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# Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Narrative in the Wake of Trauma with the Fiction of Charles Brockden Brown and Paul Auster

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**Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Narrative in the Wake of  
Trauma with the Fiction of Charles Brockden Brown and Paul Auster**

by

**Tim Han**

**A Thesis**

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## Abstract

Through the use of a common language, a common history, and widespread communication of current events, the American collective psyche creates for itself a founding mythology, an almost all-encompassing cultural narrative that subsumes every major plot point in the country's history, interpreting new events and reinterpreting old ones. The United States' founding mythology creates a basic interpretive framework with which American citizens can begin creating their own identities while retaining a sense of community. However, because the founding mythology of a community as large as a nation must represent a large number of people, it cannot be terribly complex, as far as narratives go. The deep-seated emotions and psychological states of each individual citizen cannot possibly be accounted for, so the founding mythology paints history in broad strokes, only describing actors, actions, and logical causes and effects.

Trauma, most obviously moments of great, unexplainable violence, undermines the basic assumption that history can consist of logical chains of causality, an assumption that founding mythologies require in order to exist. The loss of faith in a founding mythology can be traumatic in and of itself, but as I will argue in this paper, a self-awareness of the founding mythology's artifice can lead to a sort of recovery, or at least acceptance. I will discuss the novels of Charles Brockden Brown and Paul Auster, who evidence self-awareness of language's and narrative's constructed nature through their fiction. The traumatic pulling-away from the safety of the founding mythology ironically also allows for the reordering of personal experiences into

private narratives, free from the insufficiency of the founding mythology.

## Introduction

In this project, I will explore the impact that historical trauma has upon the fiction of its time, the emotions and cultural tendencies that that trauma reveals and destabilizes, and how authors react to that trauma through their writing. I will be discussing American fiction in particular through the works of two authors from opposite ends of United States history: Charles Brockden Brown and Paul Auster. Brown lived and worked during the Early National Period from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. He wrote prolifically, producing articles, histories, and other pieces of non-fiction for a number of publications, as well as editing magazines and anthologies. One of the United States' first professional fiction writers, Brown published an astonishing eight novels in the four-year period between 1798 and 1801. However, he subsequently gave up on novel-writing and died nine years later at the age of 39 due to tuberculosis.<sup>1</sup> Regardless, I will show that modern American writers, Auster especially, owe a great deal to Brown, who broke new ground in terms of both form and theme amidst the birth of a new nation and a new national literature.

On the other end of the national time line, Paul Auster still writes actively today. Born in 1947 and raised in New Jersey, Auster led a wide-ranging life as a young man. He traveled widely and worked as a census taker, cargo ship deck hand, and university lecturer. He began writing and publishing from a young age and continued to do so from college onward. He settled in New York City, where he still resides. Much of his

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<sup>1</sup>*Charles Brockden Brown: Three Gothic Novels* 901-907

fiction revolves around the city. He has created a varied body of work, which includes poetry, short fiction, novels, translations, and critical pieces.<sup>2</sup> His novels represent a continuation of Brown's thematic concerns, consistently exploring questions of identity and providing postmodern observations on the ways in which stories are constructed.

I will be focusing on two of Brown's novels, *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntly* (1799), as well as one of Auster's, *The New York Trilogy* (1986). Auster published the component stories of his trilogy, "City of Glass," "Ghosts," and "The Locked Room," separately, but they make up a single, cohesive work, although not in the traditional sense. The stories do not seem to relate to one another, at least narratively, until the near the end of "The Locked Room," when the narrator reveals that he, the character, has written the previous two stories in the trilogy. I will further explicate the implications of this and other unusual narrative turns in later chapters, but most important, moves like this indicate self-awareness of the medium. The characters themselves seem to realize that they are components of narrative. I choose Brown and Auster's novels because of their self-reflexivity. These authors are keenly aware of the limitations and possibilities of the written word and exploit that rare knowledge to produce highly manipulative works.

I use the word "manipulative" to refer the ability to control readers' reactions. Through self-awareness of tropes and expectations of genre, Auster and Brown control reactions to their work more completely than most other authors, which

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<sup>2</sup>"Auster's Biography"

allows for mechanical distortion of narrative. Rather than draw readers into the world of the book, these two authors pull readers away from the page and reveal the medium's artificiality. Explaining how narrative is usually constructed and the circumstances that can disrupt narrative, exploring the different ways in which Charles Brockden Brown and Paul Auster reveal those disruptions in their fiction and mapping out the implications that narrative self-awareness has upon both author and audience will be the goals of this project.

### **Some Context**

Both authors draw inspiration from history, though in different ways. Brown treats upon local and national incidents in the early American cultural sphere. He based *Wieland*, a novel about a rural family destroyed by mysterious disembodied voices, on the true story of a man who went insane and murdered his family. *Arthur Mervyn: or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* takes place during the Philadelphia Yellow Fever epidemic of that year, which wiped out more than a tenth of the city's entire population. In *Edgar Huntly: or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*, the protagonist battles an army of hostile Native Americans, led by a crone known as "Old Deb." Although Brown took significant liberties with her character, he modeled her after an actual person: a Delaware woman named Hannah Foster.<sup>3</sup> Whether as impactful as a war or as localized as the murder of a single family, the events on which Brown bases his fiction were public occurrences, influential enough to be covered in national

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<sup>3</sup>Newman 322

newspapers.

In contrast, although much of his later fiction, like *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Man in the Dark*, references the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Auster draws upon personal experience for *The New York Trilogy*. Many major plots throughout are at least partly autobiographical. The mistaken phone call that starts the action of “City of Glass” actually occurred to Auster while living in Brooklyn.<sup>4</sup> Auster gives much of his own history to the unnamed narrator/protagonist of “The Locked Room” and to Fanshawe, the story's nominal and largely absent antagonist. All were born and raised in New Jersey before settling in New York. All three are writers. Both Auster and Fanshawe have mentally unstable younger sisters and traveled broadly throughout Europe in their younger days. Auster splits his work experience between the two characters: Fanshawe works as a deckhand after dropping out of college and the protagonist works as a census taker for the government shortly after moving to New York. I will later explain how these convergences of private and public narrative in Auster and Brown's fiction play into the construction and purpose of both.

### **More Context: Expectations of Fiction**

Before going any further, in order to further elucidate the ties between history and fiction, I wish to examine generic expectation. In her book, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, Cathy N. Davidson writes about the need for cultural context when studying the American novel, “[...] how can we talk about the

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<sup>4</sup>“Auster's Biography”

history of books without taking into account such concepts as genre, audience, implied authors, implied readers, and strategies by which given texts operate within a given culture?"<sup>5</sup> I will argue that the expectations of the American literary public created a writing situation unique to Brown, who then manipulated the desires of both reader and writer to create fiction thematically and mechanically beyond his time.

When late 18<sup>th</sup> century New Englanders, these newly nationalized Americans, picked up a work of Charles Brockden Brown's fiction, what exactly were they expecting? And importantly, did Brown's work align with those expectations? How might his work have upset the expectations of those early American readers? A series of strong concerns regarding literature governed the heart and mind of the American public during the Early National Period. These concerns gave rise to a very specific set of desires, which would have a profound effect on the domestic fiction that was produced during this period. Navigating these concerns and desires left little room for authors to work with, and with a few notable exceptions, their fiction was narrow in both volume and scope. Brown, aware of the American public's often contradictory hopes in its own literature, would concern himself with fulfilling and subverting those expectations.

In the decades shortly following the American Revolution, an eager, newly-created national public clamored for a unique literary voice. American readers and critics sought a new American "style," and aspiring authors strove to craft one with

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<sup>5</sup>Davidson 5

varying degrees of success. Henri Petter makes a comprehensive study of the American fiction that arose out of this brief period in his occasionally caustic book, *The Early American Novel*. In fact, the book opens with an insult:

The three decades ending in 1820 are not considered a distinguished epoch either in the history of American writing or, more specifically, in the development of the American novel. Indeed, the student of the period is likely to be struck not only with many individual achievements but with widespread mediocrity.<sup>6</sup>

Petter attributes this mediocrity to a crisis in identity, obviously enough. He defines this crisis by contradictions. Critics at the time, both American and European, were rather self-aware of the “literary delinquency” of fledgling American fiction, imputing it to several different reasons during the Early National Period.

One broadly-held, if somewhat simplistic, theory held that the American colonists were simply too busy making money to care about a pursuit as frivolous as literature. Forgive the platitudes, but the then-uncultivated American nation was rife with opportunity for the smart, the hard-working, and the capable. Hyperbole or no, critics on both sides of the Atlantic praised the new frontier for its ability to turn even paupers into (democratically-elected) kings. Quoting the early 19<sup>th</sup> century British-American observer John Bristed, Petter writes, “nearly all the active talent of the nation is employed in prosecuting some commercial, or agricultural, or professional

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<sup>6</sup>Petter 3

pursuit, instead of being devoted to the quieter and less lucrative labours of literature.”<sup>7</sup> Such concerns can obviously never be substantiated through objective means, but the simple fact that many critics were of this opinion lends credence to it.

On a related, perhaps more important, and certainly more quantifiable note, American authors had difficulty getting their works of fiction published and put on store shelves, even with native publishers and distributors. According to Petter's sources, American literature suffered a certain stigma that stemmed from being an unknown quantity; booksellers preferred stocking imported British novels that would sell reliably, rather than untested domestic work.<sup>8</sup> These competing worries left writers in a rather brutal Catch-22: readers and critics hoped for a bold new literary style, independent of European influences, but booksellers wanted fiction that history had proven would sell, largely imported British literature. This meant that aspiring American writers would either flaccidly copy European literary tropes; explore what could become a new national literature, and thus fail to garner much attention from publishers and the reading public at large; or not bother with writing professionally at all and instead pursue work as lawyers, farmers, or businessmen and make much more money with comparable effort.

On top of all of this, many critics, even at the time, believed that Americans could not produce a strong literary tradition because the United States of America had no great *historical* tradition to call upon. In ancient Rome, the greatest tests of an

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<sup>7</sup>Petter 5

<sup>8</sup>Petter 6-7

experienced poet's skill, his crowning glories, were the founding myth and national epic. Vergil's *Aeneid* traces Rome's origins to Trojan royalty, creating a sense of mythic pride in the city. Where might an American author have found similarly worthy subject matter, seeing as how the War for American Independence was recent history rather than mythic history?

The wish for a stronger national literary tradition, a lack of material incentive for the professional writer, and the lack of an existing national history to draw upon for inspiration congealed to create, as previously mentioned, a largely mediocre stable of fiction during the Early National Period, at least, according to Petter. Most of the novels written during this period tried to emulate popular British forms, and the desire to appeal to the “practicality” of the United States led to the overwhelming popularity of the sentimental, moralistic novel. Obviously enough, Petter calls this form, “usable fiction,” “books which combined an unobjectionable subject matter with the guise of fictional reports, correspondences, and narratives, and therefore can be said to have encouraged a more tolerant acceptance of imaginative writing.”<sup>9</sup> Most popular novels written during this period were largely formulaic affairs, featuring impeccably moral characters overcoming ludicrous odds and improbable twists of fate in order to triumph over a world that quite logically rewards a strong drive and good behavior.

For example, *The History of Constantius and Pulchera, or Constancy Rewarded* (1789-1790), one of the most popular domestically written novels of the late 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Petter 63

century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, follows the story of the eponymous heroine as she falls in love with the titular Constantius. Her father obviously disapproves and arranges to have her married to a different, rather despicable man. Pulchera and Constantius flee the United States, and through a series of misadventures involving pirates, shipwrecks, alternating hostilities and pleasantries with the British navy, cross-dressing, and cannibalism, the pair manage to cure Pulchera's father of his stubbornness with nothing more than tenacity and an unwavering faith in their own moral superiority.

Usable fiction often took the form of epistolary novels like *The Boarding School*, which was composed of a series of letters written by a schoolmistress on the proper education of young ladies, along with letters written by the students themselves that show they have benefited from the schoolmistress's lessons.<sup>10</sup> Petter argues that these were little more than thinly-veiled moralistic and behavioral tracts that endeavored to make their messages more interesting by dressing them in the trappings of fiction. Brown's own work qualifies as "usable fiction," at least on the surface.

Scholarship written since the publication of *The Early American Novel* in 1971 has been invested in proving that Early National American fiction is actually more complex than Petter gave it credit for. Regardless, many of these stories are rife with common tropes, and Petter argues that they lack depth or identity, even though such work enjoyed frequent reprintings over bolder fiction like Charles Brockden Brown's.

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<sup>10</sup>Petter 410

Brown was keenly aware of the conflicting expectations being placed upon his country's writers that Petter argues contributed to early American literature's "mediocrity," whether or not one would argue with Petter's overall assessment. He manipulates those expectations in the form and content of his novels. His novels seem to strive for moral "usefulness," each opening with a preface stating as much. He substitutes the mouldering ruins and ancient graveyards of European Gothic writing for the darkened forests and untracked wilds of the American frontier. And most important of all, rather than more ancient fare, he draws upon recent historical events for inspiration: wars, murders, plagues. In doing so, he creates a superficially moralistic body of work like those of his contemporaries, while subverting reader expectations and illustrating the deepening fracture of the American mind between history, narrative, and psyche.

Auster would eventually take up the same mantle of self-aware storytelling. I will argue that Auster's 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction represents a continuation of Brown's own, further developing Brown's technique in manipulating the written word and inheriting Brown's purpose in highlighting the artificiality of narrative structures.

### **The Purpose of Narrative**

The eagerness with which the new Americans sought a literary tradition that they could call their own reveals a fundamental, human desire for common stories on a cultural scale. These stories take many forms, such as newspaper articles, popular works of fiction, and history textbooks, but their purpose is singular. They

contribute to the founding mythology, a universal history that individual constituents of a given culture can use as a baseline for self-interpretations of identity. This purpose, in fiction especially, is rarely explicit and is often unintended, but shared narratives accomplish this purpose, regardless.

To give a broad example of a shared narrative and its effect on identity, the story of the American War for Independence, of the colonial struggle against Great Britain, forms an essential part of my identity as an American citizen, one which I share with millions of other Americans. Adapting the nationalistic narrative of the United States' creation in the wake of war creates a basis for self-interpretation—by exclusion if nothing else. Being able to adopt this myth as my own by virtue of my birth and citizenry gives me an identity distinct from those who might identify themselves as citizens of other nations.

I call the result of this tendency towards common cultural narratives a “founding mythology,” but I do not use this term to refer to something so narrow as the story of a nation's birth. To me, a founding mythology is an ever-evolving narrative that communities adopt to define themselves. Furthermore, although generally I use “community” in this paper to refer to the United States, the term can be applied to any group. Whether it be as broad as a nation or as narrow as a group of friends, every community has a founding mythology that molds the self-identity of each member of those communities.

In this paper, I will argue that especially widespread founding mythologies, America's in my case, tend towards simplicity for the sake of mass consumption.

Every action has a clear motive and a logical reaction. But horrifying, traumatic events destabilize the belief that history is made up of such simple chains of events. Brown, Auster, and self-aware authors like them use fiction to reveal the artificiality of founding mythologies while simultaneously exploiting that artificiality to work through that trauma.

## Chapter One: Trauma and its effects

On a December evening in 1781, an honest, well-respected, law-abiding Pennsylvanian farmer by the name of James Yates hosted a religious gathering for several friends at his home. After his guests left, he stayed up with his wife, reading their Bible together while his wife held their youngest daughter, an infant. Their eldest, a girl, sat with them. Their two middle children, both boys, slept in their room. It was then that a spirit came to Yates and commanded him to “rid himself of idols.” After throwing the Bible into the fire, Yates took up his ax, went outside, hacked the family sleigh to pieces, and slaughtered all of his livestock.

And yet the spirit was not satisfied; it told him to destroy his family as well, to rob himself of that which he loved most. And so he turned on his children, killing his sons in their beds and his wife and youngest on the road outside as they tried to flee. Finally, he found his eldest daughter hiding in the barn, and he murdered her as well. He went to his parents' home the next morning, apparently naked, and confessed his crimes to them. His mother and father did not believe him until they saw the bodies themselves. Yates blamed this spirit for his actions, showed no remorse for his crimes, and continued to behave as though he had committed no wrongdoing until the day he died.

From this horrifying story, Charles Brockden Brown drew inspiration for his novel, *Wieland: or, The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798). The epistolary novel, written from the perspective of a Pennsylvanian woman named Clara Wieland,

is composed of letters which describe traumatic events that have befallen her family over the course of her life, including the tale of her father, who started a cult and died under mysterious, explosive circumstances and her encounter with an at times treacherous, at times helpful ventriloquist. Eventually, her brother, Theodore, driven by voices that he believes to be divine in nature, murders his own wife and children and is narrowly diverted from murdering Clara herself.<sup>11</sup> The novel ends with Clara recovering from her ordeal, leaving behind her life in America for Europe.

### **Responding to Trauma**

To Brown, the physical and psychological violence of and surrounding America's foundation created a traumatic split. I use “split” here to mean a division between action and intention, between what is said and what is left unsaid. “Action” here means the act of storytelling itself, literally everything that the writer writes and the narrator narrates. By “intention,” I mean the narrators' and authors' unspoken attempts to recover from trauma. Trauma renders one unable to speak directly about one's painful experiences. The act of storytelling allows authors to create spaces in which trauma might be dealt with indirectly through a sort of negative affirmation or active ignorance.

I believe that the various traumatic events that Auster and Brown engage with, generally violence of some kind, indicate a sort of cultural malaise. The broken

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<sup>11</sup> To be clear, from here onward, I will use “Wieland” (not italicized) to refer to Theodore Wieland, as Clara does within the novel.

narratives that these authors create are a reflection of a nation's wounded psychology and its attempts at reconciling its new broken state.

For Brown and Auster, this split manifests itself in the conceit of self-awareness. Their novels take on a sort of self-consciousness; at the most direct level, Brown wrote in the epistolary form, necessarily implying that the characters were aware that they were crafting a narrative, and many of Auster's works feature author-protagonists who are similarly self-aware. Notably, in *The New York Trilogy*, the narrator of the first part meets Paul Auster the writer. This self-awareness of medium acts as both the result of and the cure for psychic trauma. Literature, or rather the act of creation itself, allows injured individuals to reorder their experiences so as to not be overwhelmed by them. Emma Hegarty writes, "Auster conceives the role of literature to be in providing alternative perspectives that encourage the self-questioning that he deems necessary for an understanding of subjectivity and identity construction".<sup>12</sup>

While writing before the birth of formal psychoanalytic theory, Brown makes use of similar tropes in dealing with personal and political traumas through his fiction. The specter of religion haunts the Wielands after their father's mysterious and rather violent death. The event itself took place during Clara's childhood, and she describes the event itself with a surprising level of clarity and gruesome detail, which W.M. Verhoeven states is typical of the Gothic style.<sup>13</sup> Their father leaves in the middle of

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<sup>12</sup>Emma Hegarty, "The practice of solitude: agency and the postmodern novelist in Paul Auster's *Leviathan*", p. 864

<sup>13</sup>W.M. Verhoeven, "Gothic Logic: Charles Brockden Brown and the Science of Sensationalism", pp. 96-97

the night in an uncharacteristic fit of anxiety to the small temple that he built for himself at the top of a rock overlooking their home. A loud, brilliant explosion brings Clara's mother and uncle to the temple where they observe the remains of the eldest Wieland:

My father, when he left the house, besides a loose upper vest and slippers, wore a shirt and drawers. Now he was naked; his skin bruised. His right arm exhibited marks as of having been struck by some heavy body. His clothes had been removed, and it was not immediately perceived that they were reduced to ashes. His slipper and his hair were untouched.<sup>14</sup>

Clara deals with the direct physicality of her father's death with little hesitation, but has greater difficulty reconciling with the unexplainable aspects of the event. She exhaustively explains how theology has been sidelined in her and her brother's education, and importantly they create a "pleasure dome" out of their father's former temple dedicated to the study of Roman philosophers like Cicero rather than God. She attempts to snuff out religion, which stands in proxy for the trauma that she experiences when her father dies. Obviously, the death of her father and the resultant grief-induced death of her mother are emotionally scarring in and of themselves, but the greater trauma lies in the inexplicability of the circumstances leading to his death: his strange behavior, the bright lights, the shining cloud, the

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<sup>14</sup>*Wieland* 16

selectively-burning fire, and so on.

I would argue that this is at least partly why Clara is so concerned with empiricism as an adult. She surrounds herself with the science and philosophy of the time, but these methods are insufficient when the same sorts of events occur yet again. When she finds herself and her loved ones again beset by mysterious voices and unexplainable phenomena, her brother is driven to madness and murder while she is physically sickened by the affair. Ultimately, it is through writing, the very act of narrating the novel itself, that she comes to terms with her grief.

Similarly, in Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008), the protagonist, August, and his granddaughter, Katya, struggle to overcome a string of recent tragedies. I will not examine this novel as closely as I do *The New York Trilogy* because its treatment of personal trauma's effects on identity is not as complex as that of Auster's earlier work. However, *Man in the Dark* is worth mentioning because the traumas its characters endure are closely analogous to those that Brown's protagonists suffer. August has lost his wife and nearly lost his leg in a car accident. Katya's boyfriend, who got a job driving trucks for the American military in Iraq, was murdered by insurgents, who broadcast the deed on the internet. August attempts to deal with his trauma by creating a story in which America split apart into a second civil war after the 2000 election. The Twin Towers were never attacked, but millions of Americans have been killed as militias tear the country apart. In a mindbending twist, the protagonist of this embedded narrative is made aware that *this* is an "artificial" world, created by a single man, and he is given the task of killing the person responsible for imagining

the war. Thus, August indirectly commits psychic suicide.

However, he begins to overcome his grief by discussing films with Katya, a film studies major in college. The two of them spend their days watching movies together, and much of their interactions involve discussing themes and ideas in those movies. Katya begins to formulate a thesis that grief in film can be characterized by inanimate objects, which August. They constantly circle around their troubles, but never answer them explicitly, using the language of criticism to both mask and engage with their grief, so that they might not face the danger of revisiting past traumas directly.

The ultimate result of trauma is self-awareness of the founding mythology, or rather, the artifice of the founding mythology. Horrifying events, often terrible acts of violence cannot be neatly absorbed into the national founding mythology. In that moment of injury, after the wound has been dealt but before an explanation can be invented, victims know that truth is what they make of it, and that indirect manipulation of how those events are perceived can aid in recovery.

### **Manipulating Expectation**

Here, I wish to introduce my paper's most important concept: displacement. In psychoanalytic terms, displacement is a redirection of energy from a dangerous target to a less dangerous target. For example, if a parent scolded a child, the child might not retaliate directly for fear of worse punishment. Instead, the child might vent his frustrations by destroying some object that the parent holds dear, indirectly

striking back at his aggressor and releasing his emotional energy against a target less likely to cause harm. I argue that, when responding to trauma, the very act of writing is an act of displacement. Rather than re-experience traumatic events within their own minds, their emotional impact unmitigated, Auster and Brown's writing characters externalize their memories, allowing them to approach trauma indirectly and thus, more safely.

However, I also use "displacement" to mean movement, both physical and emotional. With this definition, the role of displacement is more ambiguous, being both the cause and result of trauma. For example, the physical displacement of the American Indian population of Norwalk in *Edgar Huntly* instigates the violence that inspires the novel. The Native Americans murder numerous white Americans in retaliation for this crime, and the horrors that Edgar endures while combating the vengeful natives begin to destabilize his belief in his own ability to perceive his personal history in a linear fashion, which eventually leads to his recounting of those traumatic days.

Sudden, inexplicably destructive events like the Indian Wars or the Yates murders reveal cracks in the fundamental understanding of causality. That is, horrifying acts of violence can shake one's belief in a logical universe in which things always happen for a reason. In her book, *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore discusses the destabilizing effect that trauma has upon the ability to form narratives through language:

Something of a consensus has already developed that

takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency. Yet, at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma.<sup>15</sup>

In Gilmore's use of the word, "language" stands in for a broader definition than a shared mode of communication. Language is the basic ability to form narrative; when I say that trauma displaces language, I mean that trauma both renders narratives unreliable by creating distance between the work and the reader, but also allows readers and writers to work through trauma by using that distance to create new forms of narrative.

I will elaborate on this dynamic further in the next few sections, but basically, displacement is the simultaneous reaction to this trauma and its intended solution. Displacement is both that loss of faith in an ordered universe and the attempt to either restore that faith or learn to cope without it. To begin, I will explore how Brown uses the literary and historical anxieties of his time to subvert expectations and question causality. He enacts this subversion through both content and form, becoming one of the earliest American writers to make a study of displacement in fiction. As such, Brown's fiction is both a tool to study historical displacement and a

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<sup>15</sup>Gilmore 6

site of displacement in and of itself.

Returning to Brown's treatment of generic expectation, I will, from the top downward, examine how Brown's stylistic choices might have been interpreted by his contemporary audience. At this point in history, a "memoir" could refer to a number of genres. In her essay, "The Tyranny of Sleep: Somnambulism, Moral Citizenship, and Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*", Justine Murison writes that maps, medical studies, historical accounts, sexual exploits, and autobiographies could all be labeled "memoirs." She writes about the definition and usage of memoirs in the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

what unites these variations is a claim to truth implicit in observing, experiencing, and recording events. In this way a sexual history such as John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure; or, Fanny Hill* (1749) can participate in the same genre as Barton's *Memoir Concerning the Rattlesnake* (1796). Both ask the audience to trust observation and memory as the organizing principle that creates the believability of (alleged) nonfiction. (258)

Brown uses the expectations raised by his novels' perspectives and genre to complicate the reader's belief in the reliability of memory. At this moment in literary history, fiction as a genre did not enjoy the same amount of respect as it does today, and many of the novels written during this period had to make some sort of overture towards "usefulness" and plausibility (3). Brown prefaced his novels with verbalized

hopes that readers would find his work morally and intellectually instructive. In order to do so, he needed to, or at least felt that he needed to, defend the verisimilitude of his work.

Of course, Brown did not necessarily attempt to deceive his readership into believing that the events that take place in his novels are one-to-one transpositions of actual events, nor would his readership have likely believed him if he tried to make such a claim. However, he is preoccupied with proving that phenomena like bilquism and somnambulism *do* exist and that they can lead to death and destruction, scientifically and morally. Brown begins this novel with an advertisement, writing that the events of the novel are difficult to believe, but have basis in historical, scientific, and medical fact, openly referencing the story of James Yates when he states, “most readers will probably recollect an authentic case, remarkably similar to that of *Wieland*” (ibid).

But Brown plays with the expectations of credibility that he raises himself. Even though *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly* are called “memoirs” and written in the first-person, thus claiming authenticity, both render themselves fundamentally unreliable. Clara, *Wieland's* protagonist, begins to doubt even her own sanity when she begins to hear voices with no discernible origin, necessarily mirroring the readers' own difficulty in grasping the fantastical events that occur within the narrative. These include her father's unexplained death by violent explosion, ventriloquism-induced insanity, and of course, infanticide.

And in *Edgar Huntly*, large blocks of the narrative's action are missing and the

eponymous narrator's own recounting becomes suspect because of his somnambulism.<sup>16</sup> Sleepwalking acts as a literalization of psychic displacement; the narrative is made unreliable because the narrator is performing actions that he has no knowledge of. Notably, the narrative opens with the protagonist doubting his ability to faithfully recount his own experiences. The novel itself “exists” because of the death of Waldegrave, a good friend of Edgar Huntly's. Most of the story's narrative fabric consists of a letter that Edgar is writing to Waldegrave's sister, Mary, concerning the various horrific and fantastical events that occur after Waldegrave's murder and Edgar's subsequent investigation into the crime. This letter is written some time after those events, but Edgar is still not confident in his own narrative faculties:

Yet am I sure that even now my perturbations are sufficiently stilled for an employment like this? That the incidents I am going to relate can be recalled and arranged without indistinctness and confusion? That emotions will not be reawakened by my narrative, incompatible with order and coherence?<sup>17</sup>

From the outset, Edgar acknowledges that he likely will not give an unbiased account and that the emotions that are tied up in the events might get the better of him.

Brown further upsets expectations of the memoir form by manipulating the

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<sup>16</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 275

<sup>17</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 643

reader's experience of perspective, emphasizing the constructed self-awareness of his novels. The form of the epistolary novel necessitates a certain willingness to believe in the narrator. While the reader might not believe that the narrator can be relied upon for absolute truth within the frame of the story, the narrator's perspective is all that we have. Reciting from memory, the letter-writer's recounting is expected to at least create a complete narrative. However, it would be easy to take for granted the necessary implication of that generic convention: because the very act of narrating the novel's events is a narrative action, the narration itself only comes after the fact.

That is, when Clara writes about her family life her fascinating and terrifying interactions with Carwin, her romance with Pleyel, or the murder of her brother's family she is recounting those stories *after they have already happened*, just like Edgar Huntly's letter to Mary. Clara iterates this point several times; in the novel's opening, she confirms that she is writing the letters that constitute the novel because she has been asked to do so and says, "In the midst of my despair, I do not disdain to contribute what little I can to the benefit of mankind. I acknowledge your right to be informed of the events that have lately happened in my family."<sup>18</sup> In the beginning of chapter six, she writes, "I now come to the mention of a person with whose name the most turbulent sensations are connected. [...] I have taken a few turns in my chamber, and have gathered strength enough to proceed."<sup>19</sup> These brief but

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<sup>18</sup>*Wieland* 5

<sup>19</sup>*Wieland* 46

frequent asides to the constructed nature of the text subtly inform the reader that the narrator's account is not so unbiased or empirical as it seems.

Again, I am not trying to claim that Brown was in any way trying to fool his readers into believing that Clara or Edgar Huntly were real people and their accounts are "true," nor am I claiming that late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century readers would have believed him if he tried. Rather, according to Murison, the understanding of the memoir genre at the time depended on a certain expectation of plausibility within its narrative, in a broad sense. Brown plays with this expectation, and in a sense, takes advantage of it.

As one of the country's earliest novelists, Brown was at the forefront of the genre's development in America, but he also had a surprisingly complex awareness of what readers would eventually expect from novels and how fiction would eventually develop. As the title of his short essay, "The Difference between History and Romance," suggests, Brown delineates history and romance, which he believes to be the two major tendencies of storytelling:

An action may be simply described, but such descriptions, though they alone be historical, are of no use as they stand singly and disjoined from tendencies and motives, in the page of the historian or the mind of the reader.

The writer, therefore, who does not blend the two characters, is essentially defective.

According to him, a historian recounts events in their barest form; a historian's

account involves concrete observations of objects and how they interact. A romancer attempts to assign *motives* to these interactions. Clearly, Brown understands the importance of cause-and-effect relationships in creating strong narratives, or if not that, at least argues for their importance. In his short story, "Walstein's School of History," he writes that the most effective historical narratives take some liberties in the telling, using romance when history comes short in explanation. Although he clearly defines how the two differ, he is careful to note that history and romance need to overlap in their recounting of past events. In doing so, history becomes "useful," in his words. History can teach lessons from the past, but romance gives those lessons the emotional impact necessary to linger in the minds of its readers.

This is why I find it so interesting that many of his novels divorce action from intention. *Wieland* and its inspiration, the Yates murders, embody this displacement. The events that took place on the Yates farm, and perhaps their coverage in local newspapers, became a framework for the form of the novel. The stilted reportage of the murders, which I will elaborate upon shortly, would be reflected in the stilted narrative of *Wieland*. In the novel, Brown does not merge history and romance, effects and causes, into a coherent, "useful" narrative. Rather, events are disjointed, and logical explanations for fantastic occurrences are few and far between.

Most obviously, Clara's father's death is never explained, and the catastrophic effect that this separation has on personal action is evident on a basic level in *Wieland's* account of the deaths of his family. *Wieland* describes his first encounter

with the supernatural presence, before it first compels him to murder, as a rapturous experience, stating, "I stretched forth my hands; I lifted my eyes, and exclaimed, O! that I might be admitted to thy presence; that mine were the supreme delight of knowing thy will, and of performing it!" (154). Despite the strength of his conviction, he initially does not have any idea what that "will" wants of him. As he wanders into Clara's home, he says, "Scarcely had I regained recollection of the purpose that brought me hither. [...] the relations of time and space were almost obliterated from my understanding" (ibid.). Here we see fanaticism replace reason, which will soon have catastrophic consequences.

This inability to assign will to action, to connect historical events through romantic motivations, actually reflects the news coverage of the actual murders. The event itself was covered in newspapers across several states, appearing in Connecticut's *The Norwich Packet*, Massachusetts' *The Salem Gazette* and *The Worcester Gazette*, and Pennsylvania's *Pennsylvania Journal* and *Pennsylvania Packet*. However, the details were very sparse at the time. The newspapers in Norwich, Philadelphia, Salem, and Worcester ran identical stories, only a brief paragraph reading, "A few days since one James Yates, who says he was born in West-Chester county, was committed to gaol in Albany, for the wilful murder of his wife and four children; he also killed his cattle."<sup>20</sup> To be clear, "gaol" is an archaic spelling of "jail." Each newspaper ran this story approximately a week after the the murders took place on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1781. Only the barest of facts are revealed. By Brown's

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<sup>20</sup>"Fish-Kill, Dec. 20<sup>th</sup>." *Norwich Packet*

criteria, this hardly even qualifies as a story, featuring history, but no romance.

Interestingly, it would only be in the following months that the murders, and possibly Yates' motivations for committing them, would be elaborated upon.

On February 14<sup>th</sup> of the following year, the *Worcester Gazette* published a brief followup piece:

We hear from Albany, that one James Yates, formerly of West Chester County, one of the Society of Shakers in that Neighbourhood was lately committed to the Gaol in that City, for the Murder of his Wife and four Children— It seems this unfortunate Man was tempted to this horrid Deed by the Spirit which so manifestly actuates the whole Society. After perpetrating the above act, he killed his Cattle, Hogs, &c. and boasted of his Deed as meritorious.<sup>21</sup>

While not much longer than the original piece, this story is entirely more complex. The reporter, apparently after a month's worth of fact-checking, has added romance to the narrative. He implies that Yates' participation in the "Society of Shakers" had a part in his madness, perhaps insinuating that any Shaker might, at any point, be "tempted to horrid Deeds."

While I do not wish to turn this section into even a tangential study of the Shakers, I do wish to briefly describe them, so as to elucidate the religion's place in the

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<sup>21</sup>"Westminster (Vermont) January 14" *Worcester Gazette*

American public's cultural psyche. At the time that the story was written, the Shakers, more properly known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming, had been active for less than a decade. An English migrant named Ann Lee arrived in America in 1774 in order to start this new religion, based on complete social equality, industry, separation from the general population, and a very active sense of spiritualism and religious fervor. In fact, the United Society of Believers received its colloquial name, the Shakers, from their energetic, ritualistic dancing.<sup>22</sup> The tone of the February 14<sup>th</sup> article indicates that there might have been some anxiety in the early colonial public regarding this radical new religious sect. The article even implies that the "Spirit" that possesses the Shakers is responsible for the murders.

Oddly enough, one of the most basic tenets of Shakerism is celibacy; Shakers do not marry nor do they have children. Obviously, James Yates was married with children, which confuses the issue of his membership in the Society. If he truly was a Shaker, he must have converted after his marriage and the births of his children, but how did he reconcile his private life with the Shakers' belief in communal living?

Returning to the article, the use of the word "unfortunate" is significant in at least three ways. First, "unfortunate" implies in a roundabout way that the reporter, if no one else, actually believes Yates. Rather than writing, "Yates claims to have been tempted to this horrid Deed," he writes, "It seems this unfortunate Man was tempted to this horrid Deed," taking Yates at his word as to his motivations. Second, it strips

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<sup>22</sup>"About the Shakers"

Yates of much of the guilt, portraying him as a victim of circumstance rather than a murderer, whether it be a murder inspired by malice or insanity. Third, and related to the previous point, this story represents a drastic change in the perception of the crime. The article released only a week after the crime uses the word “wilful” to describe the murders, meaning that the reporter believes that Yates was in complete control of his faculties and purposely killed his family. Of course, the “purpose” of those murders became a needle in the eye of those American writers who called attention to them, namely the unnamed newspaper reporters and Brown himself. The American public was willing to believe immediately after this horrendous event occurred that Yates had killed his family to fulfill some sort of purpose whatever it might be. Months later, after learning more about Yates' history, a reporter put forth that he killed because an evil supernatural entity forced him to. A logical or understandable explanation being untenable, an illogical one is found. That is not to say that the reporter cut this article out of whole cloth, but that the inherent incoherence of the crime, warring against the need to set the sequence of events in an objectively/romantically logical fashion, created a justification that would have been more suited for the prosecution of a witch trial.

On February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1782, a week later, the *Worcester Gazette* published another followup piece, yet more detailed than the previous. It goes into Yates' character according to his neighbors, who describe him as “insignificant” and not at all insane. Ignoring any speculation as to the “why” of the crime, the article pores over the sordid details of the murders: Yates' grim advance through the house, the butchering

of his livestock, the destruction of his property, the murder of his eldest daughter and two sons, the failed escape of his wife and infant daughter, and his insane, naked confession to his parents. Apparently, when shown the dead bodies of his family, he claimed that the body of his wife did not in fact belong to his wife, and that the body was one of an "Indian Squaw."<sup>23</sup> With all of the details of the incident revealed, it seems as though motives have again been overshadowed by the deeds themselves.

The Yates murders did not have an objectively pivotal impact on early American history; I'd be hard-pressed to explain how they led to, say, the War of 1812. However, I examine the news coverage of this story because it reveals, through its form, the American psyche's emblematic response to trauma, which would eventually form the basis of Brown's novels. The first story was but a single sentence, the second gave a possible explanation, and the third explained the particulars of the crime with grim precision. The first story's subject matter, a horrific crime, is reflected in the story's form through its sparseness. The trauma of the crime left a sort of psychic impact on the minds of those who observed it or were affected by it; nothing but the barest of facts could be reported because anything else was incomprehensible; what could have possibly motivated a man to commit such a malicious deed? The second and third stories are attempts at recovery. By assigning motivations to the murders, even when there likely are none, the reporters and their readers attempt to restore their faith in ordered systems, in which even deadly crimes are perpetrated for logical, though despicable, reasons.

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<sup>23</sup>"Worcester, February 21" *Worcester Gazette*

In this light, *Wieland* becomes a similar exercise for Brown, or more precisely, Clara. Her expressed purpose in writing the letter that makes up the narrative is to place her life back in order. If she can put it all down in front of her, take a step back, and look at it from a distance, perhaps she can make sense of it all. Of course, Brown takes the tendency towards romancing as illustrated by the newspapers a step further by implying that there are no motivations; cause-and-effect and temporal linearity are fictions. Figuring out *why* her brother murdered his family is likely impossible, but perhaps she might at least derive something useful from the telling of it.

## Chapter Two: Displacement as reflected in formal elements of fiction

In this chapter, I wish to discuss the nuts and bolts of displacement; how it affects the form of Brown and Auster's fiction and how those formal elements, in turn, become reflections of displacement. Gilmore points out two different popular views of how trauma should be dealt with in regard to language:

For example, to take one view, trauma cannot be spoken of or written about in any mode other than the literal. To do so risks negating it. In this construction, language may merely record trauma even as its figural properties and the speaker's imagination threaten to contaminate trauma's historical purity. In another view, trauma, it is claimed, does not exist until it can be articulated and heard by a sympathetic listener. This view swings to the other extreme to claim that without language, experience is nothing.<sup>24</sup>

The first view, which posits that the extremely personal nature of trauma cannot be conveyed through language, coincides mechanically with Brown's definition of "history." Both history and this first method of recording trauma only record the barest facts. Both insufficiently characterize the experience of trauma because, even if the emotional state of the traumatized writer can never be wholly transposed onto

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<sup>24</sup>Gilmore 6

the page, simply not trying does not accomplish anything for reader or writer. The second view, which posits that trauma can only be worked through in a group, denies the agency of the writer in private, recording thoughts and emotions without the pressures of outside interpreters. I will argue that Brown and Auster, through their fiction, reach towards a synthesis of these two approaches to trauma. Their work represents a public (or publicized, rather) response to trauma. This trauma so deeply affects the characters of these novels that they begin to question the founding mythology and language's ability to articulate a stabilizing truth, no matter the situation. Basically, the desire to bring trauma into the public sphere instigates the act of trauma writing. However, Brown's and Auster's characters' responses are deeply private and unique as well. As I will soon show, the most powerful answers to trauma consist of personal narratives, of stories and reactions to stories that can only be experienced by oneself. To illustrate this synthesis, I will perform close readings of the texts and examine displacement in its various forms.

### **Perspective**

Perspective conveys displacement in ways that few other elements can, as it is the method by which the narrative itself is conveyed. As such, the effect that displacement has upon perspective will be my first subject. I will return to Brown's work, but for now, I wish to focus on Auster's novel, *The New York Trilogy*. The first story, "City of Glass," is technically told from a first-person perspective. Although unnamed, the narrator clearly has a distinct voice and acts as a character within the

narrative framework, using “we” and “us” frequently to refer to himself. However, in most respects, the story reads like a third-person narrative, making the issue of identity in relation to perspective and identity much more confusing.

The story follows a mystery novelist named Quinn, who receives a mistaken phone call. The woman on the other line, Virginia, is searching for a private detective named Paul Auster (distinct from both the author of the book and a different character in the story named Paul Auster, also a writer). She hopes to hire him to follow her insane father-in-law, Boston Stillman. When her husband, Peter, was a child, Boston imprisoned him in a darkened room for nine years. Upon discovery, the courts deemed Boston insane and sent him to a mental institution. Years later, with his release imminent, Virginia fears that he will try to harm her family and hopes to hire a detective, namely Auster, to keep tabs on the elder Stillman. After a series of twists and terrifying journeys into Quinn's dissolution as a human being, the story closes with the revelation that a friend of Auster's (the writer-character) has been narrating the story, reading from a notebook that Quinn left behind of his experiences since taking the case. Quinn has disappeared, that record the only proof that he had ever existed at all.

“The Locked Room,” the final story in the trilogy, is told from the first-person perspective. In this story, a struggling, unnamed writer takes on the task of publishing the work of Fanshawe, his childhood friend who has disappeared and left behind his wife and infant son. However, this apparently noble goal becomes muddled as the protagonist/narrator begins to take over Fanshawe's life. The

changeover is initially subtle; Fanshawe's work, published by the narrator, achieves widespread acclaim. Eventually, some critics begin to believe that Fanshawe is a fiction created to build mystique around the work and that the narrator wrote everything himself. He marries Fanshawe's widow, Sophie, and adopts their son, Ben. He decides to write Fanshawe's biography, but quickly becomes obsessed with finding Fanshawe, convinced that his life will remain forever a reflection of Fanshawe's until he can confront him. After many misadventures, including sex with Fanshawe's mother, a prostitute-laden journey through Paris in an attempt to track Fanshawe's journey overseas, and a vicious Parisian beating, the protagonist reveals that he wrote the previous two stories, "City of Glass" and "Ghosts."

I explain all of this to emphasize the slippery and obfuscated nature of identity in Auster's fiction. This novel provides unusual examples of perspective as, throughout the three stories that make up the trilogy, Auster builds up and manipulates expectations of genre and fiction. That is, he takes advantage of what a novel *should* sound like to disrupt the barrier between reader and writer by utilizing "tricks" such as including himself within the narrative and turning "City of Glass" and "Ghosts" into stories within the story. In doing so, he manages to displace the very notion of narrative embodiment. Narrators are the arbiters of perspective, and when the narrator is a character rather than a detached observer, as is the case with Brown's epistolary fiction and Auster's embodied narratives, the work itself takes on an embodied identity. As such, when the narrators cannot place themselves within stable textual or psychological spaces, when they cannot form coherent self-identities,

the readers cannot either:

To further explain the function and role of perspective, and how both Auster and Brown manipulate perspective to manipulate the reader's response to the text, I turn to Michael McKeon. In his introduction to the "Subjectivity, Character, Development" section of the *Theory of the Novel* anthology, McKeon discusses how an author can give a narrative voice personality, how giving a narrative voice a personality affects perspective, and how perspective can break down the barriers between readers, writers, and characters. He states that internalization characterized the novel as the genre gained more public legitimacy in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. "Internalization" can be broadly defined as a narrative's tendency to reflect upon itself, but McKeon explains a specific formal technique of internalization known as "free indirect discourse." He quotes Dorrit Cohn, defining this discourse as, "the technique for rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration."<sup>25</sup>

In simplest terms, I might describe the use of free indirect discourse, henceforth abbreviated to FID, as an author writing a story in close third-person perspective. The perspective remains detached, but the narrative voice focuses on and embodies specific characters. Modern readers are familiar with this concept, but McKeon complicates understanding of it by calling attention to the effect that it has on the relationship between narrator, character, and audience. He writes:

As a method of internalization, free indirect discourse

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<sup>25</sup>McKeon 485

does not, strictly speaking, reach a 'deeper' level of consciousness in character than that already accessible through first-person narration [...] and third-person 'omniscience.' Rather, the effect of greater interiority is achieved by the oscillation or differential *between* the perspectives of narrator and character, by the process of moving back and forth between 'outside' and 'inside,' a movement that seems palpably to carve out a space of subjective interiority precisely through its narrative objectification.<sup>26</sup>

To illustrate, I turn to a master of the technique, Elizabeth Gaskell, an author active during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I choose an example from this period because the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the great period of FID. Authors like Gaskell and Jane Austen understood the tropes of FID, utilizing them to create stories that contained wide variety of emotionally distinct characters.

Gaskell is well-known for her astute and self-conscious commentaries on the foibles of gender and power dynamics in her native Victorian England. She set her final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, in the small country town of Hollingford. This town provides a neat cross-section of Victorian society; the poor, laborers, professionals, and two noble families reside in Hollingford and interact regularly, illustrating Gaskell's interpretations of class structures and relationships. While I do not wish to

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

turn this paper into an exhaustive study of sociopolitical hierarchies in Victorian England, I will explain the purpose and method of FID by analyzing two passages from the novel. The narrator maintains a gently sarcastic tone throughout, poking fun at the close-mindedness of the townsfolk, from rich to poor. Even when not utilizing FID, it maintains its own voice. That is to say, a strong narrative voice with a distinct personality is prerequisite to the use of FID. Before she can use FID, Gaskell must establish the narrator's personality. And so, immediately as the novel opens, she characterizes the narrator as intelligent, witty, gently mocking when it speaks of the town's relationship to the local ruling family, the Cumnors:

'The earl' was lord of the manor, and owner of much of the land on which Hollingford was built; he and his household were fed, and doctored, and, to a certain measure, clothed by the good people of the town; their fathers' grandfathers had always voted for the eldest son of Cumnor Towers, and following in the ancestral track, every man-jack in the place gave his vote to the liege lord, totally irrespective of such chimeras as political opinion.<sup>27</sup>

The narrator illustrates the precariousness of the aristocratic system by pointing out that the nobles ostensibly in power are utterly beholden to the whims of the people

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<sup>27</sup>Gaskell 7

under their authority, offering a subtle, yet radical rereading of then-contemporary models of political power. Furthermore, the narrator actually prefigures the master/slave dialectic by suggesting that the people of Hollingford, to a certain measure, remain the oppressed lower-class because they wish to. The narrator hides these radical observations underneath a veneer of quiet irony that it maintains throughout the novel. Gaskell does not use FID in this passage, but crafts a strong, recognizable voice for the narrator's most mundane observations.

The narrator's most explicit use of FID requires some setup. One of the novel's important conflicts centers on Osborne, the eldest son of the Hamley noble house. He has secretly married a young woman named Aimée, a French Catholic commoner. His father, a nobleman of the proudest sort, would never approve, or at least Osborne believes so. The stress of maintaining his secret relationship and his inability to tell his father about it weakens him physically. Sadly, Osborne dies during the course of the novel, leaving his wife a widow and his child fatherless. It is left to the protagonist, Molly, to pen a letter to the widow. One of Osborne's few confidantes, Molly knows about Aimée and their son and how to reach them. She hopes to soften the blow by writing to Aimée that Osborne is very sick, and then writing to tell her that he is dead the day after. But in an excellent example of FID, the oblivious widow immediately takes matters into her own hands:

And all this time a little, young, grey-eyed woman was  
making her way; not towards [Mr. Hamley], but towards

the dead son, whom as yet [Aimée] believed to be her living husband. She knew that she was acting in defiance of his expressed wish; but he had never dismayed her with any expression of his own fears about his health; and she, bright with life, had never contemplated death coming to fetch away one so beloved. He was ill – very ill, the letter from the strange girl said that; but Aimée had nursed her parents, and knew what illness was. The French doctor had praised her skill and neat-handedness as a nurse, and even if she had been the clumsiest of women, was he not her husband – her all? And was she not his wife, whose place was by his pillow?<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to the previous example, the narrator hones in on the perspective of a single character, that of the beleaguered French wife, and embodies her thoughts and motivations. While retaining some measure of distance, the narrator becomes as earnest, emotional, and optimistic as Aimée, a clear departure from the gentle sarcasm that otherwise characterizes the narrative voice. Ironically, it is that closeness that allows Gaskell to more deeply contrast the narrator's "natural" voice with the voice that the narrator adopts when speaking through and about Aimée. Placing the two voices within such close proximity with one another distinguishes both by their differences, allowing for more complex and relatable characterization.

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<sup>28</sup>Gaskell 570

On a broader scale, readers are better able to connect with the characters in a novel when the novel is *not* written in the first-person perspective or omniscient third. When an author uses FID, thus drawing attention to the divide between character and narrator, the reader can more easily gauge the effect that the former has on the latter; the closeness of FID allows for more personality than an omniscient third-person narration, while the distance allows readers to see the effect that that personality has on the narrative voice more wholly than they would be able to in a first-person narrative.

And so, how does FID relate to Brown's and Auster's work? I should note that the authors I am examining generally do not use FID in the strictest sense; Brown only wrote novels in epistolary form, and the majority of Auster's novels are written in the first-person. However, the two occupy interesting spaces in the study of FID. Brown, the first professional American novelist, did not understand FID as a theoretical term; the close third-person perspective would not become widespread until the next century and FID would not become clearly defined until scholars began to earnestly study the theory of the novel in the century after that. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Auster has the advantage of decades of study in the theory, history, and development of the novel, as well as psychoanalytic and deconstructionist perspectives on subjectivity. While I cannot definitively say that Auster is a particular student of deconstruction, he does have knowledge of the tropes made common in a poststructuralist Western tradition.

Basically, Brown represents the “before” of FID and Auster represents the “after.”

And despite the fact that neither author uses the precise form of FID, both manage to instill its effects in their fiction. Both authors create an internal space in which the narrative, the characters, and the readers can react against one another to create new perspectives. Auster accomplishes this by playing games with perspective and the expectations that they create. Brown grasps at the theory of FID, touching on its methods and characteristics, but without the vocabulary or historical examples to understand exactly what he was doing. In particular, the epistolary form allows him to write from a perspective of both omniscience and limitation.

I have discussed this previously, but in Brown's novels, the narrators write in such a way that they build suspense, as though the action were taking place in real time relative to the narrators, but actually write retroactively with a full understanding of the events that they recount. I do not mean "full understanding," as in Clara understanding what killed her father and drove her brother to madness or Edgar Huntly understanding why he is waking up in strange places, but rather a literal knowledge of what has transpired; Brown's novels are a purportedly a series of eyewitness accounts told after the fact. This creates the same effect on the reader as FID; by collapsing "present" into "retrospection," Brown ironically draws attention to their distinction from one another, simultaneously and counter-intuitively making the reader aware of the unreliability of the medium and bringing the reader deeper into the internal world of the novel.

Ultimately, the nature of the novel and its birth as a distinct genre correlates directly to my claim about the self-consciousness that authors and characters adopt

when experiencing trauma. Auster's and Brown's characters take this method of internalization and turn it inward yet again. They become aware that they are characters in narratives that they have been writing for themselves; they realize that they are the heroes of their personal stories. However, this realization only comes after some great tragedy. Characters like Brown's Clara or Auster's Quinn become aware of their positions as actors in a greater chain of events, but only because that chain has been broken and they realize that causality is false. The narratives that they weave (I use "they" ambiguously to draw attention to my own difficulty in separating authors from characters) are attempts at coming to terms with the realization that history cannot impart objective meaning.

The introduction to *The New York Trilogy* and the character of Quinn perfectly encapsulate the process of narrative self-consciousness that stems from moments of great trauma. Ever since his wife and child died under unspecified circumstances, Quinn's identity has literally split in two. William Wilson is not just a pseudonym, or even an alter-ego that Quinn inhabits periodically. Wilson is an entirely separate consciousness, responsible for Quinn's professional affairs. The two never interact and might as well be different people altogether. Interestingly, Quinn seems to be losing his own sense of self, becoming less and less of a "real" person each time he goes on one of his walks in the city. Important here is the psychic disconnect between mind and body. Auster writes, "By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal, and it no longer mattered where [Quinn] was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be

nowhere.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he seeks to consciously disassociate his painful past with any of the negative emotions that characterized it, the narrator stating that he has removed pictures of his family from his apartment and that he no longer sleeps with the lights on.

That sense of detachment, of dissociation and displacement, represents what I believe to be a reaction against trauma. Losing one's family is much more personal than political, obviously. Auster published this novel before 9/11, which would heavily influence his later work. However, the principles of reaction and catharsis, or at least attempted catharsis, remain the same. Auster's character makes literal the process of fictional restoration: after losing his family, his consciousness splits, allowing him greater control over how his own mind deals with that horrible event. McKeon writes, “Free indirect discourse may [...] be understood as a concretization, at the micro-level of style and the sentence, of that [...] condition of detachment or distance with the theory of the novel is notably attentive.”<sup>30</sup> The form that Brown's and Auster's novels take, of deeply self-reflexive narratives that are written in response to tragedy, embody that detachment. Clare, Edgar, Quinn, and the narrator/protagonist of “The Locked Room” are literalizations of FID.

Auster, taking Brown's ideas of physicality a step or two further, destabilizes the very notion of physicality, rendering a person's body an imperfect proof of existence. Questions of displacement pepper the opening of “City of Glass” to the point of

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<sup>29</sup>*Trilogy 4*

<sup>30</sup>McKeon 485

overdetermination. It even opens with a declaration of the protagonist's unimportance as the narrator states, "As for Quinn, there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance."<sup>31</sup> In first few pages, the unnamed narrator is determined to reduce Quinn's identity to near non-existence. Quinn's experiences with walking in New York City are especially revealing:

New York was an inexhaustible space [...] it always left [Quinn] with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace.<sup>32</sup>

Importantly, Quinn actively seeks displacement of identity, responding to the trauma of losing his wife and child. His story follows the track of FID, even though the narrative voice never embodies different characters. Instead, Quinn becomes conscious of the difference between experiencing events and perceiving events, which splits his consciousness between various identities. The mental distance that he maintains between himself as a "seeing eye" and his writing persona symbolizes

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<sup>31</sup>"City of Glass" 3

<sup>32</sup>"City of Glass" 4

this split. By reducing himself to a passive observer of his own life, he better manages his own perception of his troubled memories.

The novel both created and was created by FID. “The invention of free indirect discourse marks a signal moment of historical discontinuity, when novel writers learn to match matter to form in a new way” (485-486). FID allows for the tricks of perspective that Auster and Brown play, displacing identity through the physical form in which narrative is conveyed (I use the word “physical” interchangeably; it refers both to the literal presence of bodies interacting within narratives and the various elements that the authors use to tell their stories). The genre itself allows authors like Auster and Brown before him to approach trauma in a new way, creating spaces in which they might both recover from trauma and explore the possibilities that trauma reveals.

### **Letters: Implications and conditions of form**

To further elucidate the effect that displacement has upon narrative, I will explain its effect on letters, which play critical roles in both Auster's and Brown's fiction. Letters are formally important because they are a type of displaced communication. That is, they allow characters to communicate with one another, but only after a delay. Letters, unlike face-to-face or even telephone conversations, do not allow immediate responses from the recipient. Instead, they are concrete representations of the writer's immediate psychic state, able to be transported and stored and consumed repeatedly at the reader's leisure. Furthermore, the act of

letter-writing necessarily implies certain conditions. These conditions are interrelated and contingent upon one another, but differentiating and explicating them will help me explain how Brown and Auster use letters to subvert reader expectations and displace narrative embodiment.

First, letters are written in privacy. I do not necessarily mean that the writer is alone in a darkened room during composition, but that letters are written without the influence of the recipient's physical presence. I might say that people are more “comfortable” when writing letters than when they are trying to physically speak to others. A recent study conducted by the University of Michigan found that people give more honest, detailed answers to questions when text messaging than in conversation. Fred Conrad, the Director of the Program in Survey Methodology at the university's Institute for Social Research discusses this apparently counterintuitive tendency:

The preliminary results of our study suggest that people are more likely to disclose sensitive information via text messages than in voice interviews. [...] This is sort of surprising since many people thought that texting would decrease the likelihood of disclosing sensitive information because it creates a persistent, visual record of questions and answers that others might see on your phone in and the cloud. [...] We believe people give more precise answers via texting because there's

just not the time pressure in a largely asynchronous mode like text that there is in phone interviews. [...] As a result, respondents are able to take longer to arrive at more accurate answers.<sup>33</sup>

Although this study is not yet scientific fact and texting had not yet been invented by the time the novels that I am discussing had been published, the principles of distanced communication remain the same. The absence of the recipient allows a letter-writer to form a more honest statement. Of course, the recipient's psychic presence can have as great an effect on the writer as the recipient's physical presence would, as I will later explain using Fanshawe. However, the writer is free from the burden of the immediate call-and-response nature of conversation when communicating through letters.

Second, the writer maintains stronger control over his own discourse than he would in normal conversation. This is especially evident in Brown's novels. Within the framework of their narrative universes, *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly* are both written in order to communicate to friends a series of traumas that the narrators/writers have undergone. They begin with proclamations that they only come to the table to record their experiences after sufficient time has passed to quiet their own turbulent emotions following tragic events.

Third, the writer maintains a stronger control over the *recipient's* discourse than he would in normal conversation. This concept can be tricky to lock down, but

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<sup>33</sup>“OMG!”

manifests itself in mechanical manipulations. After a year at college, Fanshawe decided to travel the world, hoping for a reprieve against the pressures of dealing with his family, his mother and sister both emotionally dependent upon him after the death of his father. During his travels, Fanshawe wrote to his sister quite often, but he never gave a return address, making himself unreachable. He does this again to the narrator, leaving a letter that thanks the narrator for publishing his work and taking care of his wife and son, but Fanshawe does not so much as leave his name. Through these simple omissions, by rendering response impossible, he effectively silences his correspondents, making their discourse an entirely one-sided affair.

Fourth, letter-writing is inherently meaningful. Without over-explaining this point, the process of penning letters differs from the process of speaking in that writing takes time. The writer can formulate, edit, or even just throw away a coherent and self-contained thought before ever releasing that thought into the public space. As such, a letter always implies intent in its own contents, or at least more so than spontaneous conversation. For the sake of clarity and completeness, I acknowledge that acting and public speaking (as in issuing prepared statements in front of groups of people) share this quality with letter-writing, as well as incorporating the physical embodiment of direct conversation, but they do not play major roles in my argument, or in Brown and Auster's fiction. Unlike normal conversation, a person is not compelled to respond by a correspondent's physical presence. As such, the content of letters will always be something the writer personally finds to be worth mentioning.

All of these characteristics of letter-writing are distinct, yet interrelated and contingent upon one another. These characteristics are variations of the same theme: purpose. Privacy, control over self, control over others, and meaning all serve to illustrate the constructed nature of communication. Construction never occurs without purpose, an implication of artifice so fundamental that it is easily overlooked, especially in works of fiction. I will explain how these different psychological and mechanical characteristics contribute to purpose. Brown and Auster take advantage of deep-seated expectations of purpose in relation to writing.

For the sake of understanding Brown's *Wieland*, it is vital to remember that the entirety of the narrative is told from the perspective of a single person years after the events described take place and for a specific purpose: to enlighten an unspecified friend about the tragedies that befell her family. It is that element, *purpose*, that I find so interesting about the epistolary genre, especially one that does not actually contain any back and forth between writer and recipient like *Wieland*.

Works of fiction rarely attempt to justify themselves. The audience simply understands that if a person took the trouble to write, publish, and sell a book, that it might be worth the time and effort to read. This lack of self-justification shortens the distance between the reader and the narrative. A well-crafted story can make a reader forget about the artificiality of whichever medium is being used. On the other side of that coin, having an explicit purpose creates distance between the reader and the work itself by drawing attention to that artificiality. In *Wieland*, the epistolary form, along with Clara's own declarations, let us know that we are being told a story.

The unspoken purpose of the letter/novel is to allow Clara to deal with the trauma of her family's destruction in a safe environment, that is, the written word. Letters are generally meant to be read by a single recipient, or at least a limited circle. Depending on the established relationship between writer and recipient, we can assume a certain level of personal investment in the authenticity of the letter. That is, we can expect the writer to be honest.

And yet, the letter is still an artifice, a constructed form of communication, no matter how intimate the writer is with the intended reader. Essentially, the letter, when sent to a person with whom the writer might be "honest," becomes an outward manifestation of the writer's self-interpreted psychological state. Letters occupy a sort of halfway space between private and public discourse. In a certain way, they are actually more personal than conversation; as we see with Carwin's manipulation of sound and voice, aural communication is highly vulnerable to misinterpretation and slippage. The discourse of letters can be hidden away and secured.

Of course, they are hardly impregnable. *Arthur Mervyn* deals extensively with the ways in which written communication can be abused. Letters, as concrete snapshots of the writers' personal thoughts and opinions, can be used to manipulate the writers, especially if their thoughts and opinions have changed since the writing. A letter can be both a secure form of concrete and private communication and a means of compromising its writer in the public space. Rather explicitly, in *Edgar Huntly*, Edgar and his friend Waldegrave exchanged correspondence frequently. These letters centered on their writers' stances on philosophy and morality, and Edgar notes:

Waldegrave, like other men, early devoted to meditation and books, had adopted, at different periods, different systems of opinion, on topics connected with religion and morals. His earliest creeds, tended to efface the impressions of his education; to deify necessity and universalize matter; to destroy the popular distinctions between soul and body, and to dissolve the supposed connection between the moral condition of man, anterior and subsequent to death.<sup>34</sup>

Waldegrave actually became an atheist, contrary to his childhood education. Like Clara, he began to store his faith entirely in the power of his own mind, in logic and reason. In his letters, he questions the existence of God, of Heaven, and begins to grasp at an earthly origin for morality. However, under the tutelage of an influential and morally impeccable man of faith, Waldegrave begins to redact these beliefs, regretting that he ever argued for the supremacy of reason over religion. He is so passionate about his change of heart that he wishes to erase all traces of his younger philosophies. Recalling this time, Edgar writes, “[Waldegrave] insensibly resumed the faith which he had relinquished, and became the vehement opponent of all that he had formerly defended. The chief object of his labours, in this new state of his mind, was to counteract the effect of his former reasonings on my opinions.”<sup>35</sup> However,

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<sup>34</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 754

<sup>35</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 754-755

two things keep him from burying his past completely: Edgar himself, whom Waldegrave inculcated with his atheistic beliefs, and his own treasonous writings.

The two begin to live under the same roof at around this time, which allows them to communicate face-to-face, rather than being restricted to letters. Edgar notes the change in his friend's attitude, along with the change in communicative form. Recalling that time, he writes, "The intercourse now ceased to be by letter, and the subtle and laborious argumentations which he had formerly produced against religion, and which were contained in permanent form, were combatted in transient conversation."<sup>36</sup> He then precisely describes the implications of letter-writing's permanence as opposed to conversation's transience:

[Waldegrave] was not only eager to subvert those opinions, which he had contributed to instil into me, but was anxious that the letters and manuscripts, which he had employed in their support, should be destroyed. He did not fear wholly or chiefly on my own account. He believed that the influence of former reasonings on my faith would be sufficiently eradicated by the new; but he dreaded lest these manuscripts might fall into other hands, and thus produce mischiefs which it would not be in his power to repair. With regard to me, the poison had been followed by its antidote; but with respect to

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<sup>36</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 755

others, these letters would communicate the poison  
when the antidote could not be administered.<sup>37</sup>

Here we see the essential implications of displacing communication through written language. The fervor with which Waldegrave apparently endeavored to destroy his own letters interests me. Both characters understand how letters, and the written word in general by extension, can act as physical manifestations of will. Thus, letters can be extremely dangerous. Waldegrave believed that, through direct conversation, he could eventually erase the beliefs that he impressed upon Edgar through his writing. But the specter of his forsaken atheism continues life regardless. Strangely, Edgar uses the language of death to describe this atheism, which he presumably still upholds as truth.

Despite the ubiquity of letter-writing at this point in history, being the primary means of displaced communication, there lies an undercurrent of distrust beneath it. As I will explore later in the chapter and as Waldegrave seems to believe, writing can be dangerous, it can attribute ideas to people after they have been abandoned, and in a vacuum, can be misunderstood.

Although they do not occupy as central a narrative space as they do in Brown's work (or rather, they *are* the narrative space in Brown's work), letters play a large role in *The New York Trilogy*. Letters motivate every major narrative turning point of "The Locked Room" and act as the primary means by which the narrator/protagonist creates an identity for the missing Fanshawe. When the novel begins, the narrator is

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

making his meager living by writing minor articles for a wide range of publications until he receives word from Sophie that Fanshawe has disappeared. Fanshawe instructed his wife, if anything were to happen to him, to contact the narrator, and she does so by letter. Later, after the narrator begins to settle into his new life, publishing Fanshawe's writings and beginning a relationship with Sophie, he receives a letter from Fanshawe, thanking the narrator for taking care of his affairs. This confirms to him that Fanshawe is still alive and eventually leads to his almost complete breakdown as he searches for his missing friend. Years after that, when the narrator has more or less given up the search, Fanshawe sends him a final letter, asking to speak to him one last time.

Fanshawe from Auster's *The New York Trilogy* fills a similar role as Waldegrave, or at least, both characters are examples of identity construction through letter-writing. In "The Locked Room," soon after the protagonist agrees to publish Fanshawe's work, he becomes obsessed with finding the missing writer. Under the guise of conducting research for a biography, he visits Fanshawe's house and collects Fanshawe's collected letters from his mother. Just as Waldegrave feared would happen to him, Fanshawe's letters create a sort of disembodied yet concrete identity, representative of the writer, yet separate from him. Writing itself becomes a ghost of the writer. When he first visits Sophie's apartment and takes Fanshawe's work to read and eventually publish, he says of the papers, "I hauled the two suitcases slowly down the

stairs and onto the street. Together, they were as heavy as a man,"<sup>38</sup> indicating that the writing has become a substitute for the man himself.

And like Waldegrave's, this separate identity would prove to be unrepresentative of its very creator. Waldegrave wished to have his letters destroyed because they contained beliefs and philosophies that he no longer upheld. As such, in addition to the physical displacement involved in a form of correspondence that delays and limits communication by its very nature, letter-writing involves emotional and psychological displacement, allowing for the writer's own voice to speak "untruths," as in philosophies that are no longer upheld by the writer's present mental state. I use the word "untruth" rather than "lie" because at the time of their composition, those philosophies, at least in Waldegrave's case, were truth. Even the most passionate and single-minded people tend to change their opinions over time. Fascinatingly, the concrete nature of letter-writing allows truth to become untruth, but without any change in actual content. Opinions might change, but writing does not. Of course, as Edgar and Waldegrave understand, a written record that contradicts current sensitivities can be extremely dangerous, especially if the record is meant for others to read, as are letters.

These concrete, direct, yet unrepresentative portrayals of the writers' will, these ghosts, confuse language's supposed ability to directly and reliably convey truth. Brown and Auster render perspective unreliable by drawing attention to the ways in which letters can misrepresent and distort truth, and as letters are so crucial in their

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<sup>38</sup>"The Locked Room" 204

fiction, these authors also distort their readers' ability to navigate these stories coherently, proving the given narrative untrustworthy.

The form of Brown's fiction makes bold first steps in exercising the letter's potential in manipulating the reader's understanding of generic expectation and narrative reliability. Auster goes yet further by showing how the form of letters themselves can reflect the conscious manipulations in relationships.

### **Letters: Manipulating expectations of letter-writing**

As I described earlier, letters can be used to craft an outward illustration of the writer's inward space. The narrator of “The Locked Room” tries to do exactly this, using Fanshawe's letters to create a picture of Fanshawe in the years since their separation. While Waldegrave feared that his sacrilegious beliefs would cause moral destruction and thus tried to have his writings destroyed, Auster's protagonist tries to use this knowledge to destroy Fanshawe. Fanshawe wrote most of his letters to his sister, Ellen. He was fully aware that his letters were not reaching her unmediated and unmolested:

And the fact that is most of his letters are not even read by Ellen. Addressed to the house in New Jersey, they are of course opened by Mrs. Fanshawe, who screens them before showing them to her daughter—and more often than not, Ellen does not see them. Fanshawe, I think, must have known this would happen, at least would have

suspected it.<sup>39</sup>

In a post-modern take on written discourse that Brown prefigured, Fanshawe knew that his mother would filter his letters. Wishing to preserve the physical and emotional distance that he established between himself and his family, he never revealed enough information to precisely locate him. Following him or even replying are thus impossible.

*Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly* wear their (explicit) purposes on their sleeves, each beginning with some variation of “I am writing this because you asked me to.” Fanshawe’s letters subvert explicit intent—they are still *meaningful*, but their meaningful content stems from what is *not* written, rather than what is written. He writes to show his sister that, even thousands of miles away, he still thinks of her. The narrator observes, “the letters were highly specific. I sensed that Fanshawe was making an effort to entertain his sister, to cheer her up with amusing stories.”<sup>40</sup> But rather than acting as windows into his psyche, Fanshawe’s letters act as a smokescreen. Knowing that his mother reads them as well, Fanshawe manipulates this unspoken knowledge:

When the letters do begin to come, they arrive fitfully,  
and say nothing of any great importance. [...] the letters  
give no real sense of the life he is leading one feels that  
he is in conflict, unsure of himself in regard to Ellen, not

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<sup>39</sup>“The Locked Room” 268

<sup>40</sup>“The Locked Room” 264-265

wanting to lose touch with her and yet unable to decide how much or how little to tell her. (Which further complicates the matter—since in some way these letters are not written to Ellen at all. Ellen, finally, is no more than a literary device, the medium through which Fanshawe communicates with his mother. Hence her anger. For even as he speaks to her, he can pretend to ignore her.)<sup>41</sup>

Fanshawe, ever self-aware, takes advantage of an already displaced form of communication. Knowing that his letters are not reaching their intended destination, he changes the letters' intent, addressing the letters indirectly to his mother, displacing voice yet further. His self-awareness of the conditions of the medium, as in how it is composed and consumed, allows him to keep tight control over every aspect of discourse. He only speaks, he is never spoken to.

Ultimately, letters act as a microcosmic metaphor for fiction writing itself. They straddle the line between public and private: they are written without the burden of the correspondent's physical presence and without the burden of the reader's response, but they are also implicitly meant for public consumption, limited though that public might be. As such, these intratextual works of writing give their writers a safe space to work through their trauma, physically placing it outside of themselves so that they can reflect upon and examine the events that so deeply affected them. As

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<sup>41</sup>“The Locked Room” 268

microcosms of fiction at large, letters motivate every major narrative action in these works, both in writing and in reading. Like the books that contain them, letters work to destabilize readers' perceptions of narrative's function in history.

### **Displaced Conversations, i.e., Ventriloquism**

On the subject of distanced communication, notable instances of displaced conversation, as opposed to letter writing, occur in Brown and Auster's fiction, and like letters, they subvert the flow of typical physical conversation and displace confidence in the use of language to impart truth. I will be focusing on two such instances, one from Brown's *Wieland* and another from Auster's "The Locked Room."

Throughout *Wieland*, I found that most of the characters placed complete faith in the power of language in communicating their various personal concerns with one another. This indicates a greater faith in logic as a whole – any problem can be analyzed, broken into its component parts, and solved. Language is the baseline arithmetic in this regard, the basic tool with which to organize one's thoughts and analyses. Carwin's ability to imitate any voice perfectly and produce sound from any direction greatly destabilizes that belief. Notably, Carwin tricks Pleyel into believing that Clara has compromised her dignity, prompting Pleyel's initial depression and flight from America.

I am also interested in Carwin's motivations for tricking Clara and her family, or rather, I have not quite worked them out for myself. He uses the language of transgression, saying that he pushed Clara as far as he did because he had heard

from others that Clara had a reputation for “fearlessness.” Importantly, her courage is said to stem from her capacity for reason. She cannot be swayed by fear because fear stems from an unwillingness to understand the new and unknown. He explicitly states that he pushes her further than anyone else he has ever manipulated with his ventriloquism because he wants to see if he can break her of her faith in reason and make her experience true fear. Carwin is something of a chaotic element, here. He says that he had to flee Europe because his various unspecified machinations were discovered, but he clearly does not torment the Wielands for any sort of material gain. He simply seems to be fascinated with pushing Clara and her circle to their absolute limits. Does he have something to prove? What does he achieve by breaking down this family's belief in the inviolability of language, and therefore, reason?

His ventriloquism pushes Clara to the brink of her sanity, which he openly admits to her, but the one crime that he will not cop to is giving Wieland the order to kill his family. He destroys several relationships, but he never causes any actual physical harm, at least by his own admission. And importantly, he actually saves Clara's life when he manages to convince Wieland to spare her through his ventriloquism. I believe that Carwin represents a sort of elemental force, affecting both history and cultural psychology. Not only does his ability degrade the belief in a universal logic that is mediated by language, he is the living embodiment of the breakdown of causality. Carwin does not come across as good or evil, he has no motivations other than to set ordered systems askew. Saving Clara does not even come across as a redemptive moment because of the inexplicability of his actions in both destruction

and reclamation. He does not even seem like a fully human character. He makes his greatest narrative contributions as a literally disembodied voice.

Displaced conversation as a narrative device comes up in Auster's *New York Trilogy* as well. Displacement occurs in a variety of methods and forms throughout the novel: calls are made to wrong numbers, notes are left in place of face-to-face meetings, people who should know one another on sight speak as though they were strangers. However, I wish to focus a single conversation from "The Locked Room." After months of monomaniacal struggle to find Fanshawe, the protagonist gives up on any outward attempts at a search. He tells his publisher that he will no longer be writing Fanshawe's biography and settles into a life with Sophie, Ben, and their newborn son, Paul (of course). He receives a final letter from Fanshawe, simply reading "Impossible to hold out any longer, [...] Must talk to you. 9 Columbus Square, Boston; April 1<sup>st</sup>. This is where it ends, I promise."<sup>42</sup> Without telling his family why, the protagonist leaves to meet Fanshawe one last time, hoping to bring their shared story to a close. Of course, Fanshawe is not willing to be wrapped up neatly into a tightly-packed narrative, denying access to the protagonist by literally locking himself in a room and speaking through it. Until the end, he baffles all attempts at interpretation, denying embodiment and embracing displacement, and the protagonist leaves unsatisfied.

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<sup>42</sup>"The Locked Room" 295

## Court Transcripts

Again, we see intersections of personal and private discourse. Clara's uncle, oddly enough, considers himself too close to the situation to be able to tell her about what transpired without botching the telling. So, somewhat ironically, he gives her Wieland's court-transcribed confession. This decision can be read in several directions at once. On one hand, it seems odd that, to create distance between the horror of the event and the potential trauma of its knowledge, Uncle Thomas would give her the perpetrator's precise statement. If Clara's reaction to the story were an honest concern, the recounting should have been told from any mouth other than Wieland's. On the other hand, the artificiality of the medium, a packet of papers, creates a safe space in which Clara is in control of her own perception of Wieland's crimes.

Notably, she actually sets down the transcript and stops reading before she reaches the portion that deals with the deaths of her nephews. I would argue that putting down the transcript does not help her deal with trauma by passive avoidance, but active. The difference is rather slippery, but basically, because her experience of Wieland's crimes is personal, rather than mediated by a storyteller, she has sole control over her own perception of the event. She knows that Wieland has murdered his children. She knows that he confesses the crime in the transcript, but she chooses not to see it in print. Obviously, this action helps her deal with her trauma by avoiding recurrence, but I believe that the power that she exerts over the story is actually more important than the avoidance itself.

The nature of the documents as court-certified is especially important in this regard. Legally speaking, Wieland's statement is as close to "truth" as can be hoped for. To be clear, when I use "truth" here, I do not mean some concept of concrete objectivity, but rather an effective interpretation of shared cultural events that citizens (in this particular example) are expected to pattern their behavior after. In a practical sense, the legal system (and the American government by extension) arbitrate a culturally-ratified truth by holding a claim over culturally-ratified violence. The rulings of the courts become effective truth when resolving disputes, and apparatuses like the police and military enforce those truths. As such, Clara's ability to control her own perception of the event gives her an especially great power in contrast.

As the perpetrator, Wieland is the only witness to his crimes, meaning that his confession is the only primary account of those crimes. Wieland's confession has been ratified by the courts, the effective, and thus ultimate, arbiter of truth. When the judge ratifies the transcript, the judge incorporates it into the nation's founding mythology. Within the shared psyche of the American public, this court transcript becomes fact, an official history. The recorded American narrative subsumes Wieland's confession, despite all of its meanderings and ramblings and declarations of divinity. Clara knows what Wieland has done and she knows that his deeds have gone into the public record. Her simple decision to stop reading thus becomes more than an act of denial, more than an attempt to protect herself from further trauma. It becomes an act of defiance, even if she is not fully aware of the implications of this

action. The decision to stop reading is not just personal, but political, a turning-away from the accepted public narrative. The constructed nature of the court transcript, which allows it to be recorded and incorporated into the greater historical narrative, ironically also allows Clara to control her experience of it and craft for herself a personal narrative experience. Like how Fanshawe silenced his mother and sister by omitting a return address in his letters, Clara takes advantage of the mechanical aspects of the written medium in order to control her own emotional response to its contents.

However, her turning-away becomes physically dangerous in the months and years following Wieland's arrest, illustrating her lack of self-awareness as to the significance of her actions. She stays in her old home, surrounded by memories of her previous life and near death, growing unhealthier by the day. She writes, "Surely I had reason to be weary of existence, to be impatient of every tie which held me from the grave. [...]I was not only enamored of death, but conceived, from the condition of my frame, that to shun it was impossible."<sup>43</sup> Despite the best efforts of her friends and family, she cannot be convinced to leave her bed:

I refused to listen to their exhortations. Great as my calamity was, to be torn from this asylum was regarded by me as an aggravation of it. By a perverse constitution of mind, he was considered as my greatest enemy who sought to withdraw me from a scene which supplied

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<sup>43</sup>*Wieland* 218

eternal food to my melancholy, and kept my despair  
 from languishing.<sup>44</sup>

Her self-confinement parallels her experience with Wieland's transcribed confession. Both her home and the court document act as physical evidence of trauma. The physicality of these sites of trauma allows a certain amount of manipulation in the subject's favor, but while Clara has learned to control writing and language, she has not yet extended that self-consciousness from the space of pen and paper into the world at large. As such, she unknowingly blinds herself to her ability to forge her own narrative, later writing, "I now see the infatuation and injustice of my conduct in its true colors. I reflect upon the sensations and reasonings of that period with wonder and humiliation."<sup>45</sup> However, some time later, her house burns down under unknown circumstances, prompting her exodus from the United States to Europe. The literal destruction of the site of trauma displaces her sense of victimization and leads to self-awareness; she comes to realize that her behavior had been self-destructive.

Similarly, Fanshawe avoided his past through mechanical means: he simply leaves out any return address whenever he sends letters. The protagonist never learns what truly went wrong with Fanshawe: why he left his family, why he chose the protagonist as his successor, or what pushed him into so desperate a place at all. But whatever had happened to Fanshawe, if some concretely traumatic event had

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<sup>44</sup>*Wieland* 218-219

<sup>45</sup>*Wieland* 219

happened to him at all, he was able to take control over his personal experience and discourse by taking advantage of the artificial nature of his medium.

The court transcript further illustrates the artifice of language (or at least language that makes claims towards objective truth), while also representing cultural norms. When I speak of historical narratives, I refer to stories that define a society's identity. Court transcripts are an especially important representation of these historical narratives because they define transgression. They are possibly more important than bills and laws themselves because court transcripts record how the public interprets and practically enforces law. Putting down the transcript of her brother's crimes reveals Clara's ability to form her own personal narrative, outside of the dominant cultural narrative.

The form of the court transcript creates a widespread and uniform notion of cultural truth through the endurance of the written word, creating a permanent record of how different transgressions should be interpreted and dealt with, both practically and emotionally. But ironically, the form also gives readers the ability to subvert notions of uniform truth by separating the word from the self.

### **Conversations**

The spoken word, when compared to the Brown's complex treatment of the written word, occupies a strange space for communication in *Wieland's* closing chapters. Clara confronts Wieland in her home after he has escaped from prison for the second time, he justifies his actions, or rather the intent behind his actions, as

pure because he believed the to be divinely inspired. Astonishingly, even after Carwin, masquerading as a heavenly voice, convinces him that he was deceived, Wieland still holds to his own innocence, again, because his intentions were pure. Perhaps this speaks to a lack of faith in language's ability to change the hearts and minds of its users; speech does not actually help people communicate, and if Wieland's delusions are any indication, can obfuscate communication and lead to disaster.

It is also important to remember the nature of conversation in this book in relation to the physical form of the epistolary novel. That is to say, the character of Clara, within the universe created by the novel, personally transcribes every conversation that takes place in the novel, presumably from memory. As such, despite the fundamental differences between writing and speaking when communicating, conversations in Brown's novels retain the slipperiness of meaning that the other, more obviously artificial forms of communication display.

*Edgar Huntly* explicitly addresses the emotional and interpretive implications of conversation as opposed to written correspondence. Namely, Edgar's conversations with Clithero and Weymouth. Both of them give rather fantastical accounts of their histories. Clithero was born in Ireland to impoverished parents, was adopted by a benevolent noblewoman named Mrs. Lorimer, raised and educated in her household, betrothed to her niece, accidentally murdered his patron's scoundrel brother, Wiatte, and tried to murder the noblewoman as well through a rather confused sense of altruism. The noblewoman stated several times that, despite her brother's

astonishingly inveterate behavior, she loved him unquestioningly and would surely follow him to the grave, if he were to be killed.

Clithero's account of this detail is somewhat confused, as he is unclear on whether she will die because of grief or because of a pseudo-scientific sibling connection. Regardless, Wiatte attempts to rob Clithero as the latter walks home from Mrs. Lorimer's residence and Clithero kills him in self-defense. In Clithero's account, immediately following this event, no one seems to find him guilty of any crime, as his reputation is sterling and Wiatte is a well-known rascal. However, in a rather dark turn, Clithero takes Mrs. Lorimer's previous declaration to heart and believes that she will die a painful, grief-stricken death if she discovers that he killed Wiatte, so he decides to kill her himself as she sleeps to spare her from a worse fate. He ultimately fails and flees to America, where he quietly awaits death, at which point Edgar finds him.

Edgar finds himself in the position of listener again with Weymouth, an Englishman and apparently an old friend of Waldegrave's. Weymouth scraped together a fortune throughout his life and at one point lent a significant amount of money to Waldegrave, but a series of disasters caused him to lose everything that he owned. He comes to America with the intention of finding Waldegrave and reclaiming the debt, eventually learning that he has died and that Edgar is the executor of his will. If he is to be believed, the entirety of the fortune that Waldegrave left for his sister would actually go to Weymouth. Importantly, Waldegrave never made mention of Weymouth in any of his writings and Weymouth has no written

evidence of the transaction, meaning his story is the only proof that he has.

Both stories stretch credulity. He comments on the implausibility of Clithero's tale, writing, "The story I had heard was too extraordinary, too completely the reverse of all my expectations, to allow me to attend to the intimations of self-murder which he dropped"<sup>46</sup>, and much of his experience of the story involves his observations on Clithero's physical state:

His visage was pale and wan, and his form emaciated and shrunk. I was astonished at the alteration, which the lapse of a week had made in his appearance [...]  
Hitherto my companion had displayed a certain degree of composure. Now his countenance betokened a violent internal struggle.<sup>47</sup>

These types of observations occur multiple times throughout Brown's novels.

Whenever narrators find themselves in physical conversation with other characters, the narrators take careful notes of the speakers' features and facial expressions.

They describe in great detail how the speakers look and sound, but most significantly, the narrators extrapolate the speakers' psychological states from their physical states.

Many educated individuals studied the "science" of physiognomy during the Early National Period, believing that aspects of a person's personality could be divined from their physical characteristics, especially the face.

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<sup>46</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 718

<sup>47</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 668

Superficially, this might have been a setup for a contrast between written and spoken language. Because written language is inherently displaced, it can be misinterpreted, manipulated, or just lost. To Brown's protagonists, who begin to understand that writing obfuscates truth more often than it reveals truth, spoken language seems to be a more direct alternative. The embodied nature of this form of communication allows participants to "read" the faces of their correspondents, which apparently renders testimony more reliable. Edgar himself, while remarking on the fantastic natures of Weymouth and Carwin's stories, believes them both, seeing the "truth" in their faces.

But as we discovered with Carwin, spoken language can be manipulated just as completely as written language, and embodiment does not guarantee linearity and inherent truth. Carwin's ability to project his voice destabilizes a belief in language's ability to impart truth. Similarly, Old Deb's ramblings undermine physical embodiment's ability to reinforce the spoken word. The various Native American attacks that have led to the deaths of multiple U.S. citizens, including Waldegrave, ultimately stem from Old Deb. Old Deb, ironically also known as Queen Mab, is a Native American crone who lives in solitude some miles away from Edgar's home in Norwalk. She would occasionally venture to white American residences, demanding basic supplies with the imperious authority of a true queen. The English settlers generally met these demands, viewing Mab as a harmless and rather amusing local

personality,<sup>48</sup> at least until they discover that she instigated the rash of recent attacks on American farms.

She literally never stops talking, but addresses no one and speaks in an incomprehensible language, “She always disdained to speak English, and custom had rendered her intelligible to most in her native language, with regard to a simple questions.”<sup>49</sup> Old Deb is an aberrant figure, boldly speaking the truth of her crimes where others are traumatized. While Edgar Huntly needs to avoid the page for months after his horrifying misadventure, heading off any sort of confrontation with his own memory, Old Deb proudly admits to instigating the deaths and abductions of multiple people. A native foreigner, an outsider in her own ancestral lands, she uses her alien tongue to speak a destabilizing truth that displaces the traditional narrative of native savagery against white victimization.

An in-depth analysis of racial politics in the fiction of this era is beyond the scope of this project, but I call attention to Old Deb because of how strikingly she disrupts the identity of language. In each of his novels, Brown's protagonists hold to the belief that language can impart meaning to events, and thus, understanding, at least at first. This is what motivates them to write the letters that make up the novels at all. As I have explained, various inconsistencies in method and form undermine the belief in inherently meaningful language. Old Deb's use of language provides a stark, fundamental contrast to the writing characters' understanding of language.

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<sup>48</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 821-822

<sup>49</sup>*Edgar Huntly* 822

Unlike the hulking, nameless, faceless, almost primal warriors whom she commands, Old Deb possesses a strong, unceasing voice. But unlike Edgar Huntly or any of Brown's protagonists, she does not use language in an attempt to structure her experiences into a linear, coherent, psychologically satisfying narrative. Her speech, in a dialect literally incomprehensible to the new Americans, resists logical interpretation. She uses language to actively disrupt linearity, instigating terrible crimes in response to crimes committed against her people. Physically displaced from their homes, Old Deb and the warriors whom she commands perform acts of terrible violence against those who displaced them. This violence destabilizes the historical narratives that the Americans of the Early National Period have built, thus bringing them into the same psychological space as Deb.

### **Bringing it all together**

The manipulation of each formal element that I have described, these different modes and methods of communication, gradually erodes the belief in the inviolability of language. Brown does more than destabilize the “authenticity” of fiction, which is implicit in the genre, even at this early stage. By incorporating forms of storytelling such as writing, speaking, and voice itself in such a way as to render them mechanically and psychologically unreliable, Brown breaks down language's ability to create linear narratives at all. He manipulates letters, books, and conversations, each microcosms of writing at large, in order to prove that a self-conscious author can use the physical aspects of pen and paper to simultaneously create truth on a widespread cultural level and disrupt

the very notion of “truth.”

Of course, becoming aware of the medium is only a first step. Understanding that language cannot impart inherent truth, but might impart contingent meaning, is a means but not an end unto itself. As they recount the series of horrors that befall them, from the outright fantastical to the inexplicably violent, Clara and Edgar gradually learn that simply writing down their experiences will not restore their faith in the linearity of history. Instead, they use writing to place their experiences outside of themselves; not necessarily to restore linearity, but to “play” with their own memories. Linear, historically-approved narratives fail to account for the way in which trauma can deeply affect personal perceptions of the world, disrupting previously-held notions of objective truth. By controlling the malleable medium of writing, Clara and Edgar control their responses to trauma, which allows them to craft personal narratives, contingent upon personal experience, that account for the disruptions caused by trauma.

Auster, as ever, writes from a position similar to Brown's, but pushes that understanding of medium a step further. After finally meeting with Fanshawe, the protagonist comes away from the experience with Fanshawe's final account and the knowledge that the writer will soon die. With this book, he hopes to create some final image of meaning, an ultimate understanding of what Fanshawe *meant* as an existence. But Fanshawe's ability to defeat meaning endures, and the protagonist describes the confusion that he feels when reading this last work:

If I say nothing about what I found there, it is because I  
understood very little. All the words were familiar to me,

and yet they seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out. I can think of no other way to express it. Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. It is odd, then, that the feeling that survives from this notebook is one of great lucidity. It is as if Fanshawe knew his final work had to subvert every expectation I had for it. [...] He had answered the question by asking another question, and therefore everything remained open, unfinished, to be started again.<sup>50</sup>

Here, Fanshawe brings to a head every idea of displacement and subversion that the protagonist had been grasping at throughout the novel, throughout his journey. He never truly explains why he searches for Fanshawe, or rather, he never explains what he believes that finding Fanshawe will accomplish. This is because Fanshawe himself is another formal element, another form of communication. He is less of a man and more of an idea, an embodiment of language's ability to obfuscate identity and meaning. The protagonist searches for Fanshawe because he hopes that, by finding him, he will be able to place his life in order. He hopes that Fanshawe will be able to turn his narrative into something more than a unmitigated burst of causes and effects. This notebook, the last concrete embodiment of Fanshawe's identity, represents language's inability to impart that ordered, universal meaning to narratives. The notebook acts as proof that what the

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<sup>50</sup>“The Locked Room” 307

protagonist searches for does not exist.

As he waits for the train to take him home, he finally decides that he has had enough. He writes, "One by one, I tore the pages from the notebook, crumpled them in my hand, and dropped them into a trash bin on the platform. I came to the last page just as the train was pulling out."<sup>51</sup> This seems to be a moment of triumph for the protagonist. Fanshawe came close to destroying the protagonist in as complete a sense as possible. The protagonist almost completely lost his sense of self in his pursuit of Fanshawe, his identity being nearly displaced in the pursuit of another, just as Quinn lost his identity in "City of Ghosts." But in this final act of defiance, the protagonist destroys the last outward representation of Fanshawe's will, freeing himself from his old friend's influence.

However, ambivalence is implicit with a breakdown in inherent meaning. I cannot say that the self-awareness that the protagonist achieves is "good" in a holistic sense. That is, being conscious of the artificiality of language, and thus being made aware of the impossibility of a stable, unifying truth, is not necessarily a healthy psychological state to be in. Destroying Fanshawe's notebook leaves the protagonist so distracted that he actually misses the train home,<sup>52</sup> indicating that even in exorcising his influence, Fanshawe occupies a central space in the protagonist's thoughts. In other words, being aware of the problem does not guarantee a solution will be found, or if one even exists. Rather, awareness of the limitations and possibilities of communication, with all of its displacements of meaning and identity, allows one to decide how to personally interpret events.

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<sup>51</sup>"The Locked Room" 308

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

## Conclusion

“I wandered in my mind for several weeks, looking for a way to begin. Every life is inexplicable, I kept telling myself. No matter how many facts are told, no matter how many details are given, the essential thing resists telling.”<sup>53</sup>

I remember taking AP U.S. History in my junior year of high school. It was a class that I had anticipated with a sort of dreadful optimism. The reason was singular: Mr. Pearl. Mr. Pearl was Villa Park High School's most infamous teacher. He terrified, fascinated, and amused us in equal measure. He had fought in and subsequently marched against the Vietnam War. He had lived in a hippie commune, a time that he himself labeled as “disastrous.” He had spent five years in New York during the 80s, living in semi-vagrancy and making ends meet by playing guitar in seedy bars. He had started an electronics company that quickly failed due to sudden bankruptcies in major clients. He had traveled across Asia, spending years in Japan studying Zen and martial arts. The one thing that we could never figure out was how he had ended up teaching History (and Computer Science) at a small town high school.

Regardless, he was the sort of teacher whom the students loved to fear. Upperclassmen would tell underclassmen horror story after horror story, building up the legend with every generation. For his part, Mr. Pearl seemed to enjoy it. He took turns regaling us with stories from his youth and terrifying us with vicious indictments of our own incompetence. One day in particular stands out in my memory. During the weeks running up to the AP exam, Mr. Pearl would lead intense

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<sup>53</sup>“The Locked Room” 242

review sessions after school. Not one of us dared to miss a session. On a Tuesday afternoon, three weeks before the exam, he asked us why the year 1765 was essential to our understanding of the American Revolution.

I knew the answer, or rather, I thought that I knew. Failure was not an option; a misplaced guess, even after hours, would mean certain death. And so, I held my peace. Ten horrible seconds passed without a word. I could see Mr. Pearl's growing anger: a pumping vein in his neck and forehead, testament to our lack of attention and study. Unable to bear it any longer, I raised my hand.

"Mr. Han," he said, spreading his arms, "please tell the class why 1765 was important."

"It's the year that Parliament passed the Stamp Act," I said. I could hear my classmates sigh with relief. Disaster had been averted. I had saved us from the disgrace of collective ignorance. But as it turns out, lightning has a habit of striking twice.

"Very good, Mr. Han," Mr. Pearl said. "And how did the Stamp Act of 1765 lead to the American War for Independence?"

Now I was beyond nervous, I was clueless. I had no idea how the Stamp Act of 1765 had led to the American Revolution. Apparently, my incomprehension bled into my face, and Mr. Pearl knew that I did not know the answer. I will not go into precisely what he said to us that day, but he let us know exactly how he felt about us, who had so blatantly ignored the lessons and lectures that he had been drilling into our minds all year. But oddly enough, he reserved the worst of his fury for me. I had

come closer than any of my compatriots, but this only seemed to offend him more. This confused me at the time, but I now understand why my old history teacher felt that way.

My classmates were, evidently, completely ignorant. They did not even know the “what” of the question. But I knew. I knew that the Stamp Act had been passed by Parliament in 1765, I knew that it taxed a great number of paper products sold in the American colonies, I knew that it was written to offset the costs of the French and Indian War, and I knew that it had led to the American Revolution, at least in some small part. I knew the “what” of it, but what galled Mr. Pearl was that I could not figure out the “why.” I had the pieces, but I did not know how to make them fit together. Lacking this skill, in Mr. Pearl's mind, was worse than complete ignorance of relevant events.

He would tell us time and time again that specific dates only mattered on multiple choice questions; picking a name or date correctly only determined a few fractions of a point. And so we spent the bulk of our time preparing for the essay questions. He told us that it did not matter if we wrote an incorrect time, as long as we explain how events connected together logically. Rote memorization of names and dates is pointless without the ability to tie those names and dates together with motives and effects.

Thinking back on that day, I believe I know the answer that would have satisfied Mr. Pearl. I should have said that the French and Indian War cost the British government a significant amount of money. In order to generate revenue, Parliament

passed the Stamp Act, placing taxes on a great number of widely traded goods in the American colonies. Parliament believed this to be well within its rights. After all, the war had been fought to protect colonial holdings; it only made sense for the colonists to pay back some of the cost. The act was written and put into law without the representation or consent of the American colonists. Many colonists believed that this action violated their rights as English citizens. This, and obviously a great number of other factors, eventually led to open rebellion and independence.

This is how we are trained to organize our own stories, both communal and personal. Event A, involving persons One, Two, and Three; leads to Event B, involving persons Four, Five, and Six. Unbroken chains of causes and effects compose history. We compose cultural narratives in this fashion in order to create stable identities at the community level. In broad terms, by sharing stories that can be easily followed from point to point, entire societies form around common origins and narratives. The ultimate purpose of the founding mythology is to reduce history to a series of easily digested names, places, and actions and thus create a stable community through a unified narrative. The ultimate realization of the founding mythology is a self-sustaining cultural narrative, one that constantly subsumes and interprets events both past and present for the consumption of the relevant culture's constituents. Founding mythologies, in their pervasiveness, color our very perceptions of reality with constructed narratives.

Americans from the Early National Period to the present day cling to this myth of universal narrative, even as moments of great trauma lead to doubt. When a man

kills his wife and children, or when a group of people crash planes into busy skyscrapers, those involved can have difficulty coping with that doubt, with a loss of faith in an ordered universe. Most, like that unnamed 18th century reporter who claimed that some Shaker spirit of malevolence compelled James Yates to murder, attempt to suss out connections and set the world aright. Mr. Pearl tried to teach this skill to us, as have countless teachers to countless students. To many, this method of history-making is not so much a single form of interpretation. Instead, this method is objective truth, or at least, how objective truth is believed to be portrayed. It seems Paul Auster has similar ideas. In “The Locked Room,” the protagonist explains the collective tendency towards unambiguous, causal storytelling:

To say that so and so was born here and went there, that he did this and did that, that he married this woman and had these children, that he lived, that he died, that he left behind these books or this battle or that bridge—none of that tells us very much. We all want to be told stories, and we listen to them in the same way we did when we were young.<sup>54</sup>

Parents read fairy tales to their children because of simplicity in execution. Characters receive treatment in direct proportion to their actions. The princess is rewarded for constancy. The prince is rewarded for courage. The wicked stepmother is punished for attempting to usurp the rightful position of the biological child

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<sup>54</sup>“The Locked Room” 242-243

(perhaps a reflection of Western prejudice against divorce/remarriage, or anxieties surrounding primogeniture and the division of property?). Children's stories seem simplistic because they follow the rules of cause and effect so blatantly, but honestly, very few people ever ask for or wish for a more nuanced approach to storytelling. As a child, I felt ignorant when I could not name the day on which the Declaration of Independence was signed. As a teenager, I felt ignorant when I could not explain how the Stamp Act of 1765 factored into the American Revolution. And now, I feel ignorant because I realize that simply knowing how people and events interact with one another does not teach anything, does not signify anything. Moments of great trauma, like wars and epidemics, scratch away at the veneer of causality while simultaneously revealing the human tendency to defang trauma by placing it within those same causal chains.

And yet, authors like Charles Brockden Brown and Paul Auster, through their fiction, respond to trauma with self-awareness, investigation, and experimentation. Their works resist all pretense of linearity. People explode, murder one another, disappear without a trace, and collapse inward upon themselves, crushed underneath the weight of their own identities with alarming regularity. Rarely if ever do these events “logically” connect to one another. These works are not like lines (even crooked ones) that connect causes and effects. Rather, they are like clouds of action and reaction, like atoms smashing against one another to form the matter of fiction. These swirling masses of events are centered around their protagonists, whom Brown and Auster displace further by confusing issues of reliability, authority,

and identity. Their protagonists suffer from displacement of faith, identity, and purpose. Brown writes about the recording and interpretation of events:

A voluntary action is not only connected with cause and effect, but is itself a series of motives and incidents subordinate and successive to each other. Every action differs from every other in the number and complexity of its parts, but the most simple and brief is capable of being analyzed into a thousand sub-divisions. If it be witnessed by others, probabilities are lessened in proportion as the narrative is circumstantial.<sup>55</sup>

When he writes if an action “be witnessed by others, probabilities are lessened in proportion as the narrative is circumstantial,” he means that secondary accounts inherently reveal less because details are always lost in retelling. He uses language of unreliability, of probability and possibility and never absolutism. By simply placing events as they occur beside one another instead of trying to necessarily connect them, by showing that simple causality cannot account for the entirety of historical interpretation, Auster and Brown reveal the sheer enormity and complexity of history as narrative. As the narrator of “The Locked Room” observes, “In the end, each life is no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes, of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of

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<sup>55</sup>“Difference” 253

purpose.”<sup>56</sup> They use fiction as a tool to explore the possibilities that that lack of purpose divulges and what meaning can be derived when inherent meaning is revealed to be nonexistent.

In her essay, “Nonfelicitous Space and Survivor Discourse: Reading the Incest Story in Southern Women's Fiction,” Minrose Gwin explains the role that fiction plays in responding to trauma. She writes about American Southern fiction that deals with incestuous rape and how it is distinct from autobiographical accounts about the same:

What is the meaning of fiction in a discourse so heavily invested in 'fact'? The effect of such stories, whether they be fictional or autobiographical (and I don't want to draw too fine a distinction between the two), is to create [...] a psychic space that forces the reader into a unsettling consideration [...]. Like autobiographical narratives, then, the fictional incest story speaks a previously unspoken truth about the patriarchal family. Because it is not laden with exigencies of literal and specific 'truth' claims, one might argue that such fiction is better equipped to tell the *cultural* story of father-daughter sexual abuse.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>“The Locked Room” 213

<sup>57</sup>Gwin 417

Of course, while Gwin's work deals with a very specific subset of fiction, her essential reading of these texts of rape trauma shares many characteristics with my own reading of Brown and Auster's trauma fiction. Gwin claims that Southern incest-rape fiction, as opposed to Southern incest-rape fact, allows a freer exploration of the cultural and psychological implications of such terrifying events, going deeper into the social climates and communal attitudes that can give birth to such behavior. As Brown might have said, focusing on the romance rather than the history, on the motivations and emotional effects rather than on the facts of the events themselves, can create more psychologically enduring and emphatic stories.

And of course, Brown and Auster utilize similar methods and hold similar attitudes to those that Gwin describes. As Verhoeven's work shows us, the fiction of Brown's time often conflated fiction with reality, which is why Brown seemed contradictorily interested in both drawing upon the fantastical for inspiration and explaining how such inexplicable occurrences were scientifically possible. By conflating fact with fiction, he creates a fascinating balance between belief and disbelief, holding the reader's attention with stories that are just strange enough to be true. Beyond that, by drawing upon historical traumatic events for inspiration, Brown prefigures Gwin's Southern authors and Auster in using fiction as a safe space in which to recover from those events.

Again, Auster explains fiction's ability to confuse expected partitions between reader and writer, and thus bring the reader into that space. In a moment of emotional turmoil, after being asked to write Fanshawe's biography and learning that

Fanshawe is still alive, the protagonist explains what it means to tell stories and to be told stories:

We imagine the real story inside the words, and to do this we substitute ourselves for the person in the story, pretending that we can understand him because we understand ourselves. This is a deception. We exist for ourselves, perhaps, and at times we even have a glimmer of who we are, but in the end we can never be sure, and as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence. No one can cross the boundary into another—for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself.<sup>58</sup>

What seems to be a moment of despair is in fact a moment of liberation. By breaking down expectations of genre, by placing themselves within history, by collapsing the lines between reader and writer, Brown and Auster manage to turn what seem to be private responses to trauma into communal meditations on the effects of widespread bloodshed, loss of identity, and horrific violence on the American social consciousness. By displacing their protagonists' identities and bringing readers into those displaced identities, Auster and Brown ironically create a common psychic space by drawing attention to the fact that history is not universal. Attempting to create linear

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<sup>58</sup>“The Locked Room” 243

narratives, agreed upon by everyone, is ultimately unproductive. Knowing how different bodies and events interact on a basic level will not lead to emotional growth. Placing oneself within the mind of others—understanding that this is impossible, but trying anyway—imparts a deeper moral education, as Brown might have said if he had had a chance to read Auster's work.

Fiction, in a broad sense, acts as a sort of engraving of the collective psyche of whatever society produces it, whether a reflection or a reaction, culture or counterculture. American fiction creates an especially coherent portrait because of its newness, its complete trajectory from beginning to now. Critics have exhaustively studied the context, concerns, and goals of early American authors. Brown, aware of the tropes common to his contemporaries, manipulated the expectations that arose in the reading public, which both caused and were caused by those tropes. Auster brings a similar approach to his fiction while taking advantage of hundreds of years worth of psychological study, critical theory, and their effects on a more widespread proliferation of the genre of the novel. Their concern lies with the power of the written word, how it can mold the hearts and minds of those who read it.

By subverting expectation and displacing meaning, Brown and Auster show that simple, coherent narratives that are built upon the preconception of inherent, universal truth, instituted in order to create stable cultural mindsets, will not withstand traumatic pressures. Drawing from recent history, Brown's protagonists suffered murders, the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793, and the Indian Wars. Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, while not inspired by a sudden instance of horror, draws from

an emotional sources no less painful. Auster's protagonists suffer from the dehumanization inherent to urban living—the traumatic experience of losing oneself within the city sprawl, surrounded by uncaring masses. Families are torn apart, although not through methods as direct as murder by ax. Quinn's wife and child die some time before the period in which “City of Glass” takes place, and Fanshawe becomes estranged from his family after his father's death puts enormous strains on his relationships with his mother and mentally-ill younger sister.

I do not suggest that Wieland might have come to his senses or Clara might have convalesced more quickly or Fanshawe might not have abandoned his wife and child if these characters had read more books. In fact, in Fanshawe's case, understanding the fragility of perceived reality leads directly to his disappearance and dissolution. Fiction does not offer any direct, actionable answers to trauma, as they likely do not exist. But when moments of terrible, inexplicable tragedy show us that founding mythologies cannot account for deeply personal trauma, fiction can create unique, personal narratives, allowing for the formation of new self-identities that can tolerate those stresses.

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