal money can be more safely placed within the Lacanian imaginary. *Arthur Mervyn* seems obsessed with various forms of paper money, while coins remain on the periphery of Philadelphia’s urban world. Likewise, as Michael Gilmore points out, Brown’s novels – and *Arthur Mervyn* in particular – “[confer] conspicuous visibility on acts of speech and writing” out of concern about “the transition in the culture from one type of discourse to the other” (646). There is a clear distinction between speech and writing in the book, with Part Two paying conspicuously more attention to the latter. Thus, Brown actually makes us witness the historical “transitions” both from metal to paper money and from speech to writing.

In the pages that follow, I will explore the ways in which Brown represents money and writing: what function they serve in the novel, and how they are treated by the characters. In *Arthur Mervyn*, both have a structuring role: they order the world of material objects and personal relationships. This ‘symbolic’ function is especially evident in the confrontation of money and writing with the real, which in the novel takes form of the yellow fever epidemic. This disaster negates the power of the symbolic, questioning its connection with the material world. In fact, Brown exposes the frailty of this connection throughout the novel, showing the gap between the signified and the signifier, and, therefore, the vulnerability of the latter to manipulation and fraud. According to the novel, and much in consonance with modern theories about money and language, both paper money and texts can live a life of their

own, generating values and meanings independently of the referenced reality.

However, changes in the sphere of the symbolic inevitably lead to changes in the real world, as the former never loses its grasp on the reality.

Nothing can illustrate the purely symbolic – in the Lacanian sense of the term – nature of money better than Mervyn's own financial transactions. Curiously, the only time he actually buys something in the novel, he uses coins. When Arthur leaves his father's house, he takes "[t]hree quarter-dollar pieces" (19) with him, supposing that this will last him till he reaches the city. On his way to Philadelphia, he stops for breakfast at an inn, and pays a quarter-dollar. Later, when he stops for lunch at another inn, he assumes that the same meal will cost him the same amount, but ends up paying half a dollar instead. In this way, he spends all of his money before even reaching the city, and fails to pay the toll for crossing the bridge. A naïve and rustic youth, Mervyn ends up penniless in a big city on the very first day and has to seek assistance first from Wallace, and later from Welbeck, which marks the beginning of his adventures. Significantly, we will never see Arthur buying anything again in the novel. The most obvious reason for that is that his hosts, from Welbeck to the Hadwins to Stevens, have everything procured for him, so he does not have to worry about money anymore. And yet, he comes into possession of large sums: he works as a copyist, then finds banknotes in Lodi's book, and in Part Two he gets a one thousand dollar reward for delivering missing bills to the Maurices. Supposedly, he spends the latter sum for his training as a doctor, but the act of payment is left out from the narrative. In this way, Brown shows us an abundance of paper money of various kinds, but curiously, he never shows it in use. Banknotes and bills of exchange get lost and found, forged and destroyed, but we never directly see them accomplishing their primary,

“mediating” (Goux 47) function, that of purchasing things. It is implied that Welbeck squanders the twenty thousand dollars he gets from the younger Lodi, or that Mervyn invests his reward in his education, but these implications are not the same as the meticulously detailed description of the inn episode, with Arthur overpaying for breakfast.

This significant omission is made to underscore the abstract character of paper money as opposed to the more tangible coins. And it is to elucidate this opposition that Jean-Joseph Goux’s theory will be particularly helpful. Curiously, even though he claims that money in general belongs to the symbolic realm, he manages to distribute all three Lacanian orders – the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic – between different monetary functions. Drawing on “the three sections of Marx’s chapter on the circulation of commodities in *Capital*,” Goux distinguishes three functions of money. The first is when gold serves as “a means of payment” (48) that has to be present in its materiality in a given moment of commercial exchange, and cannot be replaced by any representation. This function, according to Goux, corresponds to the order of the real. Then, money functions as “a measure of values” (47), as that “ideal gold” that only exists in our imagination when we think or talk about prices or evaluate the cost of something. This is clearly the imaginary order of money, different from its symbolic function that Goux links directly to paper money. Like Lacan’s symbolic order, paper money regulates the relationship between the real and the imaginary, serving as a “mediating existence” that stands for both a commodity (expressing its value in price, that is in numeric signs) and for gold (representing a certain amount of it): “The relation between it [paper money] and the value of commodities is this, that

the latter are ideally represented in the same quantities of gold as are symbolically represented in the paper” (Marx qtd. in Goux 47).

Even though it would be difficult to draw distinct boundaries between these three hypostases of money, this distribution of its functions can help better understand the role of money in *Arthur Mervyn*. As I showed above, the only time we see money in its primary, instrumental function, is at the very beginning of the novel.

Significantly, this function is performed by metal coins, not paper bills. When the latter come into play, conversely, they are denied any purchasing ability. Surprisingly consonant with Goux’s theory, Brown makes paper money mere representatives of things they *can* buy, symbols of wealth and luxury. Consider, for example, Arthur’s wild fantasies about wealthy lifestyle Lodi’s banknotes can procure him: “Would not this sum enable me to gather round me all the instruments of pleasure? Equipage, and palace, and a multitude of servants; polished mirrors, splendid hangings, banquets, and flatterers...”. Even though he hastily disclaims these fantasies, saying they are “abhorrent to my taste” (99), this impressive list does not appear in the text by accident. It enumerates all of the things or services that can potentially be purchased with these banknotes, thus equating several pieces of paper with a number of commodities. Notably, the banknotes only represent these attributes of wealth, but never actually get exchanged for them in the novel, as Arthur eventually burns the bills. In this way, Brown seems to reiterate the purely representative, highly abstract nature of money, especially of paper money.

What are the practical implications of the difference between concrete coins and more abstract bills? The episode at the beginning of the novel, already discussed above, can elucidate this problem. Setting out for the city, Arthur takes three quarter-

dollar coins with him, thinking it almost a fortune. He is initially very complacent and even proud of having some money in his pocket: "I felt reluctance to beg as long as I had the means of buying" (20). Arthur is soon made to realize the real value of money: in the very first inn where he orders breakfast, he has to pay four times as much as he expected. Having finished a rather poor meal, he gives the inn-keeper a quarter-dollar "to indicate a liberal and manly spirit," thinking himself "entitled to at least three-fourths of it in change" (21). However, to his surprise, the keeper does not give anything back to him. At the next inn, Mervyn has to face an even more discomfiting failure, when he is charged half a dollar for dinner. After he has spent all of his money, he finally has to admit that his initial self-confidence was ill-grounded. This episode illustrates Arthur's total ignorance of the cost of living in the "big world," that stems in part from his lack of experience, in part from the inaccurate or incomplete image of the world that he gets from books. But the scene also has some important implications for the differences in the use of metal and paper money.

To begin with, the weight of silver quarter-dollars in his pocket makes Mervyn extremely conscious of how he spends them: he always knows the exact amount he has on him, because he can literally feel its weight. Despite his meticulous calculations, the coins go very quickly, and there is no way to restore them. However, paper money behaves differently, as we notice when Arthur enters the world of bills, banknotes and debts, the world of "floating or transferable wealth" (44). Gold, although already a representation, when converted into paper, loses its palpability and is, therefore, spent more easily and carelessly. Paper money takes less space and is much easier to carry around in large sums, the reason why it can also get wasted in a blink of an eye. Welbeck is a glaring example of such thoughtless squanderer, but

some other characters prove the point as well. Thus, even the property of apparently thrifty Hadwin is heavily in debt when he dies, one of the reasons Eliza renounces her claims of inheritance. The difference between gold and paper money implied in the book, is comparable to the one we can more easily relate to, that between paper money and credit cards. The latter is even less “material” than banknotes; moreover, it is purely virtual. Curiously, Brown foreshadows the advent of credit cards in one of his essays. In his “Sketches of a History of Carsol,”<sup>3</sup> an experiment in writing utopia, he gives a minute description of the monetary system of the fictional state of Carsol. What would surprise a modern reader is that the state issues “cards of the shape and size of a ducat, the edges hardened by a species of glue” that “are transferable like pieces of money” and entitle their holders “to payment five times in the year.” Resemblance to modern credit cards is intensified when the reader learns that the Carsolian cards can be used “in any part of the world” and in case of loss or destruction “may be repaired by proving before an impartial tribunal.” This whole idea that would probably seem bizarre to an 18<sup>th</sup> century audience, takes the abstract nature of money one step further. These cards, according to Brown, are even better than gold or paper money, because, unlike the latter, they can be reissued in case of loss or robbery. This characteristic of credit cards eliminates any dependence of the symbolic aspect of money on its “real,” or material form. The physical object that represents the value becomes replaceable, contingent and practically insignificant, thus revealing the superiority of the symbolic function of money (“the idea of value,” according to Goux).

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<sup>3</sup> The sketches appear in William Dunlap’s *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown*.

This short fragment anticipating the advent of credit cards serves as another proof of Brown's awareness of the representative nature of currency. In the novel, we see the extent of his concern not only in the shift from golden money to paper money as a higher level of symbolization, but also in the latter's failure when confronted with the chaotic and fragmented physicality of the real. In Lacan's theory, the real is that which resists all signification, that which cannot be signified by definition. "The real is the impossible," that is "lacking in the symbolic order" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* 280) and thus causing the failure of logic and signification. While the real is usually associated with the pre-mirror stage in human development, it never disappears in later life, and manifests itself through various traumatic "encounters" (69) that rupture the net of signifiers. One example of such encounter in the novel is, the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. We see this disaster through the eyes of Arthur who, by that time, has already spent some time in the countryside with the Hadwins. However, he decides to go back to Philadelphia, driven partly by curiosity, and partly by his desire to find Susan Hadwin's fiancé. His second trip to the city is a sharp contrast to the first one, and yet they are in some respects parallel.

In the beginning, Arthur is extremely naïve in his outlook on life, and utterly poor too. As we remember, he only has few coins in his pocket, and they do not last him even a day. This time, he is already experienced in city life and has some idea of its commercial and financial aspects, thanks to his lodging with Welbeck, whose dazzling wealth, however, comes from theft and forgery. Moreover, Arthur is no longer penniless: as we remember, Arthur discovers other twenty thousand dollars in Lodi's manuscript, and carries them along to the fever-ridden city. Having witnessed the power of money during his stay with Welbeck, he feels certain that the banknotes

will procure him anything he may need in Philadelphia, be it food, lodgings or a carriage. However, the devastated Philadelphia soon overthrows his expectations. The situation has now become the reverse of his first journey to the city: then he could buy anything, but he had little or no money. Now, when he does have money, it has suddenly lost its purchasing power. Again Mervyn stops at an inn to ask for lodging, but gets shut out by an angry female servant. This unexpected reception plunges Arthur into despair: "I began now to feel some regret at the journey I had taken. ... I had money, but an horse shelter, or a morsel of food, could not be purchased. I came for the purpose of relieving others, but stood in the utmost need myself" (109). Naturally, money has lost its purchasing ability because in an epidemic-ridden city people think about saving their lives rather than of engaging in commercial activity. As Louis McAuley notes, the fever causes alienation between people, which is symbolized in the cloaks they wear as a means of protection against the infection. However, his interpretation of this alienation as a metaphor "for authorial disembodiment" (329) that characterized the print culture of the time, seems a little far-fetched. In my opinion, the yellow fever can be anything but a metaphor for print because of its irrational nature that resists symbolization. The fever, in this case, is a perfect illustration of the real that disrupts both human communication and financial transactions.

According to Lacan, the real is "that over which the symbolic stumbles, that which is refractory, resistant" (280), it evades all attempts at ordering the reality and is, by definition, opposed to language which does not simply belong to the symbolic realm, but constitutes it. As Goux suggests in *Symbolic Economies*, money is isomorphic to language. Both are mere representations, born out of human need for

order: if language enables our relationship with each other, money regulates the relationship between commodities. Goux brings together structuralism's analogy between language and money, the psychoanalytic distinction between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, and the Marxist theory of the general equivalent. Thus, he analyzes the analogy between money and language from the point of view of Marxism, subsuming both under the notion of the general equivalent. He declares that "[t]he general equivalent is *representative*; both because it is *typical* and because it takes the place of something" (31). The process of substitution, or exchange, he claims, lies at the basis of any signifying event, and any act of signification, in its turn, creates value. This is how both money and language work, standing for something they are not, defining the value of this "something" and thus imposing order and structure on the chaotic reality of the physical world.

If money and language structure our reality, what happens when the real intervenes and disrupts all of these structures? This is precisely what happens in *Arthur Mervyn* when the epidemic breaks out in Philadelphia. Huge personal and social traumas like this one cause breaches in the net of signification. As Freud and Lacan have shown, traumas rupture people's narratives, personal stories that frame their perception of the world. Little surprise, then, that in the fever-ridden Philadelphia communication between people becomes so difficult. All human relationships, with some notable exceptions, are destroyed by the real in the form of the yellow fever. Masters are abandoned by their servants and vice versa, close relatives turn their backs on each other, and random passersby hurry past dying people, avoiding all contact with the infected. Verbal accounts of the epidemic, though they exist, fail to give an adequate idea of the disaster. The news of the fever reaches Mervyn and the Hadwins

not through newspapers, as McAuley suggests, but in the form of rumors and “narratives of travellers” (*Arthur Mervyn* 107). And yet, when Arthur arrives in the city, he realizes that he has been receiving a distorted image of reality: “[m]y preconceptions of the evil now appeared to have fallen short of the truth” (107). The impossibility of giving an adequate account of the epidemic stems from the chaotic and irrational nature of this calamity. Thus, McAuley’s theory that the lack of communication between people during the fever stands for “anonymity that newspaper editors typically offered contributors to purportedly preserve the liberty of the press” (330) does not take into account that, unlike print, the fever-ridden city saw a cessation of production of all kinds. As we see from the episode mentioned above, all mercantile affairs come to a halt during the fever epidemic. All services performed in this period, which are mainly burying the dead or carrying the sick to the hospital, are completely voluntary and free. Money in any form seems to be excluded from this reality, precisely because it belongs to the order of the symbolic, while the latter is pervaded by the real. It seems necessary to dwell on this distinction as it appears crucial for understanding the way money works – or doesn’t work – in the novel. In a like manner, all commercial activity is suspended during the epidemic as well. Signifying processes that make possible people’s healthy relationship with each other and the circulation of commodities become disturbed by the eruption of the real. Hence Mervyn’s frustration with the impossibility of buying anything in the epidemic city. This episode suggests that Brown anticipated the idea about the symbolic nature of money, first articulated by Saussure and thoroughly examined by Goux.

Thus, by bringing money and language in confrontation with the traumatic experience of the real, and making them fail, Brown shows both as elaborate

constructs that impose order on the world of human interactions, but crumble in the face of disruptive physical reality. In the novel, he goes even further and, apart from confronting the symbolic with the real, he explores the relationship between the two major signifiers (money and language) and the reality they signify. Of course, Brown does not use these terms, but on the conceptual level, surprisingly ahead of his time, he foreshadows the ideas of Lacan and structuralists. Thus, the motif that runs through *Arthur Mervyn* is the gap between the material world and its various symbolic representations, like paper money and written/printed texts. Brown shows their inadequacy to the reality by simply demonstrating their failure to grasp it, or by exposing their frailty and vulnerability to fraud that breaks any connection between the representation and the represented object. Acutely aware of the profound similarity between money and language, Brown consistently points to their discrepancy with the reality they supposedly represent.

The doubt about writing's adequacy to its referent resurfaces multiple times in the novel, usually in relation to Arthur. While Arthur's character and views are not the main subject of this chapter, it would be impossible to talk about writing in the novel with no reference to his perspective on this topic. The relationship between writing and reality is often shown from his point of view, which undergoes an evolution in the novel and affects his own writing as well. In different parts of the novel, he consecutively occupies three roles with regards to writing. First, according to his own confession, and to some literary references scattered throughout his narrative, he is an avid reader of books. Later, as the novel progresses, Arthur takes up the pen himself and becomes first a copyist, then an amanuensis, and finally, an (amateur) writer. The last, but not the least role he is assigned in the novel, is a character of others'

narratives. Arthur is the main hero of the story they write with Stevens upon Mrs. Wentworth's request - the story that includes other characters' narratives – and, more importantly, he recognizes himself as such. Indeed, one's approach to the text he reads may be different from the approach to the text he or she writes. Curiously, Arthur nevertheless complains of writing's inability to describe reality in each of these three roles.

Let us first consider Arthur as a reader. We know that on his father's farm, he reads indiscriminately, whatever books happen to fall into his hands, and this eclectic reading shapes his ideas about the world beyond the farm. When he finally arrives in Philadelphia, it even provides a sort of touchstone for everything he experiences in the city. Thus, when he sees Welbeck's house for the first time, he observes: "My books had taught me the dignity and safety of the middle path, and my darling writer abounded with encomiums on rural life. ... A nearer scrutiny confirmed my early prepossessions, but at the distance at which I now stood, the lofty edifices, the splendid furniture, and the copious accommodations of the rich, excited my admiration and my envy" (37). This is the first time Mervyn feels the discrepancy between books and real experience: the former fails to give him an adequate idea of what the city wealth looks like. Another situation that makes him question the veracity of books is his sudden transformation from a country boy into a secretary of an urban rich: "I have read of transitions effected by magic: I have read of palaces and deserts which were subject to the dominion of spells: Poets may sport with their power, but I am certain that no transition was ever conceived more marvellous and more beyond the reach of foresight than that which I had just experienced" (42). Arthur comes to

realize that the reality transcends even the most incredible fiction, and all of his subsequent adventures confirm this idea and augment his distrust of books.

Finally, in Part Two, looking back on his experience in Philadelphia, he declares “[b]ooks and inanimate nature ... cold and lifeless instructors,” and comes to the conclusion that “our own eyes only could communicate just conceptions of rational study” (221). Indeed, this does not prevent him from denying Eliza the right to embrace the life, and pushing her toward indirect sources of knowledge of the world, like books and his own letters from the city. As far as he is concerned, however, books are superseded by a “living and learning” strategy. Instead of relying on reading, he chooses to examine people. For instance, relating one of his conversations with Achsa, Arthur contrasts books unfavorably with her face: “There is no book in which I read with more pleasure, than the face of woman” (297). Part Two in general is marked by Arthur’s recurrent concern with the problem of people’s textual representations. As is seen in the quotation above, he begins to value real people over books. One of the reasons for this preference may lie in Arthur’s own “experience” as a character of different written narratives within the novel.

Mervyn’s “true” character and the veracity of his story are main subjects of debates between different characters of the novel (Stevens, Wortley, Mrs. Althorpe, Mrs. Wentworth). “His [Arthur’s] tale could not be the fruit of invention; and yet, what are the bounds of fraud?” (175), exclaims perplexed Stevens after having been presented with Wortley’s image of Mervyn. Through a complex narrative structure, Brown makes readers ask the same question, and their desire to know the true story of Arthur is one of the main reasons that keep them reading the book. Brown intentionally heats our interest, as if “hiding” Arthur under multiple “layers” of

narrative, and ultimately evoking the feeling of the impossibility to get to the main character through these layers. Without any doubt, this strategy reveals the purely symbolic nature of writing that creates a false illusion of reality standing behind it. Interestingly, in the case of *Arthur Mervyn*, the illusion is so powerful, that even some literary critics have taken it at face value and offered solutions to the mystery of Mervyn's character. Thus, in his article "The Chameleon of Convenient Vice," James Russo undertakes an investigation in order to find an answer to the question "Who ... is this narrator, the impostor who calls himself Arthur Mervyn?" (388) Russo comes to the conclusion that Mervyn's name is appropriated by Clavering, an educated youth from a rich family, long dead by the beginning of the novel, and only mentioned several times because of his physical resemblance to Arthur and his relation to Mrs. Wentworth. Although barely deserving any serious attention, this "conspiracy theory" is symptomatic in itself as it shows how the novel's complex narrative structure facilitates readers' attempts at discovering a deeper meaning underlying it. It is striking how scholars still debate about Mervyn's personality, almost forgetting that he is just a character, that is, a "semic configuration" (67), in the phrase of Roland Barthes. Thus, the novel itself is a brilliant example of how writing can create a powerful illusion that, however, bears no relation to real life.

The characters of the novel, however, have an opportunity to deal not just with textual representations, but Arthur himself. And for most of them, the real person appears much more preferable – and more trustworthy – than his textual portraits. Aware of the unreliability and incompleteness of written representations, different characters oppose them to the tangible reality, that is bodily appearance. The first chapters of Part Two cast doubt on the veracity of Mervyn's story as it is related by

him, and written down by Stevens in the previous volume. Stevens, however, refuses to believe Wortley's and Mrs. Althorpe's accusations, seeing Mervyn's body as an evidence of the truth of his narrative: "the face of Mervyn is the index of an honest mind. ... He that listens to his words may question their truth, but he that looks upon his countenance when speaking, cannot withhold his faith" (175). Eliza Hadwin, though she never doubts Arthur's words, is nevertheless not satisfied with his letters and craves for his immediate presence: "You write me long letters, and tell me a great deal in them, but my soul droops when I call to mind your voice and your looks, and think how long a time must pass before I see you and hear you again" (295). No written representation, regardless of who authors it, can compare with the represented person. A similar idea is implied in the already quoted passage where Arthur claims that no book can compare with a woman's face.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to say that while writing is symbolic, body stands for the real. Body is also a signifier, it can be inscribed and read like books. Eliza, Stevens, and other characters who contrast writing with the body, only express their preference of nonverbal signs over verbal ones. This leads us back to Goux who sees the "isomorphy" of language and money in the fact that in the course of history both have been "set apart" from the multitude of similar elements (signs and commodities respectively) to dominate over them. The human body is a site of nonverbal sign systems like facial expressions, gestures, or intonation. Multiple references to phrenology and physiognomy, the "sciences" of reading people's skulls and faces, scattered throughout the novel confirm this idea. Surprisingly, Mervyn himself inadvertently warns Stevens against judging people by their bodily appearance. When Stevens relates Mrs. Althorpe's acrimonious narrative to Arthur,

the latter mercifully forgives his former neighbors for their malice, saying that “[i]t was the phantom that passed under my name, which existed only in their imagination, and which was worthy of all their scorn and all their enmity” (254). Arthur’s neighbors had a chance to talk to him directly and see his face, this “index of an honest mind,” and yet, the “phantoms” of Mervyn they conceived fail to give a “true” picture of his character. By saying that “[t]hey examined what was exposed to their view; they grasped at what was placed within their reach” (254) Arthur implies that appearances can be misleading too, as they allow for various interpretations. The body and non-verbal signs, along with metal money, can be more appropriately relegated to the sphere of the imaginary in the Lacanian sense of the term. The real in both cases would be a chaotic material or psychic reality, like the yellow fever epidemic I discussed above, or the *jouissance*.<sup>4</sup> I have already shown how the accounts of the fever that shape Mervyn’s initial judgment of the disaster, fall short of the truth. Later, he also experiences the impossibility of describing the *jouissance*.

Arthur faces this problem no longer as a passive reader of or listener to others’ stories, but already as an author. He begins writing about two thirds into the novel, taking over the narrative for an undisclosed reason. For some time, he seems to be comfortable with this new role, except for the tediousness of the task (he writes on Mrs. Wentworth’s request). However, in chapter XXIII of Part Two, the narrative suddenly changes. As we learn later, the reason lies in the new status of Arthur’s relationship with Achsa: he realizes his romantic feelings for her, and they get engaged. With the realization of his sexual desire, and, moreover, with the anticipation of satisfying it with Achsa (“only three days to terminate suspense and give me *all*”

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<sup>4</sup> For the concept of *jouissance*, see Lacan’s *The Ethic of Psychoanalysis*.

305), Arthur is overwhelmed with the *jouissance*. For the first time in the novel, he tries to write not about the past, but about the immediate present, and is faced with difficulties. Arthur admits that he cannot convey *everything* in writing: “Now could I repeat every word of every conversation that has since taken place between us; but why should I do that on paper? Indeed it could not be done” (329). The *jouissance* belongs to the realm of the real, which, according to Lacan, is irreconcilable with signification: hence Arthur’s complaints of the limitations of writing.

Even more interesting is that Arthur expresses this concern in economic terms. Thus, after the first paragraph of chapter XXIII, he exclaims, “I must, cost what it will, rein in this upward-pulling, forward-urging – what shall I call it? But there are times, and now is one of them, when words are poor” (305). Apart from the theme of costs, which is telling in itself, Mervyn describes words as “poor.” The metaphor suggests that the language does not have enough “funds,” that is, words to symbolically evaluate human experience. The sentence itself embodies this insufficiency: Arthur cannot finish it, cannot find the right word to describe his feelings, leaving the adjectives “upward-pulling” and “forward-urging” unattached to any noun. These last pages, in fact, are full of incomplete sentences, exclamations, dashes, one-phrase paragraphs, and words in italics. It looks as if Mervyn calls up all means of expression available to written language and print in an attempt to convey his emotions. Autoreflexive elements (“what shall I say?”), choppy sentences (“And first as to Achsa Fielding – to describe this woman” 305), and rhetorical questions (“What more can be added? What more? Can Achsa ask what more?” 330) make a stark contrast to the rest of the novel. For the first time, Arthur tries to make his writing almost immediate, simultaneous with the described reality/the real of his

jouissance, but this proves to be impossible. His present emotions, or the emotions that fill him at the remembrance of the time spent with Achsa, cannot find an adequate verbal expression. Discontented with writing's limitations, Arthur decides to lay the pen aside: "But why am I indulging this pen-prattle? ... take thyself away, quill. Lie there, snug in thy leathern case, till I call for thee, and that will not be very soon" (330). Formerly vexed by books' "sparingness of information," Arthur could now guess where it comes from, as his own attempt at conveying his feelings on paper leaves him equally disappointed.

The reason for this disappointment is disclosed by Arthur toward the end of the book: "All is of equal value, and all could not be comprised but in many volumes" (329). Bringing up economic perspective again, he, consciously or not, reasserts the analogy between written language and money: by assigning values, both create hierarchies of objects and experiences. Values are contingent, but they help structure the world that surrounds us and our relationship with it. The hierarchy thus created inevitably excludes certain elements considered of low, or no value. Therefore, actions, events, and people who happen to be of little relevance to the plot, usually don't make their way onto novel's pages. This is how writing creates hierarchies and prohibits the excess of meaning. Arthur is aware of this structuring function of writing: complaining of the pen's impotence (sexual connotations are hardly accidental), Arthur at the same time commends writing's ability to "temper my impetuous wishes" (305). In one of the most curious passages in this chapter, he calls the pen "a pacifier": "It checks the mind's career; it circumscribes her wanderings. It traces out, and compels us to adhere to one path" (305). Mervyn praises writing exactly for the same qualities he will condemn it elsewhere. Writing is pacifying

precisely because it is limited – and limiting. The process of signification necessarily leaves out a lot of information, choosing just “one path” among multiple others, getting rid of the excess of meaning or joy. This is why it helps Mervyn cope with his *jouissance* rather than express it. Moreover, the advent of the symbolic in the form of the language at early stages of child development prohibits the *jouissance*. Chapter XXIII foreshadows Lacan’s theory, showing how the act of writing/signification expels the excess of joy and works to quell Arthur’s excitement. The result, however, is that much of what he would like to say remains ineffable, which ultimately leads him to abandon the pen. Going back to the economy of (written) language, if “all is of equal value,” the hierarchy breaks down, and writing fails: for Mervyn it means either writing “volumes,” or not writing at all. Words really prove poor in the face of the reality where everything is equally valuable. We have seen a similar pattern in the description of the yellow fever epidemics: the real of the disaster obliterates artificial values, making money “poor,” taking away its purchasing power.

We can, therefore, observe the evolution of Arthur’s attitude towards writing: first an avid reader, naively believing in everything books say, he develops a distrust of bookish knowledge because it fails to represent real life. Distrust becomes almost hatred in the last part of the novel, when he declares books to be “cold and lifeless instructors” (221), “cold, jejune, vexatious in their sparingness of information at one time, and their impertinent loquacity at another” (317). Moreover, Arthur makes these statements while writing *his own book*, struggling with the limitations of the written language. The discrepancy between writing and the reality, therefore, can be traced at all stages of his adventures, from the beginning till the very end. Arthur is less outspoken about money, but his life revolves around it from the moment he leaves his

father's farm. Money's inadequacy to reality is made clear already in the beginning, for example, when Arthur pays different sums for the same meal in two different inns (21). The fact that paper money does not buy anything in the novel is also telling, as it shows the money's remoteness from its signified, that is, from commodities. If we return to Goux, his definition of money as the general equivalent implies its universal character, that is, the fact that it reduces "the different types of labor ... to the same type of ordinary labor, labor that produces gold and silver" (25), and the differences between "the most diverse commodities" to mere differences in their prices. The act of placing a value expressed in universal symbols (i.e. numbers) on objects or labor inevitably leaves out a lot of their other properties and characteristics. Therefore, money by its very nature can never be adequate to what it stands for. Brown makes it look even less so, intensifying this inadequacy through the depiction of fraud and all kinds of financial machinations. As noted above, paper money regulates the relationship between commodities and labor, but it is also vulnerable to forgery, much more so than golden coins, for instance. One stroke of a pen can practically throw the relationship between products completely off balance. Several examples from *Arthur Mervyn* will suffice to illustrate this proposition.

All themes related to criminal behavior, including fraud, pertain to the main villain of the book, Welbeck. He cherishes the scheme of forgery even before he comes into possession of Lodi's fortune, and finally carries it through after having squandered the latter. The reader learns about this scheme from Wortley who relates it to Stevens in the first chapter of Part Two of the novel: as it turns out, Welbeck borrowed checks for eight hundred dollars from Wortley, Thetford and another merchant, Jamieson. "The *eight* was then dexterously prolonged to *eighteen*; they

were duly deposited in time and place, and the next day Welbeck was credited for fifty-three hundred and seventy-three” (174), thus making a huge dent in the three creditors’ fortunes. Changes on the symbolic level lead to changes in the distribution of wealth, causing asymmetry in the remuneration of labor: Welbeck receives money he did not earn, while the merchants lose what they have made by their labor.

Consequently, the former gets buying ability he is not supposed to be entitled to. The symbolic, therefore, does structure reality, but not in the way it should. Even though a lot of people may know about Welbeck’s fraud, nothing can be done about it: the society, governed by the symbolic, requires written evidence to prove the crime. No such evidence can be found except for the checks, - and they are forged. This vicious circle is the result of the process of centralization that grants the superior authority to the symbolic, and more precisely, to the sphere of writing. Even oral speech does not have the same weight as written evidence, which is also one of the reasons why Stevens undertakes writing down Mervyn’s story to clear him from suspicion. It is no accident that Goux compares money not only to language, phallus or the figure of the father, but also to monarchy. At a certain stage of the historical process people willingly confer power on just one commodity, or just one person, and from then on this commodity and this person exercise absolute power over the rest of their kind. The impotence of the merchants against Welbeck’s schemes in this case proves the almost absolute power of the sphere of the symbolic in the novel.

In *Arthur Mervyn*, we can also see how this power leads to money’s almost total independence from the tangible reality. According to Goux, to acquire the status of the general equivalent, money has to be “set apart from the uniform and therefore generalized value form of commodities at large” (17). What he does not state

explicitly is that sometimes this “setting apart” creates a separate realm (the symbolic realm) where money can exist and interact in a relative independence from the realm of commodities. Thus, in a comment interposing Stevens’ conversation with Wortley, the former gives the reader some background on older Thetford, who “was one of those who employed money, not as the medium of traffic, but as in itself a commodity,” which means that “[h]e thought it a tedious process to exchange to day, one hundred dollars for a cask or bale, and to-morrow exchange the bale or cask for an hundred *and ten* dollars. It was better to give the hundred for a piece of paper, which, carried forthwith to the money changers, he could procure an hundred twenty-three and three-fourths” (173). Here we can see how money produces and re-produces itself, without any relation with the market of commodities. If by playing some tricks with the exchange of bills for gold and vice versa, with currency exchange rates, or with stock market one can literally make money from nothing, the certainty of the direct link between labor and money, or between commodities and money is shattered. Shockingly, there is even no need of a fraud to make easy money, which makes Thetford look much more ingenious than Welbeck who only relies on forgery and cannot employ legal means to reach the same goal. In the case of old Thetford we see clearly how money, and not just commodities, start defining and creating values. Talking about language, Saussure claims that language can generate meanings independently of the signified reality through “associative relations” (*The Norton Anthology* 865); money in this example can generate value, not only express it. However, any complex system sometimes fails, and the games Thetford plays “rest on a basis which an untoward blast may sweep away” (174). Just one error, like a fraud, or a financial crisis, can impact the reality and cause chaos on a private or even a

national scale. We can find an example of the latter too in *Arthur Mervyn*: for instance, the 1780 economic crisis in the Netherlands that leads Achsa's father to bankruptcy and suicide. In this way, money, though it exists in the realm of the symbolic and is, therefore, by definition, detached from the real world, still holds tremendous power over the latter.

As I have already shown above, the same holds true for writing as well. In Brown's America, as in our times, the written word has more weight than the spoken one. For that reason, the absence of a will leaves Clemenza Lodi dependent on Welbeck, and Stevens writes down Mervyn's orally narrated story to make it a valid piece of evidence in favor of his innocence. And yet, just like paper money, writing is easily manipulated: Brown presents us with some examples of literary fraud and plagiarism that are in many ways parallel to financial fraud, and sometimes even overlap with it. Thus, Welbeck's schemes of forgery and check fraud are accompanied by a plan of literary forgery as well. Explaining to Arthur why he has hired him as a copyist, Welbeck confesses to a criminal intention of assuming the authorship of another's book. The manuscript that was given to him by the dying Lodi together with twenty thousand dollars, remains unopened until Welbeck squanders the money and starts seeking for new means of subsistence. He then discovers that "the work was profound and eloquent" (79). Consequently, much as he has appropriated Lodi's money, he makes up his mind to appropriate his writing too. Welbeck must be really well-informed as the first Copyright Act that afforded protection to American authors, and, consequently, entitled them to royalties, was passed by Congress only three years before, in 1790. Apparently aware of this relatively new way of earning money (and fame), he decides to "claim the authorship of this work" (79). But as the manuscript is

written in Italian, and as Welbeck has some literary ambitions too, he intends not only to put his name to the book, but to translate and expand it: “I meant to translate it into English, and to enlarge it by enterprising incidents of my own invention” (79). By his own confession, this trick would also help prevent potential accusations of plagiarism or imposture. This, however, was highly unlikely to happen in the 1790s when plagiarism was a norm rather than an exception. According to Michael Gilmore “authors appear to have had little sense that a character, an incident, or even an entire passage could be the property of an individual” (626). Funnily, even parts of *Arthur Mervyn* were plagiarized by a Sarah Wood in 1801. But Welbeck, as we can deduce from his precautions, already sees literary texts as intellectual property. This fact describes him as rather progressive in his views on authorship: all the more so since he hopes to make money by literature despite the fact that “only the rare American book returned a profit” (Gilmore 553) in the early States. Welbeck’s modern perspective on literature probably reflects Brown’s own precocious idea of authorship and his aspiration to earn money by the pen. But writing in this example is not only an instrument for making money, but is also analogous to money, especially in its paper form.

In fact, Welbeck treats Lodi’s text in the same manner as he treats the checks borrowed from Thetford, Wortley and Jamieson. While the actual checks would only be worth eight hundred dollars each, the “four strokes of pen” more than double their worth. The forgery is, therefore, almost a literary act, an act of writing. In a like manner, Welbeck plans to enhance Lodi’s manuscript, manipulating the text and thus changing its relation to reality. As we know, the narrative is the “memoirs of the Ducal house of Visconti, from whom the writer believed himself to have lineally

descended” (74), and therefore, has pretensions to historicity. Regardless of how accurate elder Lodi was, Welbeck’s additions would have turned the narrative into pure fiction. And yet, that fiction, if successful with the reading audience, could have turned in some profit, just like the forged checks. It is also interesting that to be protected by the Copyright Act and, consequently, to bring in royalties, the text *has* to be published under Welbeck’s name, as there was no international copyright law protecting foreign authors’ rights at that time. The manuscript written by an Italian would be treated as public property. Welbeck’s imposture, therefore, is the only way to make Lodi’s text profitable. Again we see how several touches of a pen – this time putting a name of an American writer to a text - lead to a miraculous increase in monetary value.

Welbeck, however, never puts this scheme into practice. Before he has time to carry it out he learns that the ship into which he has invested all of his money has been captured by the British navy, and it has led to the forfeiture of the insurance. This event, together with the fatal duel with Watson, seals Welbeck’s ruin and marks the point of no return for him. He blames it on ill fortune, but the reader knows that the capture of the ship was carefully planned by Thetford and his younger brother, who later repurchased it from the British at a very low price and made considerable profit. This elaborate fraud, although its key part is “performed” at sea, depends wholly on the insurance contract. If the violation of political neutrality (younger Thetford let two smugglers on board) were included in the terms of the contract, Welbeck would receive a “certain indemnification” (77). However, the possibility of such an event is carefully omitted from the insurance contract by the Thetfords. This example is another proof that texts and money can be manipulated even within the confines of the

law. We have already seen that stock games and currency exchanges provide a much safer way to make money than bill forgery - so does a subtle manipulation of legal documents that blows Welbeck's fortune away. In this way, the character usually considered the main "con artist" (McAuley 311) in the novel, is again outwitted by people more experienced in financial transactions and legal writing.

This fact may throw new light on Welbeck and his role in the novel: critics who talk about his fraud schemes usually overlook other cases of financial and textual manipulation. For instance, McAuley's claim that "through Welbeck, Arthur learns to associate print with criminal behaviour" (334) needs some qualification. First, Welbeck deals not so much with print as with writing, as his only project that involves print is plagiarizing Lodi's manuscript, and it is never realized. Second, it is hard to say whether Arthur actually learns to associate either print, or writing exclusively with crime. While it is true that Welbeck introduces him into the world of letters and finance, Arthur soon gets to know other ways of employing the pen, not necessarily marred by associations with crime. Along with Stevens, who writes a huge bulk of the novel, Mervyn can observe Carlton and his sisters, who make living by copying legal documents, or Thetford and other merchants whose profession likewise involves writing in one form or another. Finally, even fraud is not always criminal, as we see in Thetford's case. Surprisingly, the symbolic realm is poorly protected against manipulation, because it comprises even the legal system which is as vulnerable and contingent as the whole. Welbeck benefits from the weaknesses of the symbolic, but oftentimes seems an amateur when compared with merchants who know all of its ins and outs thanks to their profession. It would be wrong, therefore, to aggrandize the figure of Welbeck as the main con artist in the novel, and to claim that he teaches

Mervyn to see writing as a crime. He can be far more safely described as exemplifying the dark side of the early American urban culture characterized by the boom of print, fast-paced commercialization and heightened interest in writing. All of these characteristics are linked to the symbolic and testify to the consolidation of its power in the time period. While all characters operate within its sphere, with some of them managing to manipulate it, Welbeck provides an extreme example of the latter, showing how the symbolic can be not just used, but abused too.

The ever growing power of the symbolic realm, represented by money, writing and print in the early America can definitely account for Brown's heightened interest in these topics. Although more than a hundred years had to pass before structuralism laid bare the analogy between money and language, and before Lacan proposed the theory of the symbolic, Brown intuitively foreshadows their findings in *Arthur Mervyn*. He shows money and texts as closely bound up together, similar in nature and in function. Using the same material (paper and ink), being light and easy to carry around, they are both perfect signifiers that constitute a symbolic net that covers, structures and governs the signified reality. Due to these similarities money and writing very often overlap, as in checks and bills of exchange, or in documents that regulate the flow and distribution of money, like wills, or contracts of insurance. We can see this regulative function of both money and writing clearly in their confrontation with what Lacanian theory would term the real: yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, and later Arthur's sexual jouissance. These phenomena negate symbolic structures and hierarchies, created by money and language, revealing their artificial and contingent nature. The impossibility of describing the real is quite obvious, but Brown insists on the discord even between representations and what they

seem to accurately represent. In particular, Arthur's views on books undergo a drastic change from admiration through distrust to utter disappointment. The stages of this evolution roughly coincide with his changing roles: from reader to character of others' narratives, and then, finally, to author of his own story. Arthur's growing knowledge of the urban culture of the early republic, heavily relying on writing, print and commerce, brings awareness of the inadequacy of textual and monetary representations, as they exclude certain aspects of the reality that Mervyn and other characters consider significant. Moreover, exactly because of their written nature these representations are extremely vulnerable to manipulation and fraud. Through Welbeck's forgery and plans of plagiarism, and Thetford's elaborate fraud scheme, Brown demonstrates the frailty of the symbolic realm constituted by writing in its various forms. Aware of this power and frailty associated with the pen, Brown must have been highly conscious about his own role as an author.

## LOOKING AT THE FORM: NOVEL AS A CONTRACT

In “Walstein’s School of History,” Brockden Brown writes, “There are two ways in which genius and virtue may labor for the public good: first by assailing popular errors and vices, argumentatively and through the medium of books; secondly by employing legal or ministerial authority to this end” (335). This equation of literature with juridical and church authorities emphasizes the force of the written word, ensured by its belonging to the realm of the symbolic, whereof law, the Bible, and other legal and religious texts form part. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how this vast symbolic field is manipulated in the novel. This shows that Brown, who asserted literature’s ability to “labor for the public good,” was aware that it may also be applied for evil purposes. To what use did he want to put *Arthur Mervyn*, which is itself a text, alongside many others featured in the book? The question arises as to how the reader should treat the novel that sends messages about the unreliability of writing, that is, its own unreliability. Modern readers, who have lived through postmodernism and post-postmodernism, will probably manage to deal with metatextuality and unreliable narrators much better than the eighteenth century public, accustomed to didactic sentimental novels. What can account, then, for Brown’s unconventional idea of writing, and for his experiments with the form? What was he trying to convey to his contemporaries through his books, and what kind of relationship did he want to establish with the reading public? This chapter will explore how Brown’s awareness of the vulnerability of the symbolic, represented in *Arthur Mervyn* by writing and money, is interrelated with the form of the novel. In particular, I will draw on Roland Barthes’ and Fredric Jameson’s ideas of text as a contract, and show how this analogy is especially relevant in the case of Brown’s novel. We can see numerous contracts of

all sorts in *Arthur Mervyn*, and almost all of them involve fraud or infringement. Little surprise, then, that the novel itself, seen as a contract, fails to keep its initial promises.

In *S/Z*, Barthes undertakes a close-reading of Balzac's short story "Sarrasine." His approach to literary texts, exemplified in the book, is remarkable in itself, but what is even more interesting is his concept of "contract-narratives" (88) that runs through *S/Z* and informs his analysis. As he articulates it midway through the book, "At the origin of Narrative, desire. To produce narrative, however, desire must *vary*, must enter into a system of equivalents and metonymies; or: in order to be produced, narrative must be susceptible of *change*, must subject itself to an *economic system*" (88). Desire here stands for many various desires: the desire of the reader for a story, for entertainment, for pleasure, but also the narrator's desire for his story to be read, the desire for fame, or money. Any text, therefore, is produced and consumed, but, as Barthes notes, both parties have to first make sure that their desires will be satisfied. Hence the idea of contract-narratives: "Narrative: legal tender, subject to contract, economic stakes, in short, merchandise, barter" (89). He deduces this idea from the plot of the short story that lends itself well to such interpretation: "Sarrasine" is a narrative within another narrative. The story of young artist Sarrasine and his infatuation with castrate La Zambinella is told by the narrator to a lady in hopes of winning her love, or, as Barthes puts it, in exchange for a night with her. However, the principle of exchange is not unique to "Sarrasine," but can be extended to all narratives: "This is the question raised, perhaps, by every narrative. *What should the narrative be exchanged for? What is the narrative "worth"?*" (89). In the following pages, I will read *Arthur Mervyn* in light of Barthes' theory of "contract-narratives," paying special attention to the beginning and the end of the novel to see what "terms"

the text offers to the reader, and whether they are fulfilled or breached. Naturally, I will also focus on how the unfolding narrative endorses or overthrows the reader's expectations engendered by the initial promises.

Nothing in a book, perhaps, resembles a contract more than the author's preface. It holds true even in our days: modern authors often make introductions available to Internet-users before they can purchase full access to their books. It seems natural that an author's introductory note should prepare readers for what they are going to receive. Then, depending on whether they are interested or not, they are free to either keep reading or lay the book aside. Hence, a closer look at the preface to *Arthur Mervyn* reveals what Brown wanted to sell to the audience. What catches our attention in the very first line of the text is that Brown addresses specifically his fellow-Philadelphians: "The evils of pestilence by which *this* city has lately been afflicted will probably form an aera in *its* history" (3, italics mine). Thus, he first justifies his choice of the topic by emphasizing the fever's importance for the city of Philadelphia. This detail indicates that the national literature is not yet fully formed, and that, although Brown is considered one of the first American novelists, his writing betrays the persistence of local identities. In this way, initially this text looks like a contract with a very concrete audience. Funnily, in the course of the preface, Brown consecutively expands the implied reading public: first onto "mankind", and then also onto "posterity" (3) – which may be a commonplace, or simply Brown's inconsistency. Thus, addressing alternately his fellow-citizens and all humankind, the author places his work within the context. According to him, physicians and political economists have already started exploring the consequences of the epidemics, but

Brown feels a need to see into “the influence of human passions and motives” as well.

This is the gap that *Arthur Mervyn* aspires to fill:

Amidst the medical and political discussions which are now afloat in the community relative to this topic, the author of these remarks has ventured to methodize his own reflections, and to weave into an humble narrative, such incidents as appeared to him most instructive and remarkable among those which came within the sphere of his own observation. (3)

Word choice is particularly interesting here: medical and political narratives being “afloat” in the community is later echoed in Mervyn’s wonder at “ideas of floating ... wealth” (44). Texts float just like money, as we have seen in the previous chapter. And the metaphor of floating may be significant in itself, given the importance of Transatlantic trade and navigation for early America (Shapiro 1-2). Brown’s “humble narrative,” therefore, enters this literary context offering to the reader some “instructive and remarkable” “incidents” the author supposedly witnessed himself. However, Brown’s preface somewhat departs from the typical eighteenth-century authors’ claims for veracity. “Observation” here is mostly “moral” (3), and the narrative is carefully “methodized” and “weaved,” that is, different from numerous epistolary novels that pretend to be real and authentic documents. And yet, Brown, much in the vein of sentimentalism, insists on the didactic purpose of the novel. In the next sentence, he promises to give the reader “the lessons of justice and humanity”, and by the end of the paragraph expresses an ambitious hope that the novel will ultimately help make the world better by “calling forth benevolence in those who are able to afford relief” (3).

The preface also opens up on the content of the book. Brown is very precise about the time at which the novel is: he talks of “the autumn of 1793,” and intends to “deliver to posterity a brief but faithful sketch of the condition of this metropolis during that calamitous period” (3). The last paragraph of the preface makes the reader understand that the novel is not just going to be a moralizing sentimental story, but “a particular series of adventures,” which, according to Brown, “is brought to a close” (4). However, we should also remember that the preface refers to Part One only, which does not prevent Brown from advertising the upcoming Part Two: “the events which happened subsequent to the period here described ... are not less memorable than those which form the subject of the present volume” (4).

Brown thus does his best to attract the reader to his book. His fellow-citizens would probably be interested in the possibility to compare their experience of the epidemic to that of another survivor. The rest of “mankind” as well as “posterity” would naturally be interested to learn more about the tragic events. To all categories of readers, Brown offers a story sure to evoke an emotional response and instruct them in empathy and resilience, being at the same time entertaining. The preface, therefore, is full of promises that would probably encourage curious readers to keep on reading. This is what Brown tries to sell, in both senses of the word, and the preface - consciously or not - betrays his monetary interest: “It is every one’s duty to *profit* by all opportunities of inculcating on mankind the lessons of justice and humanity” (3, italics mine). This ambiguity is hardly accidental for an author who intended to make money by writing. Thus, the preface actually *is* a contract, for what Brown tries to say here is: if you, reader, buy this book, you will get what I promise to you. But does the novel fulfill these promises?

Even a superficial glance at the novel is enough to say that Brown was misleading the public. As far as the setting and the plot are concerned, the preface is inaccurate: the yellow fever epidemics which is supposed to be the major theme of the novel, does not appear on the scene before some hundred pages into the book. It is true that the process of Mervyn's recovery from the fever provides frame for Part One of the novel, but the events related to the epidemics actually take up less than a half of the narrative, not to mention the fact that Part Two has nothing to do with the fever at all. Likewise, while most events take place in Philadelphia, a substantial part of the story is set in the countryside – Mervyn's native village and the Hadwins' farm. Thus, Brown's promise to "deliver" a sketch of Philadelphia's condition "during this calamitous period" turns out to be imprecise. Neither is the "series of adventures ... brought to a close," whether we consider Part One or Part Two of *Arthur Mervyn*. It is somewhat harder to judge of the didactic aspect of the novel, namely, whether it actually gives us "lessons of justice and humanity." Third person narratives of the period in America, such as, for instance, Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, leave no doubts about their didacticism, being full of the author's comments on the behavior of characters and of her warnings to the reader. *Arthur Mervyn* is a much more complex text than Rowson's, composed of multiple first-person narratives. In the beginning, Dr. Stevens seems closest to the authorial voice, with his narrative comprising all of the others, and it makes the reader expect that "the lesson of justice" will come from his side. And indeed, the beginning of his narrative echoes some of the preface's ideas and even words. However, it also departs from it in a number of significant ways, putting the adequacy of Brown's preface in question at the very first page.

The opening lines of the novel seem to be in accord with the preface. The narrator is not even named – his name will only appear in the second volume - which serves to minimize the distance between Stevens and the author. For contemporary readers, it was even easier to conflate the author of the preface and the narrator since of the former they only knew the initials “C.B.B.” The narrator, too, presents himself as a survivor of the fever epidemic. “I was resident in this city during the year 1793” (5) – the same reference to Philadelphia as “this city” and Stevens’ claim to first-hand knowledge of the events correspond perfectly with Brown’s intention to provide an account of the period based on his own experience. This line could actually be written by Brown himself. The next sentence talks about “motives” that detained Stevens in the city, at the same time hinting at his social standing (his departure would be “easy and commodious” (5), as compared to people from lower classes). However, the third sentence indicates a sudden departure – not from Philadelphia, but from the preface’s rhetoric. In contrast to Brown who was going to explore “human passions and motives,” Stevens declares, “It is not my purpose to enumerate these motives, or to dwell on my present concerns and transactions.” Instead, his purpose is “to compose a narrative of some incidents with which my situation made me acquainted” (5). This sounds a lot like the preface’s second paragraph that promises “to methodize his [author’s] own reflections, and to weave into an humble narrative, such incidents as appeared to him most instructive and remarkable among those which came within the sphere of his own observation” (3). However, these two purposes articulated in such similar terms, are, in fact, drastically different. First, there is no intention on Stevens’ part to present the reader with his personal “reflections,” the main focus of his narrative being placed on “incidents.” Second, he leaves out any hints at didacticism:

while Brown intends to pick only those events that he considers “instructive and remarkable,” Stevens does not seem much into moralizing, at least in the beginning. The very first paragraph, therefore, refutes some of the important promises of the preface. Combined with the significant departures on the plot level, discussed above, these differences allow us to conclude that the preface does not give readers an adequate idea of the book they are holding in their hands.

Neither does the rest of the novel conform to the initial promises. Indeed, some may argue that Mervyn’s misfortunes exemplify “the trials of fortitude and constancy” Brown hints at in the preface, but the truth is that Arthur’s story, and by extension, his moral qualities are permanently questioned throughout Part Two, and occasionally even in Part One (consider Wortley’s accusations, for instance). It is true that certain passages, scattered throughout the text, seem to deduce some moral lessons from the story. Part One, for example, ends with Mervyn’s pathetic encomium of Stevens’ benevolence: “Your conduct was not influenced by the prospect of pecuniary recompence, of service, or of gratitude. It is only in one way that I am able to heighten the gratification which must flow from reflection on your conduct – by shewing that the being whose life you have prolonged ... will not dedicate that life ... to mischievous or contemptible purposes” (163). The opening of Part Two by Stevens responds to it in a similar vein: “Surely the youth had displayed inimitable and heroic qualities. His courage was the growth of benevolence and reason, and not the child of insensibility and the nursling of habit” (167). This exchange of pleasantries only belongs to one of the discourses in *Arthur Mervyn*, the one that could potentially become what the novel set out to be in the very beginning. But if Brown actually meant to write a morally instructive book, why would he include other characters’

narratives that cast doubts on Mervyn's "heroic qualities"? Moreover, some of the incidents Mervyn relates himself are just as questionable. For instance, is it a laudable act to randomly walk into a brothel allegedly to look for Clemenza? Is taking money for the return of the Maurices' fortune not a "contemptible" thing? And such episodes abound in the book. Apparently, instilling sound morals into the audience was not Brown's plan – or, to put it in psychoanalytic terms, not the text's desire.

What is the text's desire then? And how does it shape our own desire? As Peter Brooks claims in his essay "The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism," there is always an "interplay of *form* and *desire*." Drawing on Barthes', *S/Z*, Brooks explains how the form of literary text works to release the reader's fore-pleasure through "both delay and advance in the textual dynamics" (339). In other words, any text, as Barthes brilliantly demonstrates in his close reading of "Sarrasine," teases the reader, using various devices and plot twists so as to make us both desirous to learn the ending of the story and unwilling to do so: "We seek to advance through this space toward the discharge of the end, yet all the while we are perversely delaying, returning backward in order to put off the promised end and perhaps to assure its greater significance" (339), which makes the process of reading a sort of erotic experience. I would also like to emphasize that in order to keep us reading, a text must hint at "the promised end" from the beginning, which links us back to Barthes' idea of "contract-narratives." If the preface's promises are put into question at the very first page of the novel – then, how does the text work in order to keep us reading it?

Having succinctly stated his purpose in the first paragraph of his narrative, Dr. Stevens turns to "incidents": "Returning one evening, somewhat later than usual, to my own house, my attention was attracted, just as I entered the porch, by the figure of

a man, reclining against the wall at a few paces distant" (5). Among many little details indicating the narrator's social standing and gender, the reader is suddenly attracted – like Stevens himself – to something mysterious, to the "figure of a man," destined to become the protagonist of the book. The mystery of this "man," the mystery of Arthur Mervyn's character will become one of the main enigmas in the novel, and what will keep the reader going is the text's promise to unveil this mystery. A close reading of the whole text, like the one Barthes did with "Sarrasine," would definitely lay bare the textual "teasers," scattered throughout the novel, but even a quick glance at the plot proves the point. A sick man is found lying at somebody's porch late at night; he is then carried inside and taken care of by the generous and merciful narrator. The man cannot even speak yet, and the reader can only wonder about his background. So far, he is merely a passive object of other people's actions. A few pages later we learn his name, and some details about his background. They are scant, though, and are related indirectly by the narrator. With all that, the reader is curious to learn more, because Stevens' narrative portrays Mervyn a) in a decidedly positive light: "his heart seemed to overflow with gratitude, and to be actuated by no wish but alleviate our toil and our danger" (8); b) as demonstrating certain qualities not quite consistent with what he relates about himself: "His features were characterised by pathetic seriousness, and his deportment by a gravity very unusual at his age. According to his own representation, he was no more than eighteen years old, but the depth of his remarks indicated a much greater advance" (8). The mystery is still there for the reader: who is this country lad, so kind and noble, too smart and serious for his age and background?

This is when Wortley appears on the scene, recognizes Mervyn, and accuses him of some terrible crimes. The image of a young and noble country boy is instantly

destabilized, but Arthur, - and here is the delay Brooks talks about – refuses to “dispel this mystery” (11), declaring it another’s secret. Eventually, Dr. Stevens convinces him to break the silence, and the youth, so untalkative and secretive before, pours out a long and detailed story of his life that, with some interruptions, takes up all of Part One. It seems that once Arthur starts speaking for himself, all doubts regarding his character must disappear. However, this is not the case: contrary to Stevens’ encomiums, Arthur’s story shows him as extremely naive and inexperienced, constantly getting fooled, deceived, beaten, or robbed by different characters, from Welbeck to a black plunderer in the fever-ridden Philadelphia. The reader, though, still wants to know the end of his story. But even when the narrative finally loops back to the beginning, explaining how Arthur ended up at Stevens’ door, a lot of questions remain unanswered. By the time Mervyn gets to the end, his story has already created another “promise,” which does not get fulfilled in Part One of the novel. Arthur’s search for love runs through his story, leaving us to wonder what happened to Betty, Clemenza, or Eliza. These three female characters are also closely related to different generic strategies Brown uses in Mervyn’s narrative. The play with genres is another way for Brown to create and then deceive the reader’s expectations, as (traditional) genres themselves are ready social contracts with established sets of necessarily fulfilled “promises.” I find it useful to discuss genre and its economy here as it is highly relevant to the textual “contract” between the author and the reader in *Arthur Mervyn*.

As Fredric Jameson suggests in his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, genres are “social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact”

(106). Jameson, as a true Marxist, is interested in how these generic contracts reflect class structure in a given period of history. In the book, he discusses mainly the genres that were popular in the past, like picaresque, or romance. However, what I find most relevant to my analysis of *Arthur Mervyn*, is Jameson's notes on the genre of the novel. For him, novel is a site of struggle for the older genres, it is a genre still in making. He explains it as exemplifying "the gradual penetration of a market system and a money economy": "With the elimination of an institutionalized social status for the cultural producer and the opening of the work of art itself to commodification, the older generic specifications are transformed into a brand-name system against which any authentic artistic expression must necessarily struggle" (107). In other words, with the advent of capitalism and print, traditional genres that often rely on oral performance, are perceived as obsolete, and are only deployed by authors as a material for new forms of expression. It is especially true for the novel, which is often considered a genre that has not yet become stabilized – here, Jameson's views are in harmony with the theory of Bakhtin who presents the same vision in "Epic and Novel." *Arthur Mervyn* that was written in times of great economic transformations and reflects them in its highly unconventional form is almost a pure example of the novel genre, marked with "indeterminacy" and "openendedness" ("Epic and Novel" 7). This is achieved through its engagement with other genres. With some qualifications, each generic strategy in *Arthur Mervyn* can be associated with a specific female character.

In his search for love, Arthur alternately turns his attention to his stepmother Betty, to Welbeck's foreign mistress Clemenza Lodi, to a simple country girl Eliza Hadwin, and finally, to an exotic widow Achsa Fielding. There is a tendency among

scholars to scrutinize Arthur's romantic choices from the moral point of view: did or didn't he have sexual relationship with his stepmother? Why did he leave innocent and beautiful Eliza for a much older woman of questionable reputation? Cathy Davidson, for example, tries to answer the latter question, identifying the whole text of *Arthur Mervyn* as belonging to the Gothic genre, which is particularly attuned to class division and the corruption it engenders. According to Davidson, Arthur's marriage to Achsa can be interpreted as either the positive sign of social mobility in the new republic, or, conversely, as a sign of corruption of the new society, where nice girls from lower classes are abandoned for rich and ugly women. The ambiguity of the ending, noted by Davidson, is symptomatic of Brown's play with the reader, but her approach to the text, I would argue, simplifies the text's generic complexity. First, Davidson subsumes the novel wholly under the Gothic genre. While *Arthur Mervyn* definitely uses certain elements of the Gothic, they do not overshadow other genres Brown deploys in the novel. Second, while many critics try to analyze Mervyn's motives and assess them from the moral point of view, they tend to forget that he is not a real person. All we have is the book of which Mervyn is simply a function. As Barthes puts it in *S/Z*, "When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created" (67). And further, "Such is discourse: if it creates characters, it is not to make them play among themselves before us, but to play with them ... the characters are types of discourse and, conversely, the discourse is a character like the others" (179). In other words, any attempts at explaining Mervyn's behavior are futile because he only "acts" in order to keep us reading. Instead, I argue that his behavior is dictated not by his moral principles, but by the text, and by different generic strategies in particular.

The beginning of Arthur's story, as noted by Michael Drexler, "is reminiscent of a fairy tale" (27). Quite a long list of plot elements borrowed from the fairy tale genre that the critic draws up in the article, provides enough support for this idea. Thus, initially Mervyn is presented as a male version of Cinderella: his mother dies, and the undiscerning father marries a "totally unlettered" and "coarse" (15) servant Betty. Determined to kick her stepson out of the house, she convinces her husband that Arthur is "old enough to provide for [him]self" (17), and that he does not deserve his father's support, having "refused all marks of respect to a woman who was entitled to it from her relation to him" (18). Consequently, Arthur has to leave the house and seek his fortune in the city without any support. Translating it into Vladimir Propp's terms, Arthur is a "victimized hero" (21) while Betty is evidently "the villain" who "causes harm or injury to a member of a family" (16). As a result of her insinuations, "the banished hero is transported away from home" (22). This fairy tale beginning offers the reader a promise of a happy ending, "where the good are rewarded, the evil punished, and order restored" (21). However, once Mervyn is in Philadelphia, the reader may get the sense that something is not going right. For some time, the protagonist himself maintains the fairy tale discourse, ascribing the "transition from my homely and quiet retreat" to "miracle or magic" (*Arthur Mervyn* 23) and recalling "the story tellers of Shiraz and Bagdad" (28). However, by evoking actual fairy tales, Brown draws the line between Mervyn's adventures and books: the latter are fiction, while the former are supposed to be real. And the illusion of reality is created through detailed descriptions of Philadelphia with its streets, taverns and inns, through random characters unnecessary for a fairy tale (Clavering, Wallace, the couple with a foundling baby). The last twist of the plot reminiscent of this genre is when Arthur

gets hired by Welbeck, moves to a luxurious house and falls in love with a beautiful foreign lady, presumably, Welbeck's daughter. We are led to expect that Mervyn will finally be rewarded for all of the hardships he has gone through, marrying Clemenza and thus becoming an heir of Welbeck's vast fortune. Arthur himself endorses these expectations, speculating on the miraculous change in his status and fantasizing about the marriage to Clemenza: "Time would lay level impediments and establish familiarity, and this intercourse might foster love and terminate in – *marriage!*" (46). However, the fairy tale discourse is very soon superseded by the Gothic one.

Late at night Mervyn decides to take a bath, and to his surprise discovers the true nature of Welbeck's relationship with Clemenza. Her "fall" automatically transforms her from an object of desire, a potential "prize" Mervyn might get, into a villain's victim, no longer sexually attractive for Arthur. Welbeck too appears in a new light: not as a noble urban rich, but as a seducer and a liar. From this point, the story changes its generic course from the fairy tale to the Gothic. Murders, hidden corpses, dark rooms, mysteries abound in the rest of Part One, right up to the moment when Mervyn faints at Dr. Stevens' door. The main characters of this part bear a strong resemblance to their European precursors: Welbeck is a typical Gothic villain, comparable to Manfred from Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Montoni from Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolfo*, or Ambrosio from Lewis' *The Monk*; Clemenza is obviously a "lady in distress," a helpless victim of the villain, like Antonia in *The Monk*, or Isidora from Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. All of these elements have made it a commonplace in critical literature to view *Arthur Mervyn* as a purely Gothic novel: such critics as Siân Silyn Roberts, Cathy Davidson, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg take the genre of the book for granted. In their books and articles, they point out the

differences between the American Gothic, of which the novel is considered a perfect example, and its European counterpart, and examine how the genre helps Brown to explore social problems of the early republic such as corruption and slavery. Their works contain insightful and compelling arguments, but they mostly concentrate on just one part of the novel, and draw conclusions about the book's genre based solely on this part's Gothic elements. However, this approach negates the text's versatility and limits the scope of its possible interpretations. *Arthur Mervyn* is much more than just a Gothic novel, even if we add "American" to its generic definition.

The Gothic genre in Europe – familiar to most contemporary readers – apart from its implicit critique of aristocracy and corrupt clergy, has a rather restricted set of elements, characters and plot devices. Gothic novels usually end with the villain's death, and the triumph of innocence, although in the "darkest" versions, like in *The Castle of Otranto*, in *The Monk*, or Hoffmann's *The Devil's Elixirs*, even positive characters (especially female) often get killed. In *Arthur Mervyn*, neither scenario is realized: while it is true that Welbeck eventually dies, the novel does not stop there. Moreover, his death is as unremarkable as it could be – dying of some incurable disease in a debtors prison – and is mentioned in passing, between Stevens' and Mervyn's dialogue about Mrs. Wentworth's suspicions and Mervyn's decision to take a trip to Baltimore. Such an inglorious end is rather unusual for Gothic villains, but the fate of his victim Clemenza is even less conventional. In the traditional European Gothic, females seduced by villains usually end up dying, as this is the only generically acceptable way out for them: if they stay alive they will be forever banned from the society no matter how virtuous and benevolent they may be. Clemenza, however, follows an unusual for a Gothic heroine path, first being placed into a

brothel where she gives birth to a baby that eventually dies, and then, thanks to Mervyn's efforts, she is taken care of by Mrs. Wentworth. Such destiny is by far more realistic: the majority of "fallen" women of the time did not die, but either became prostitutes, or led a secluded life, staying with relatives or friends. It is obvious that at a certain point in the novel the Gothic, together with its murders and corpses, with its villains and victims, gets brushed aside to the margins of the text to give place to new characters and new events.

This becomes clear as soon as Mervyn finds himself at the Hadwins' farm. The Quaker farmer and his daughters represent an environment totally different from the one Arthur has escaped from. Mysteries and crimes are unheard of in this peaceful household where Mervyn feels at home and forms a romantic relationship with the younger sister Eliza. This move would be conceivable in a traditional Gothic novel as well, if, for instance, Welbeck found out Mervyn's hideout and became a threat to the sisters' innocence and maybe even their life. However, the Hadwins storyline remains unrelated to the "Gothic" part of the plot. Although death in the form of the yellow fever destroys even this rural idyll, throwing a "Gothic" shadow over this part of the novel (consider the outlandish scene of Susan Hadwin's burial), Mervyn's relationship with Eliza points in a different generic direction, that of *bildungsroman*. Even though the first *bildungsroman* is usually considered to be Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* published in 1795-1796, the genre had many precursors in stories of young and naïve men in search for knowledge and experience, like Fielding's *Tom Jones*, or Voltaire's *Candide*. In all of these texts, protagonists usually have a female friend of the same background who either accompanies them on their path to maturity, or just waits for them patiently to come back and marry them in the end. Eliza, from

this perspective, is a perfect match for Arthur: she is a simple country girl just like him, and she too longs for the knowledge of the world. When Mervyn leaves her to go back to Philadelphia, she rebukes him for denying her the right to accompany him, resorting to proto-feminist discourse: “Have I not the same claims to be wise, and active, and courageous as you? ... You desire to obtain knowledge, by travelling and conversing with many persons, and studying many sciences; but you desire it for yourself alone. Me, you think poor, weak, and contemptible; fit for nothing but to spin and churn” (223). By this time, Arthur has already started having doubts about his feelings for Eliza, dreaming of a more experienced and sophisticated woman. This is another “teaser” for the reader: as there is no new female character on the scene yet, we still have reason to believe that Mervyn will end up marrying Eliza, especially since she does her best to reach his new ideal. After her passionate letter (in fact, she is the only female character whose writing is included in the novel) Mervyn changes his mind and arranges for her to move to Philadelphia. By this moment, we already have a new female character, Achsa Fielding, but the bond between Eliza and Arthur is too strong to be discounted. Her letter seems to have awakened his slumbering feeling, (“I saw nothing but the image of my girl” 302) although he has already formed an intimate friendship with Achsa. Once in the city, Eliza starts her studies and gets closer than ever to Arthur’s ideal of an educated and well-mannered urban lady: “[a]ll that was to be obtained from actual observation and instruction, was obtained without difficulty; and in short time, nothing but the affectionate simplicity and unperverted feelings of the country girl, bespoke the original condition” (303). Such textual “teasers” may lead the reader to believe that the novel will stick to the bildungsroman genre to the end, since Arthur by this time has fully integrated into the

society, and the main unfinished plot line is his search for love. However, our expectations are again overturned in the closing part of the novel when we suddenly learn about Mervyn's engagement with Achsa Fielding.

In this way, deploying different genre strategies throughout the novel, Brown repeatedly undermines readers' expectations based on their previous experience with books. Using Jameson's terminology, the reader has to deal with a lot of "social contracts" within just one text, and neither of them is fulfilled. When the reader notices the fairytale elements she expects the plot to go in a certain direction. In a fairytale scenario, Arthur would probably go to the city, would go through certain adventures, become rich and famous (through marriage with Clemenza), and then would triumphantly come back and kick his evil stepmother out of the house to make justice prevail. Similarly, if the novel were a proto-bildungsroman, we would see Arthur making progress in his medical studies, gaining experience, and then probably marrying Eliza, his longtime companion and friend. Instead, Brown constantly moves between genres, utterly defeating contemporary readers' genre expectations.

Moreover, some parts of the novel hardly have any particular genre. One of these parts is Dr. Stevens' frame narrative that relates his doubts about the veracity of Mervyn's story and his search for truth/other narratives that could support or refute it. This unsuccessful quest for truth would appear more natural in a postmodern novel, but not in an eighteenth century book. Another such part is obviously the last section of the book that deals with Achsa Fielding, especially starting from Chapter XXIII of Part Two. The protagonist's relationship and engagement with an older, sexually experienced "exotic" woman – which is not looked down upon, but even encouraged by the society, - does not fit well with any of the eighteenth century genres. This

unexpected plot twist foreshadows psychological novels of the nineteenth century, such as de Musset's *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle*, Flaubert's *L'Éducation Sentimentale*, or Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* that focus on a similar relationship between a young protagonist and an older married woman, or a widow. However, even compared with these novels, *Arthur Mervyn* is significantly different. Contrary to the preface's promise, the novel's "series of adventures" is far from being "brought to a close" (4). Despite the seemingly happy ending, the text stops short of showing Arthur's and Achsa's wedding and married life.

In this manner, the novel does not satisfy the reader's expectations: when we come to the last page of the book, we have been teased for so long, misled by the false hints at the upcoming marriage (to at least one of the candidates) that we cannot but feel deceived. Some readers, both now and in Brown's time, indeed, might have considered the abrupt ending "happy," but careful enough readers would definitely notice that Arthur's future happiness with Achsa is anything but certain. In the last pages, he sees an ominous dream about being stabbed by Achsa's husband who is missing and allegedly dead in real life. The text does not let us forget about this dream, as Mervyn later relates it to Achsa who takes it as a bad sign and bursts into tears. Arthur has to "go over in [his] catalogue of arguments to induce her to confirm her propitious resolution to be [his] within the week," even though he is not certain that everything is going right either: "That time – may nothing happen to prevent – but nothing can happen. But why this ominous misgiving just now?" (329). And this is literally the last page of the novel, supposed to resolve all of the questions! Besides the ambiguous ending to Mervyn's and Achsa's love story, a lot of minor questions remain likewise unanswered. For example, Arthur never explains what he saw in

Welbeck's attic, even though it "furnished matter which [his] curiosity devoured with unspeakable eagerness, and from which consequences may hereafter flow, deciding on [his] peace and [his] life" (161). Neither does he directly refute Mrs. Althorpe's assertion that he robbed his father of his money and "the best horse" (176) before leaving home. Instead of accounting for these mysteries and bringing the protagonist to a decidedly happy ending, the novel breaks off on an uncertain note, contrary to all of the genres it deploys in its course, and even to its own promises. The contract with the reader – in both Jameson's and Barthes' sense – is breached.

Going back to the discussion of money and texts in the previous chapter, we can see that the novel is just as unreliable as any text (or money) *in* the novel. Notably, all of the texts featured in *Arthur Mervyn*, apart from letters and Lodi's manuscript, are legal documents: promissory notes, checks, wills, insurance contracts. All of them function within the commercialized world of the new republic, and are supposed to regulate financial transactions and the distribution of money in general. In the first chapter, I have already demonstrated how vulnerable both money and texts are in the novel by examining Welbeck's fraudulent schemes. However, contracts in the novel are no less vulnerable than banknotes and literary texts. Moreover, all of the three major contracts in the novel are either forged, or breached, or simply not observed/destroyed. Even regardless of the contract-narrative theory, this fact can tell volumes about Brown's view of commerce in Philadelphia.

The most notable example in this respect is the insurance contract between Welbeck and the Thetford brothers. Strictly speaking, fraud in this case is not the result of breaching the contract, but, rather, of following it to the letter. The Thetfords convince Welbeck to invest a large sum of money – the remainder of Lodi's fortune –

in a trade ship going to the West Indies. Welbeck, who is by this moment in desperate need of money, agrees to the plan and signs the commercial insurance contract drawn up by the brothers. Having carefully enumerated possible causes of forfeiture, the Thetfords deliberately omit the violation of the ship's neutrality only to stage it later, taking mixed-race smugglers on board. After the ship is seized by the British navy, the younger Thetford repurchases it virtually for nothing, while Welbeck loses all of his money. In this elaborate fraud scheme, the insurance contract is the main tool, which exemplifies perfectly the power of the symbolic discussed in the previous chapter. Both the Thetfords and Welbeck obey the written word's authority, observing the contract and never questioning its validity. However, as I have shown earlier, even though it structures the reality, the symbolic can never *represent* it in its fullness, and the Thetford brothers make use of this deficiency. If Welbeck's method of fraud is manipulating the symbolic, his enemies resort to manipulation of the reality behind it.

As a novelist, Brown, of course, could not manipulate any reality except for a fictional one, so we cannot draw a direct analogy between the text of the book and the contract between Welbeck and Thetford. And yet, through unresolved mysteries, open ending and the ambiguity of the protagonist's character, Brown seeks to evoke the feeling that life is bigger than its textual representations. In this respect, I tend to agree with Kenneth Dauber's claim that Brown was acutely aware of the discrepancy between living and writing. In his *The Idea of Authorship in America*, Dauber argues that Brown was writing in the period when authorship was becoming institutionalized as a profession, compared to the earlier times when anyone could write a book – for the most part, of an autobiographical nature. The transition was painful, and, as Dauber maintains, Brown struggled to bring writing and living back together: “Fact

and fiction ... separate. But Brown, struggling against the separation, consistently refuses the commonsense attempt to make do with it and keep on going" (42). According to Dauber, these struggles led Brown to a "writing without an Author" (65), where life writes itself and the text becomes "so perfectly mimetic as to go beyond mimesis" (76). However, Dauber does not take into account that there is *always* a gap between writing and living; it is only that the 1790s, with the important documents establishing the country's independence and unity still in mind, with the fast-developing banking system, and the increased use of paper money of all sorts, were a particularly favorable time for the rise of awareness of this gap. Whatever Brown's intentions may have been, *Arthur Mervyn* lays bare this discrepancy through numerous examples of writing's vulnerability as well as through its own form. Unlike traditional novels of the time - sentimental, Gothic, or bildungsromans – *Arthur Mervyn* does not create a closed-in, impenetrable little universe where everything is interrelated, but what seems to be a piece of chaotic and confusing reality, with random characters that do not have any importance for the plot, references to totally insignificant events, unresolved enigmas and an open ending that puts not a period, but a question mark to the story. In this way, through the form of the novel, Brown achieves the same effect as he does in the episode of the Thetfords' fraud scheme: the realization that real life is much more complicated and diverse than any writing that claims to reflect it.

Besides its inadequacy to the reality, Brown shows the symbolic's frailty and unreliability. The first chapter of the present work examines various examples of this vulnerability, but to continue with the theme of contracts, let us now turn to the old Hadwin's will and the Maurices' newspaper advertisement. These two contracts too

play some role in the book. However, if the insurance contract in Part One, although fabricated with a malicious purpose, is nevertheless respected by both parties, the documents mentioned above are treated by characters with the utmost neglect and, therefore, turn out to have no power at all.

When Mervyn comes back to the Hadwins' farm, learns about the death of the father and witnesses the tragic end of Susan, he is naturally worried about Eliza's future. In a very un-fairytale-ish, down-to-earth manner, he first thinks about legal issues such as property and inheritance: "Mr. Hadwin might have fixed the destination of his property, and the guardianship of his daughters, by will" (215). His guess proves to be true, Hadwin did leave a will which Eliza eagerly fetches to Mervyn. However, the girl is not happy with the content of the document, especially with her father's choice of her guardian and the executor of the will. Judging from her angry remarks, the reader can assume that Eliza's relationship with her uncle Philip, chosen for this role by her father, are far from cordial. And yet, her next move comes rather unexpected: after Eliza hears that if there were no will, she could choose her guardian herself, "she tore in several pieces the will ... and threw the fragments into the fire" (216). Arthur is dumbfounded at this act, and so is the reader. However, we cannot help but marvel at how easily Eliza gets out of the predicament. In a paroxysm of despair, she basically negates the power of the written word, and supersedes it with her own desire, or whim – depending on how we view it: "perhaps I have been wrong, but I could not help it. I will have but one guardian and one protector." As Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro point out in their footnotes to the novel, this episode is also reminiscent of Arthur's "bold strategy ... when he burned \$20,000 to keep it from Welbeck" (216). In both cases, an unexpected act of disobedience to and utter

disrespect of writing comes as a shock for other characters and the reader alike, seeming almost a sacrilege. These two episodes demonstrate the extent of the symbolic's power: even though just fragile pieces of paper, both banknotes and contracts are usually treated with awe. By contrast, Arthur's and Eliza's behavior shifts emphasis from the symbolic nature of writing on its material, easily destructible side, divesting it of its almost magical power.

How can Brown shift emphasis on the material side of his own book? He cannot burn it or tear it into pieces, of course, but he has other means at his disposal. Metatextuality is one of them. For instance, Chapter XXII of Part Two ends with a dialogue that is but loosely linked to the previous narrative. It is not framed by any explanatory remarks regarding its time and place, so it is not until some lines into the dialogue that we realize that it's Eliza Hadwin talking with Mervyn. Even more interestingly, they are talking about the text of the book itself. Eliza asks Arthur what he is writing, and he explains that Mrs. Wentworth requested him to write down his story "for some purpose which she tells me she will disclose to me hereafter" (303). He mentions Stevens' contribution to the project that "has saved [him] a world of writing," and then urges Eliza to go to bed, to which she consents but first desires to take the manuscript with her to read it and "watch if you [Mervyn] told the whole truth" (304). This scene, therefore, has the novel itself at its focus, only now we suddenly see it as an object, manipulated by other characters. Mervyn grumbles over Mrs. Wentworth's odd request, patiently writing down his own adventures, and Eliza proofreads the text like an editor. Thus, paradoxically, even though Brown manages to make the novel look like a piece of reality, it does not prevent him from exposing the book's artificiality too. The reader practically sees the text being created in front of his

or her own eyes, by other people who are just as subjective as he or she is. This episode, like the one with Hadwin's will, undermines the writing's authority by showing its materiality and subjectivity. After all, Eliza only destroys the will because she does not agree with her father's subjective choice of the guardian, expressed in the document. This recognition of the other party's subjectivity makes her feel rightful to refuse to obey the contract.

We can also find an opposite example in *Arthur Mervyn*, the Maurices' advertisement with a promise of a \$1000 reward for whoever will return their lost fortune. Here too, one party of the "contract" refuses to observe it, but in this case, it is the Maurices who take back their own promise. When Mervyn goes to the family's executor to demand his reward, he is faced with an unexpected difficulty: "To be sure ... the contract was explicit. To be sure, the conditions on Mr. Mervyn's side have been performed. Certain it is, the bills are entire and complete, but Mrs. Maurice will not content to do her part, and Mrs. Maurice ... is the person, by whom, according to the terms of the contract, the reward must be paid" (286). Again, the symbolic is totally neglected by a person who is supposed to play by its rules. Luckily for Arthur, the executor gives him the money himself, taking "the consequences of an act of justice on myself" (287), but the fact that the author of the contract refuses to live up to her promises is telling, especially if we remember Barthes' theory of "contract-narratives." As I have shown above, Brown "breaches" his contract with the reader, constantly departing from his own promises, refusing to keep them. In this aspect, he behaves just like the whimsical and greedy Mrs. Maurice, only in Brown's case avarice is hardly the reason.

All of these examples seem to send signals about the unreliability of contracts of all kinds, whether real contracts, or wills, or even newspaper advertisements. On the other hand, we have seen how the novel itself does not keep the promises given in the preface and is, therefore, a sort of “breached contract” with the reader, just like the contracts described in the book. *Arthur Mervyn*, therefore, embodies the unreliability of writing – including money, documents, newspapers, and literature – in its own form. Was it Brown’s purpose, or did the text unconsciously come out this way? Hardly anybody can give a certain answer to this question. Indeed, Brown’s background allows us to suggest that he was fully aware of the parallel between money and literature. *Arthur Mervyn* reflects the concern about writing that was in the air in the 1790s. The new state, little more than twenty years old, was still in the process of establishing its unity and independence from Britain. Contrary to some modern readers’ beliefs, the US was far from unified and autonomous at that time. As Howard Zinn elucidates in his *A People’s History of the United States*, the founding fathers created the illusion of the country’s unity in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – the illusion so powerful that it gradually became people’s sincere belief. As Zinn bluntly puts it, “[t]he reality behind the words of the Declaration of Independence was that a rising class of important people needed to enlist on their side enough Americans to defeat England, without disturbing too much the relations of wealth and power that had developed over 150 years of colonial history” (57). Zinn draws attention to the importance of the written word for the establishment and consolidation of the new national identity, although not without its costs. The capacities of writing and, by extension, of print were actively exploited in the 1790s: McAuley’s article provides evidence for a substantial increase in the

number of newspapers and other imprints in the 1790s. Contemporaneously, Philadelphia, the new republic's capital and financial center, was witnessing the growth of importance of trade, paper money, and a credit-based banking system. In fact, the transatlantic trade was so crucial for the U.S.A. that some scholars view literature of the time not within the national context, but rather as belonging to a larger "Atlantic World-System" (Shapiro 40). Brown's novel reflects these concerns about the power of writing and print, and about money and trade, embodying in its own form the nation's search for a literary identity of its own; the search that explores various genres and strategies and reveals their vulnerability and ultimate inability to describe the chaotic reality of the new state. It likewise reflects the U.S.A.'s search for the financial independence from Europe, but only exposes the fictional nature of money and subjectivity of any contract, which invites manipulation and fraud. *Arthur Mervyn*, therefore, can be read as a warning to contemporary audience: far from condemning either literature or commerce, Brown simply teaches us to be cognizant of their immense capacities and their potential danger so that we do not fall victims to the media's propaganda or to financial fraud.

## CONCLUSION

The U.S.A. national debt ceiling is raised every year; Administration's attempts to take the debt under control have been futile so far, so the country keeps on living on a huge debt. All countries in the world have long abandoned the gold standard, and national currency values today are based largely on countries' fluctuating GDPs. International and domestic trade has become the deciding factor in determining currencies' worth. However, there are other factors in play too, and the media are among the most important. The most recent example would be the turmoil in Ukraine that had hryvnia rates hit bottom, and that also negatively affected Russian currency. Investors, scared of a possible war between Russia and Ukraine have started withdrawing record amounts from the two countries' stock markets. Such immediate reaction would be impossible without a globalized media that shape people's opinions and even direct their feelings. Money has become a fiction that does not have any direct correlation to reality and that is invented and reinvented daily by politicians, international companies, and the media.

The roots of this system date back to the eighteenth century, especially to its last decades, when the U.S. was still a young country struggling to consolidate its new status through not only political, but economic and literary independence as well. The result of this struggle was a new currency, destined to become one of the strongest in the world, largely due to the new credit-based banking system, and the emergence of the national literature, which would soon become professional and protected by copyright. Since that time money has become more and more fictionalized, and literature has become more and more commercialized. We have to deal with the consequences of these two interrelated processes on a daily basis, whether we

exchange currency, use credit cards, buy books on the author's site, or use quotation marks in academic papers not to be accused of plagiarism. All of these consequences are registered by Charles Brockden Brown in his novel *Arthur Mervyn*.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this thesis, the association between writing and money in the book is far from accidental. Brown puts equal emphasis on financial transactions and on reading and writing episodes (letters, books, documents, journals). In *Arthur Mervyn*, money and texts often function and are treated by characters in the same way. They get lost and restored, sent by mail, forged and destroyed, and both turn out extremely unreliable in the end. Brown's background definitely made him particularly sensitive to the growth in the use of paper money, one of the first steps on money's path to fictionalization. Paper is a fragile material, and language, as we know thanks to linguistics and psychoanalysis, is an extremely complex, but totally contingent system. The combination of paper and language, which is both writing and money, makes for a vulnerable, easily manipulated product. Versed in trade and law, Brown knew it better than anyone else, and reflected it in his own writing.

The novel belongs to a transitional period, when the old was not fully displaced by the new: old genres still had a strong hold on the audience, anonymity and plagiarism were still common practices, as well as the old European – and metal – money were still in use. Brown remains attentive to this variety of currencies, forms of money, types of writings, literary genres and narrative techniques while looking ahead and probing new possibilities in both literature and economics (as, for example, in his *Historical Sketches*). In *Arthur Mervyn*'s pages, Portuguese gold coexists with the newly established dollar, now almost obsolete promissory notes and bills of exchange – with banknotes and checks that are still in use. Likewise, old generic strategies

coexist with unconventional plot twists and characters, and narrative devices and elements familiar to the contemporary reader (like authorial prefaces, letters, first-person narratives) are interwoven with the most revolutionary and experimental ones, like nested narratives, metatextual elements, and an open ending. This openness to both the old and the new, and their careful and scrupulous examination leads Brown to an almost postmodern vision. His novel seems to suggest that the ultimate and absolute truth, or the universal standard are inaccessible, that the symbolic systems do not refer us to anything beyond them, but are rather self-referential.

Even a brief look at the examples described in this thesis, would suffice to see how much attention Brown pays to convertibility and translatability. Portuguese gold is converted into banknotes, the Maurices' gold is first converted into English pounds, and then into bills of exchange. Lodi's manuscript is written in Italian, and needs to be translated into English to be published. Another paper might be needed to fully flesh out this problem, but it is clear that Brown was aware of both linguistic and currency relativity. The States' transatlantic trade that brought foreign money and massive amounts of immigrants from Haiti and all over the world is definitely the reason for this awareness. A lot has been written on *Arthur Mervyn* in the context of the Haitian Revolution, and of the debates on the African American community in Philadelphia, but somebody still has to write about Brown's attention to the immigrants' languages and the dialects of different social groups within the American society. One might consider the scene in the stage-coach to Baltimore with a French refugee from Haiti and two black women talking in French, and amused Arthur listening to their "open-mouthed, half-articulate, monotonous, and sing-song jargon" (274). Even though Arthur is prejudiced against the strange language he cannot understand, the reader has

a chance to ‘overhear’ the conversation: “Tenez! Dominique! Prenez garde! Diable noir!” (274) Another curious scene is the one in Mrs. Villars’ brothel when Arthur for the first time speaks with Clemenza and tries to convey her “broken English” in his narrative (244). This attention to foreign languages, foreign texts and foreign money, fostered by Brown’s professional interests, allowed him to sense what was only articulated a century later: the absence, or at least inaccessibility of the absolute truth, and the relativity of all symbolic means of representing reality. *Arthur Mervyn* both reflects and performs this divide between the real and the symbolic, encouraging the reader to approach all texts with a critical eye. As Michael Gilmore comments on the episode when Wortley casts doubt on Mervyn’s character, both trade and the novel demand “interpretive vigor.” Consequently, “the difficulties of *Arthur Mervyn* compel readers to engage in incessant scrutiny of words and actions, a skill that can abet survival in the marketplace” (658). And not only survival in the marketplace, I would add, but greater awareness of the subjectivity and incompleteness of any text, whether it is a legal document, a political speech, or a magazine article. In this sense, Brown’s message remains relevant even in these days, when both money and texts have such a strong hold on our everyday life, and when we more than ever need to learn how to filter information and orientate ourselves in this vast symbolic space.

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