THE LETTERS *of the* REPUBLIC

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Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America

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tence is everywhere. Typical in this regard is Philip Freneau's poem "Literary Importation." The title refers not to imitation of British poetic models, but to the dangers of a foreign-trained episcopacy. Even in the novel, American writers consistently regard their writing as belonging to the civic arena. They write novels that are answerable to the standards of virtue. And they imagine the readers of their publications as participants in public discourse rather than as private consumers of luxury goods. At the same time, however, the novel generated extraordinary tensions for the republican paradigm. Its generic conditions required that any public identification found there be an imaginary one. The reader of a novel might have a virtuous orientation, but his or her virtue would be experienced privately rather than in the context of civic action. So the novel, despite the most rigorous intentions of its authors, developed a nationalist imaginary of the modern type.

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The Novel: Fantasies of Publicity

In the preceding chapter I traced some tensions between two ways of conceptualizing print in the late eighteenth century: a republican paradigm of public virtue; and categories for private appropriation such as politeness, fame, and luxury. Eventually these latter categories would allow some kinds of printed discourse to be definitively separated from the arena of public decisionmaking. My contention, however, has been that Americans to a surprising degree, and even in aesthetic discourse, understood their engagements with print as activities in the republican public sphere subject to its norms. The republican paradigm had such widespread influence in official discourses of and about print that early national American society developed no coherent alternative model for letters analogous to the liberal discourse of the literary or the mass-cultural discourse of the police gazette.

At least one kind of printed good, other than those made for the strongly residual religious culture, might seem to be an obvious exception: the novel. We commonly consider the novel to be by nature divorced from the public sphere, designed as an occasion for a specially private kind of subjectivity. There are good reasons for such a view, but it is not the full story, at least with American writing. It is precisely to explicate the peculiar character of early American novels that I have bothered to document the political-cultural context that, as printed goods, they share. For American novels before Cooper are all anomalous from the perspective of literary criticism. Often didactic, seldom unified in plot, even more seldom interested in distinctive characterizations, and almost never given to ambiguous resonances of meaning, they are universally regarded as several decades' worth of failures. I do not intend to redeem these novels as

triumphs of artistic intention. But I do think that their character and desirability can be better accounted for by treating them as features of a republican public sphere rather than a liberal aesthetic.

A better account of the early American novel might, for its own sake, interest only professionals in a rather obscure subspecialty. And who cares? In another frame of reference, however, there are motives for rethinking the relation of cultural goods to the public sphere. Recent social movements have made the consecration of art, including the literary, appear as a mystification of the cultural public sphere. Those movements, whether feminist, Afro-American, gay, or Chicano, have looked to cultural goods to redefine a public. At the same time, the undoing of the consecration of art, with its bracketing of public discourse, has become the task of an impressive number of artists: Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Hans Haacke, Victor Burgin, and others. Even the semiofficial public discourse of video capitalism rests on its ability to saturate all goods with the affect of publicity, if only the more completely to relegate political activity to a specialized social subsystem. At the intersection of these contexts, a look at the crises of publicity in a proto-literary field need not be mere antiquarianism.

I shall concentrate on the example of *Arthur Mervyn,* by Charles Brockden Brown, which exhibits a republican paradigm for its own medium in both thematic and unthematic ways. The plot of *Arthur Mervyn* cannot be summarized intelligibly. Its underlying principle, however, can be stated very simply. Brown did just that in a fictitious review essay called "Walstein's School of History." There he summarizes a number of books (none actual), including one that is essentially his own novel. He calls it "Olivo Ronsica" and describes its premise as follows:

> He [Olivo or Arthur] is destitute of property, of friends, and of knowledge of the world. These are to be acquired by his own exertions, and virtue and sagacity are to guide him in the choice and use of suitable means.
>
> Ignorance subjects us to temptation, and poverty shackles our beneficence. Olivo's conduct shews us how temptation may be baffled, in spite of ignorance, and benefits be conferred in spite of poverty.[1]

Given the wild and bewildering complexity of events in *Arthur Mervyn,* Brown's summary is strikingly simple. Can it be trusted?

Many critics take the main character's virtue ironically. They see his protestations of disinterested benevolence as stretched and improbable. Warner Berthoff finds "moral irony in the contrasts between the hero's

priggish reflections on events and the melodrama of his actual career."[2] Michael Bell discovers a "full, deliberate, and devastating irony" in the book because Brown portrays Mervyn as too rational, too confident in sincerity.[3] The reader, in this view, is asked to attain a higher and more skeptical understanding of the world than Arthur's naive republicanism allows.

Interpreting the novel ironically has two related functions, both desirable for modern critics but both, in my view, mistaken. First, it brackets the explicit republicanism of the book, allowing us to see republican explanations as the main characters' views rather than author-sanctioned didacticism. Second, it assimilates the novel to a liberal aesthetic of authorial craft. What is desirable in that aesthetic is a disjunction between the expressive particularity of craft (the way the text is *distinctively* formed) and generally ratifiable assertions (propositions *any* citizen could make). The sense of such a disjunction produces the effect of a specially private subjectivity which is the basis for literary appreciation. Brown rises in artistic stature as his aims are seen to be more indirect, artful, and privately anchored. And the text gains aesthetic status as it is fitted to modern standards of appreciation.

Because of the nature of the value judgments made here, our reading of Brown's relation to Mervyn will determine how we see the novel's relation to the public sphere. A reading based on the aesthetic of the literary presupposes, and thus discovers, a fundamental gap between the novel and public discourse. In particular, the ironically distanced judgment valued by Berthoff and Bell helps make the novel a communication between authors and readers who jointly distinguish their exchange from publicly certifiable descriptions of the world, and who by that negation make the reading of the novel an experience of interiority and privacy. The two critical operations performed by an ironic reading thus turn out to be related. The modern reading produces the interiority of art on both the level of style (irony) and the level of theme (critique). It does so by making the novel's depiction of a republican public sphere problematic—an important thing to do, since the literary negation of public discourse could only be treated *within* the republican paradigm as a loss of virtue.

Against such a reading I contend, with Norman Grabo, that "Arthur's virtue itself is the strange but true element Brown expected to dominate his readers' attention."[4] All of the novel's events can be seen as illustrating the central premise given in Brown's summary of "Olivo Ronsica." Mervyn begins his career in the confinement of rustic ignorance, and ends

possessed of virtue and liberty. What makes the transformation possible is the sheer energy of his mind, coupled with a perfect sincerity. Mervyn's naivete is depicted in detail, but the effect is all the more to display the energy of his virtuous mind in overcoming his initial ignorance. Brown cues us to read the tale in this way when he has Dr. Stevens, the auditor of Mervyn's narrative, summarize Mervyn's career: "He stept forth upon the stage, unfurnished, by anticipation or experience, with the means of security against fraud; and yet, by the aid of pure intentions, had frustrated the wiles of an accomplished and veteran deceiver."[5] In accepting this summary at face value, I could also cite evidence outside the novel. For example, the intellection that Berthoff and Bell regard as excessive is endlessly praised in republican rhetoric, and much contextual evidence suggests that the degree of sincerity they see as absurd was embraced by Brown.[6] Rather than add to the argument against an ironized reading, however, I will discuss what it would mean to take the novel's republican presentation seriously. For it is not as simple as it looks.

When Brown says that Olivo Ronsica "shews us how temptation may be baffled, in spite of ignorance, and benefits be conferred in spite of poverty," he can be read as making both a thematic description and a practical claim. Thematically the novel would be making the theoretical point that virtue is possible. But the stronger reading, consistent with Brown's other claims for his work, is the practical claim that by showing *how* ignorance may be overcome and benevolence actualized, the novel itself helps to effect those goals. If *Arthur Mervyn* is the kind of object that Brown describes, then its value is that of an exemplary public instrument. The standards for its appreciation would be nearly the same as those for historical accounts, execution narratives, sermons, or ethical treatises. The most salient difference would be that fiction's inventedness allows one to make an even closer fit between theoretical problem-solving and practical knowledge. The challenges of republican society can be examined in the mode of history. Brown's claim for the book rests on the public ratifiability of its practical and theoretical assertions rather than on any subjectively expressive dimension. He implicitly devalues the personalizing indicators of craft, since to read his assertions as expressions of subjective nature would be to set aside the civic standard of proof. For that reason, the organizing standards of the book are not standards by which literary criticism is prepared to adjudicate, and any strictly literary-critical account of the novel will falsify it accordingly.

Taking Brown's civic claims seriously does, however, have an important implication for a literary-critical account. It discloses a fit between the

efficacy desired for *Arthur Mervyn,* the printed artifact, and the efficacy desired for Arthur Mervyn, the exemplary citizen. Both are loosely imagined as overcoming ignorance and effecting benevolent intentions. Perhaps nothing in that fact alone is remarkable. But if we read Arthur Mervyn's behavior in the context of the rhetoric of republican literature, we can see the novel as figuring, in theme and in fantasy, culturally dominant assumptions and desires about the value of printed goods. Doing so will clarify the standards of value implicit in republican publication; all the more because their extension to the novel was uneasy.

As Brown's plot summary notes, Mervyn's initial ignorance is his political hazard. Through "his own exertions," guided by "virtue and sagacity," he is to overcome temptations and translate beneficence into action. Accordingly, his character is defined by beneficent intentions and rational exertions. The latter are especially striking. What Mervyn narrates about himself is not so much events as the virtuous working of his mind during those events. To the modern reader the effect is occasionally ludicrous, as when he accounts for the decision to get a drink of water: "Thirst was the evil which chiefly oppressed me. The means of relief were pointed out by nature and habit" (214). This exhaustive narration of thought makes sense less as a Lockean study of psychology for its own sake than as posing the problem of how virtue can come out of ignorance. There is a direct—often fantasmatically direct—connection between the acquisition of knowledge and virtue. We need not attribute a thematic intention to Brown for that to be so, since the republican discourse of letters rests primarily on that paradigmatic connection between public virtue and the acquisition of knowledge.

Yet the novel contains many indicators that the context I have traced is not far from Brown's mind. In the first place, Mervyn's only marketable skill is the use of the pen. His dependence on the corrupt Welbeck begins when Welbeck hires him as a scrivener. In contrast, the family that Mervyn leaves behind at the beginning of the novel are "totally illiterate": "The father was a Scotch peasant, whose ignorance was so great that he could not sign his name" (234). This original but foreign illiteracy remains a powerful negative example in the novel, for Mervyn's father abuses authority, succumbs to seduction, is swindled out of his property, and ends in ignominy and degradation. Such allegorical fates are possible only because, for Brown, literacy correlates with personality structures. Mervyn, who has exhausted his library and who never spots a book or paper without taking it up to read, defines himself by the inquisitive activity and rational transcendence associated with letters. His father, on the other

hand, remains sunk in dependence, vulnerable to accident, a sport of his passions, and the dupe of corrupt designs.

Mervyn himself draws the conclusion, commenting on the dangers of the rural life in which he began as an ignorant and unsocialized being. Rustic manners, he says, have a "tendency to quench the spirit of liberal curiosity; to habituate the person to bodily, rather than intellectual, exertions; to supersede, and create indifference or aversion to the only instruments of rational improvement, the pen and the book" (311). Although it may be an overassertion, even for Brown, to say that the pen and the book are the *only* instruments of rational improvement, he certainly thinks that letters promote the kind of vigilant thinking exemplified by Mervyn. That is why Mervyn requires literature in his beloved and prescribes a course of letters to render Eliza's mind worthy of his: "Her pen might be called into action, and her mind be awakened by books, and every hour be made to add to her stores of knowledge and enlarge the bounds of her capacity" (312).

Nowhere does the peculiar character of Mervyn's virtuous and literate mind appear more vividly than in chapter 13 of part 1. Mervyn finds himself in retreat from the city at Hadwin's farm. His passions have been aroused by Eliza, Hadwin's nymphlike daughter. "To foster my passion," he tells us, "was to foster a disease destructive either of my integrity or my existence." In order to avoid the savage condition of dependence on passions (his father's fate) Mervyn turns, naturally enough, to literature. Doing so, he says, will help to "discover some means of controlling and beguiling [his] thoughts." Luckily, in leaving the city he has brought with him a bound manuscript in Italian that had been in Welbeck's house. The curious part is that Mervyn does not know Italian, but he resolves to translate the manuscript anyway. He has such confidence in the propulsive power of his mind that he resolves to go about the translation unaided: "My project was perhaps singular. The ancient language of Italy [Latin] possessed a strong affinity with the modern. My knowledge of the former, was my only means of gaining the latter. I had no grammar or vocabulary to explain how far the meanings and inflections of Tuscan words varied from the Roman dialect. I was to ponder on each sentence and phrase; to select among different conjectures the most plausible, and to ascertain the true, by patient and repeated scrutiny" (126).

Improbably, Mervyn succeeds in this task, which shows "how the mind, unassisted, may draw forth the principles of inflection and arrangement." In this fantasy of language, letters wait only to unfold themselves before an active mind. Mervyn's impossible success reveals a certain optimism for literature as a field of virtuous exertion. Furthermore, the fantasy has tangible rewards, since in the process of translating the book Mervyn uncovers a fortune in banknotes cemented between the pages. Because his rational transcendence is shown to be a product of his exemplary literacy, the episode can be read as thematizing the necessity of literature. The banknote fantasy also indicates the depth of Brown's (unthematic) desire that literature have its own rewards.

Illiterate ignorance and virtuous letters do not exhaust the novel's thematic alternatives. Whereas Mervyn embodies the disposition of republican literature and implicitly allegorizes its necessity through his adventures, the villain Welbeck embodies the disposition of polite letters and becomes equally a figure of allegory, though a negative one. It will later turn out that Welbeck wanted to translate the same Italian manuscript. He too possesses, he has told Mervyn, a "thirst of knowledge" that he calls "ardent" (85), and his luxurious library is a key setting for much of the novel's action. Yet his wish to translate the manuscript grows out of his desire for "the *reputation* of literature and opulence" (100; my emphasis). He discloses that his intention was to add some episodes to the manuscript's narrative and pass off the whole as his own invention. The difference between Mervyn and Welbeck is that Mervyn engages the dynamism of his mind in opposition to the passions and in hope of virtuous literature, while Welbeck possesses what Fisher Ames analyzes as a passion of fame. Mervyn actually translates the book, while Welbeck wishes primarily to be known for having translated it. Mervyn's literature is thus allied with the substantial values of the novel; Welbeck's with their corruption. Mervyn discovers money in books; Welbeck counterfeits money and plagiarizes. These are only extreme versions of the paradigmatic difference: Mervyn's standard of value in letters is primarily civic, while Welbeck's is one of private appropriation.

Brown leaves no doubt that Welbeck's evil stems from the personality structures of civility and credit economies. Early in the novel the virtuously rude Mervyn is shocked to witness Welbeck's polite self-management in action. He notes that at a social gathering Welbeck deceptively transforms himself from sullen and reserved to vivacious. Welbeck thereby achieves "the utmost deference" from his companions; but as soon as he leaves them, he lapses into his true severity (73). Just before, Mervyn has made the contrast with himself explicit: "I saw the emptiness of fame and luxury when put in the balance against the recompence of virtue" (71).

The two personality structures, one defined by managed esteem, the other by civic action, orient the ethical-political order of the novel. The

conflict between them governs every event in the narrative. These two personality structures are also capable of being thematized through the characters' different relations to letters. That is because republican culture contained an understanding of letters designed to fit and elaborate its understanding of political personhood. So the thematic of letters can be read less as artistic self-reference than as an index to the vexed politics of late republican–early liberal culture. Welbeck's crimes—fraud, plagiarism, forgery, seduction, and the like—are symptoms of the economy of esteem. So, however, is his love of literature. "The esteem of mankind," he says, "was the spring of all my activity, the parent of all my virtue and all my vice" (89). The allegorized struggle between Mervyn and Welbeck thus implicitly devalues standards of appreciation for letters that were culturally current but in tension with the republican paradigm—in this case, those of polite letters.

Because dispositions toward letters are at stake in the most basic premises of the novel's ethical-political order, the book figures a relation to its own medium in unthematized elements of its form and narrative structure. The first indication that the issue of literature might exert an influence deeper than thematic issues again has to do with Mervyn's character. One of Brown's most intimate friends, William Dunlap, wrote in a biography of Brown that Arthur Mervyn's busy intellection is an exact description of Brown's own "modes of thinking."[7] Whether biographically accurate or not, Dunlap's remark is a direct index of the rhetoric of the novel, and it is tempting on the basis of such a statement to see Mervyn as embodying elements of Brown's own self-image.

Curiously, almost nothing of Brown is recorded but his literature. In narrating his final illness, Dunlap announces his death in this fashion: "Thus at the age of thirty nine, died Charles Brockden Brown, taken from the world at a time when the mass of knowledge which he had acquired by unwearied but desultory reading, and by acute and accurate observation, being preserved by a strong memory and marshalled by an uncommonly vigorous understanding, was fitted with the aid of his perseverance and zeal in the cause of virtue, to have conferred the most important benefits upon his fellow men."[8] One would hardly know that the man who had died was Dunlap's bosom friend. All he describes is a mass of knowledge, a great deal of reading, and a vigorous understanding exerting itself in the service of virtue and public benefit. Compare the passage with what Mervyn says upon turning down a temptation to easy riches: "The accumulation of knowledge, and the diffusion of happiness, in which riches may be rendered eminently instrumental, were the only precepts of duty, and the only avenues to genuine felicity" (128).

Dunlap's language, however strange it now may seem, was anything but peculiar to him. The *American Daily Advertiser*'s brief obituary pauses only to say that Brown died a Christian before detailing the traits that made his knowledge "extensive": "the unwearied inquisitiveness of a rich and active mind, . . . that never failing propensity to scrutiny and investigation, . . . the most facile capacity for the acquirement of knowledge, and . . . at the same time a laudable but modest ambition for the acquirement of literary fame."[9] Even the manuscript obituary probably composed in part by Brown's widow is mostly devoted to the "ardor" of Brown's "love of letters." "Ever on the alert in quest of information," the manuscript tells us, "he patiently inquired, he read, reflected, examined," and so on. "It is difficult to conceive what acquisition a mind thus constituted possesses above ordinary men. Those hours devoted by the generality of the world to colloquial amusement, and which the memory afterward retains no vestige of, were to him all subordinate to the grand purpose of his life, the acquisition of knowledge."[10] All parties involved in praising Brown as a man of literature found it necessary to emphasize the very disposition of mind that dictates Mervyn's character and actions. Here, Brown's ardor for letters displaces all other details of his behavior. I conclude from such evidence that in *Arthur Mervyn* Brown is exploring, in ways that are only partly thematized, the political self-understanding made available to him in the republican discourse of and about print. Mervyn is, among other things, a fantastic self-image.

Yet Mervyn possesses neither the greatest virtue nor the greatest literature in the novel: those honors belong to Dr. Stevens. It is not accidental that the two go together in his case. The physician's task is a higher form of the hero's: to acquire knowledge of the world and confer benefits at the same time. In the eighteenth century medical practitioners were markedly distinguished from the general population by book learning rather than by institutional accreditation. And for Brown, whose closest friend (Elihu Hubbard Smith) had been one of Benjamin Rush's students in medicine, medical learning was a powerful example of virtuous literature. These assumptions can be seen at work when Stevens decides that Mervyn can perfect his "career of virtue" by becoming a physician. Medicine, in his account, is a branch of literature capable of converting Mervyn's "strenuous" mind to public benefit. It might be noted in this connection that one function of the yellow fever epidemic in the novel is to define a specifically *public* need for virtuous physicians. Stevens does not exert his literature on behalf of private persons for profit; he labors for the benefit of an entire civic population.

As with the case of the Italian manuscript, this vision of the lettered mind furthering the welfare of mankind is a displaced but strong image for Brown's own work as a writer. It is Stevens, after all, who writes down Mervyn's tale (Mervyn commends his "nimble pen" [354]), thus serving as Brown's double; and the importance of his literature to the public is something that Brown no doubt would like to claim for himself. In other words, Brown regards medicine as an ideal image of the reciprocal relation between letters and virtue toward which his own career aims.[11]

It may strike us as a magical wish to think that writing could produce effects on the public comparable to the benefits of medicine. But it did not seem so in the republic, where the political virtue of the active mind was attributed to the agency of letters. What makes *Arthur Mervyn* of interest beyond its reproduction of that rhetoric is the logic by which Brown gives such connections dramatic form. Mervyn's drive to acquire knowledge is a principle of dynamism. The effect is to make the outline of the novel's plot implicit in the properties of the hero's mind. The bookish cogitation described by Berthoff as a "priggish reflection on events" is exactly the force that directs the course of events. Arthur himself points to this fact in order to explain why, when ordered to leave Mrs. Villars' house, he instead went searching through the upper stories: "I pretend not to the wisdom of experience and age; to the praise of forethought or subtlety. I chuse the obvious path, and pursue it with headlong expedition. Good intentions, unaided by knowledge, will, perhaps, produce more injury than benefit, and therefore, knowledge must be gained, but the acquisition is not momentary; is not bestowed unasked and untoil'd for: meanwhile, we must not be unactive because we are ignorant. Our good purposes must hurry to performance, whether our knowledge be greater or less" (323).

Mervyn's exploratory behavior, in his view, naturally follows from the need for knowledge. When first denied entry to the house, he "reflected on the rectitude of [his] intentions"—and if the subsequent reflection seems priggish to the modern eye, Mervyn employs Brown's own republican vocabulary: "I thought, with scornful emotions, on the bars and hindrances which pride and caprice, and delusive maxims of decorum, raise in the way of human intercourse. I spurned at these semblances and substitutes of honesty, and delighted to shake such fetters into air, and trample such impediments to dust. I wanted to see an human being, in order to promote her happiness. It was doubtful whether she was within twenty paces of the spot where I stood. The doubt was to be solved. How? By examining the space. I forthwith proceeded to examine it" (317).

Mervyn's imperative of knowledge translates directly into action: solving a doubt, crossing a spatial boundary, and defying unrepublican social restrictions exactly coincide with each other. The novel is a showcase for the dynamism of Mervyn's mind. If there is a door, Mervyn will walk through it. If there is a book, Mervyn will open it. Because of this trait he avoids the traps of ignorance and attains a secure liberty. He ascribes his improbable behavior to "an inquisitive temper." "I was eager after knowledge," he says (64); elsewhere he reflects that "the source of all energy, and even of life, is seated in thought" (169). The result may resemble headlong idiocy, but since Mervyn's adventurous behavior is the unmediated result of his need for knowledge, Brown is able to regard that direct translation of knowledge into virtue as evidence that learning—conceived now as a necessary and continuing acquisition of knowledge, the expanding impulse of the mind—is inherently virtuous. Because it produces good republican self-assertion, Mervyn's "curiosity" (73) is more than an unpleasant quirk of his personality; it defines his political agency. The plot's premises, which allow the pursuit of knowledge to appear identical with virtuous action, are Brown's ingenious narrative solution to the cultural problem of integrating a diffuse public sphere.

By this means Brown's novel exploits an ambiguity in the idea of learning; for republican literature requires both a dynamism of the mind—its expansion through time—and an imperturbable virtue that mirrors letters in its transcendent fixity. Literature is both an activity performed in the world and a state transcending the fortunes of that world. Mervyn embodies its activity perfectly, but only at the expense of its transcendence. Although Brown goes to great lengths to represent Mervyn's inquisitiveness as producing benefit by propelling virtuous action, Mervyn's ignorance is a painful and restrictive condition. The effort of acquiring knowledge socializes Mervyn and establishes his virtue, but his ignorance entails a state of vicious dependence. He is always aspiring to a state of knowledge in which that effort will no longer be entailed upon him.

Late in his adventures he shows signs of having attained the liberty he desires, especially in the following passage (the same one Dunlap cites when saying that Mervyn resembles Brown): "If men be chiefly distinguished from each other by the modes in which attention is employed, either on external and sensible objects, or merely on abstract ideas and the creatures of reflection, I may justly claim to be enrolled in the second class. My existence is a series of thoughts rather than of motions. Ratiocination and deduction leave my senses unemployed. The fulness of my fancy renders my eye vacant and inactive. Sensations do not precede and suggest,

but follow and are secondary to the acts of my mind" (265). The immunity from "vicissitude" that Mervyn claims in this and similar descriptions of his mind is an ideal—clearly an ideal that does not entirely exist in practice for most of the novel's duration. Dr. Stevens possesses lettered tranquillity from the beginning; Mervyn only gradually attains it as his acquisition of knowledge gradually secures his virtue from the threats of dependence on fortune and the senses. In the meantime he remains ignorant, and his ignorance subjects him to perils in which he cannot afford the tranquillity of pure thought.

This ambiguity necessarily follows from the premises of Brown's plot construction. The beneficial ability of Mervyn's mind to frustrate Welbeck's wiles only appears from within his ignorant condition. Only the dramatic circumstances of his dependence allow for his virtuous actions. At one point he exclaims: "Why, said I, as I hasted forward, is my fortune so abundant in unforeseen occurrences? Is every man, who leaves his cottage and the impressions of his infancy behind him, ushered into such a world of revolutions and perils as have trammelled my steps? or, is my scene indebted for variety and change to my propensity to look into other people's concerns, and to make their sorrows and their joys mine?" (332).

It is at moments such as this one that some critics detect irony, for they read Brown as implicitly answering "Yes" to the last question. Mervyn, in their view, pokes his nose where it does not belong. But it is also possible to read such passages as expressing a tension within the novel's values rather than a disparity between Brown's judgment and Mervyn's. Mervyn's propensity to look into other people's concerns is the source of his virtue, allowing him to confer benefits. That propensity, however, is defined as an inquisitiveness seeking to escape the state of ignorance, and therefore it produces its virtuous effects only within an essentially vulnerable and dependent condition. In *Arthur Mervyn* Brown has devised a plot in which the acquisition of knowledge has the dramatic function of virtuous action, but the same plot must keep its hero in a condition of ignorant dependence which is the antithesis of virtue.

Because of this contradiction, the relation between thematic content and narrative condition entails a thematic and formal problem. The temporal duration of Mervyn's adventures takes on the connotations of fortune and dependence, and the untrammeled knowledge to which he aspires is defined against the temporal medium of the novel's action. "To act under the guidance of another," he explains, "and to wander in the dark, ignorant whither my path tended, and what effects might flow from my agency was a new and irksome situation" (63). Not knowing what

effects might flow from one's agency is exactly to be embedded in a narrative. By describing it in this way, Brown implicitly opposes the republican standards of virtue and liberty—which are defined by the assertion of agency—to the "irksome situation" that defines Mervyn's narrative, since the events of that narrative coincide with the ignorant and restrictive "path" that Mervyn here resists. In a later chapter Mervyn says, "I had acted long enough a servile and mechanical part, and been guided by blind and foreign impulses. It was time to lay aside my fetters, and demand to know whither the path tended in which I was importuned to walk" (114). His will to knowledge—opposed in characteristic fashion to "fetters"—sustains him throughout his narrative, promising a possibility of full, surveying enlightenment at the end of his dark, adventurous path. But Mervyn's demand to know, his desire to assume virtuous agency, must be partially suspended or frustrated for the duration of his adventures; if he knew "whither the path tended," there would be no story to tell. Brown's plot is ingenious for making Mervyn's learning function as virtuous action, but in so doing it defines its ideal standards of knowledge and virtue in opposition to its own narrative form.

Brown almost acknowledges that tension in the following passage, in which Mervyn says: "The condition of my mind was considerably remote from happiness. I was placed in a scene that furnished fuel to my curiosity. This passion is a source of pleasure, provided its gratification be practicable. I had no reason, in my present circumstances, to despair of knowledge; yet suspicion and anxiety beset me. I thought upon the delay and toil which the removal of my ignorance would cost and reaped only pain and fear from the reflection" (73). The delay that causes Mervyn to shudder is the duration of his narrative. Beyond it, after the "removal" of his ignorance, he imagines happiness and the gratification of his curiosity. In what might be called the meantime of his narrative, however, he sees at once fuel to his curiosity and the toil of its frustration. (Again, a contrast with Poe might be helpful. Writing in the context of liberal society and the bureaucratic nation, Poe can treat the temporal duration of narrative as expressing the fateful nature of experience in general. *Pym,* properly speaking, has no ending; and it is typical of novels in that later period to resolve themselves without a moment of enlightenment interpreted as transcending or escaping the narrative condition.)

If the narrative duration appears as restrictive and threatening, the novel's writing—its existence in the public medium of print—is implicitly associated with the liberty of knowledge toward which Mervyn aspires. This is the case partly because of the analogy noted earlier between

Brown's writing and the literature of Stevens and Mervyn. It is also because Brown associates Mervyn's virtuous curiosity with the reader's own, as he intimates in the scene in which Mervyn translates the Italian manuscript with impulsive and suspenseful curiosity. Because of the novel's writtenness, moreover, there is an important difference between the reader's curiosity and Mervyn's: for the reader, curiosity's gratification is already in hand.

The point would be trivial, except that the difference between Mervyn's restrictive condition and the more liberating context of the novel's writing is explicitly rendered within the novel. For here it will be remembered that Brown goes to considerable lengths in drawing attention to the novel's mise-en-scène. Most of the novel is Dr. Stevens' written record of Mervyn's oral narration as delivered on several separate occasions, and the difference between the oral and written contexts sensibly reproduces the difference between Mervyn's painful dependence and Stevens' secure literature. At several points Brown tells us in detail about an interruption in Mervyn's narration; in each case, the interruption associates the delay and toil of his oral telling with the delay and toil of his perilous condition. Chapter 14 of part 2, for example, begins:

> Mervyn's auditors allowed no pause in their attention to this story. Having ended, a deep silence took place. The clock which stood upon the mantel, had sounded twice the customary *larum,* but had not been heard by us. It was now struck a third time. It was *one.* Our guest appeared somewhat startled at this signal, and looked, with a mournful sort of earnestness, at the clock. There was an air of inquietude about him, which I had never observed in an equal degree before.
>
> I was not without much curiosity respecting other incidents than those which had just been related by him; but after so much fatigue as he had undergone, I thought it improper to prolong the conversation.
>
> Come, said I, my friend, let us to bed . . . Much has happened in your absence, which is proper to be known to you, but our discourse will be best deferred till to-morrow. I will come into your chamber by day-dawn, and unfold to you my particular.
>
> Nay, said he, withdraw not on my account. If I go to my chamber, it will not be to sleep, but to meditate, especially after your assurance that something of moment has occurred in my absence. My thoughts, independently of any cause of sorrow or fear, have received an impulse which solitude and darkness will not stop. It is impossible to know too much for our safety and integrity, or to know it too soon. What has happened? (339–340)

Unlike Mervyn, Dr. Stevens shows himself willing to set narrative aside as though it were written; this security reflects his role as recorder and implies the liberty of his lettered virtue. Mervyn lacks that liberty, but Brown is very clear in pointing out that Mervyn's impatience with the narrative is not emotional ("sorrow or fear") but intellectual: his "thoughts" have been propelled forward again by the discovery that he is still in the condition of ignorance. The difference in their behavior reproduces that between Brown's ideal of knowledge—which is immune to fortune and lies beyond narrative—and the dramatic knowledge of Mervyn, which is made to coincide with virtuous action only by being partial. If Stevens' ideal literature is associated with the written context, the dramatic limitations of Mervyn's knowledge are associated with the marked temporality of the oral narration. Hence the aural clarity of the chapter's beginning: what "Mervyn's auditors" hear is first the tale, then silence, and then the tolling of the mantel clock. And Stevens' detailed calendar of times for deferring and resuming the tale further demonstrates the association between Mervyn's dependence and the temporality of spoken narrative, since the deferral of the telling both keeps Mervyn ignorant and maintains the narrative suspense.

In contrast, when Mervyn says, "It is impossible to know too much for our safety and integrity, or to know it too soon," he invokes an ideal of untrammeled knowledge exemplified in scenes of writing such as that of the translation. And if the oral conditions of his narrative suggest the frustration of his desire for such expansive and atemporal knowledge, he will find what he seeks in the fixed publicity of writing. Late in the novel the mise-en-scène suddenly changes, as Arthur takes over Stevens' nimble pen and begins to write his own story. His doing so indicates the moment at which he knows the full of his own story, and equally indicates the end of his dependent condition, for it is immediately after Welbeck's death that he takes up the pen.

It can only be a problem for a novel to associate its own narrative organization of knowledge with dependence and fortune, while associating its medium with the transcendence of publicity. Yet that is the case in *Arthur Mervyn.* It is both a narrative and a publication, though the terms of its ethical-political order encourage us to think of these as opposites, in exactly the same way that dependence and liberty are opposites. Brown has a way of mediating this tension in his premises through a fantasy of publication. Virtually every episode in the novel occasions not

just the acquisition of knowledge and the conferring of benefits, but more precisely a strategy of disclosure. In each instance a dramatic act of publication appears as the escape from the perils entailed upon Mervyn by his duration in ignorance and fortune. Mervyn's narrative is itself such an act of disclosure, called forth with much prodding by Stevens in order to allay the accusations raised against Mervyn. "Arthur," Stevens says, "something is the matter with you. Will you not disclose it to us? Perhaps you have brought yourself into some dilemma out of which we may help you to escape" (12). From this moment Arthur's escape from difficulty is brought about by the labor of disclosure recorded—and disclosed—by the novel. And within the adventures disclosed by the novel occur an astonishing number of episodes that turn on an act of disclosure. When a chance expression of Thetford's reveals a plot to Mervyn, for example, he says, "This little word, half whispered in a thoughtless mood, was a key to unlock an extensive cabinet of secrets . . . To detect and to counterwork this plot was obviously my duty" (77–78).

For Mervyn, being the novel's hero entails the adoption of disclosure as a principle of conduct: he determines to be in the right by publishing information. The trouble he gets into stems from his not having done so from the beginning. One of the peculiarities of the novel's plot is that Welbeck has extracted from Mervyn several pledges of secrecy that vitally endanger Mervyn and interfere with the narration. "I was far from expecting," Mervyn says, "that any exigence would occur, making disclosure my duty" (62). He soon ceases to reason in this fashion and adopts the duty of disclosure not just as a contingent tactic, but as an abstract principle. He is, he later explains, so far from eluding curiosity, "so far from studying concealment," that he is "anxious to publish the truth" (388). On another occasion, when he is wondering whether to "disclose the truth" to Welbeck about having purloined the volume from the study, he says: "The first impulse was to hide this truth: but my understanding had been taught, by recent occurrences, to question the justice, and deny the usefulness of secrecy in any case" (199).

Disclosing information, making things public, is understood as ensuring a civic source of validity. For that reason the strategy of disclosure in this novel can be taken as a fantasy-equivalent of the act of publication, even when no thematic connection with writing occurs. The strategy of disclosure is more than an interest in publication as such, because there is an added twist. Disclosure bears a punitive character. When Mervyn decides to disclose his knowledge of Wallace and Villars he speaks of "charges" and "vindication," and in general there are dire consequences

for those about whom information is disclosed: Wallace, Villars, Thetford, and especially Welbeck. In the last scene between Welbeck and Mervyn, Welbeck cries out in the pain of Mervyn's publicizing gaze:

> Thou has done me harm enough, but canst do, if thou wilt, still more. Thou canst betray the secrets that are lodged in thy bosom, and rob me of the comfort of reflecting that my guilt is known but to one among the living.
>
> This suggestion made me pause, and look back upon the past. I had confided this man's tale to you. The secrecy, on which he so fondly leaned, was at an end. Had I acted culpably or not?
>
> (338)

The answer to the last question is no. Mervyn's disclosure in this case—identical with the novel's narration—operates in lieu of the law. Welbeck on his deathbed cringes in fear: "terror of more ample disclosures, which the simplicity and rectitude of Mervyn might prompt him to make, chained up his tongue, and covered him with dismay" (258). Although Welbeck's crimes are such that at least one character would "exult to see him suffer all the rigors of the law" (228), the only trial he ever faces is that of publicity—a trial in which evidence and punishment are the same.

If such is Welbeck's fate, it had been determined considerably earlier, when Mervyn first pledged himself to publish: "Welbeck had ceased to be dreaded or revered. That awe which was once created by his superiority of age, refinement of manners and dignity of garb, had vanished. I was a boy in years, an indigent and uneducated rustic, but I was able to discern the illusions of power and riches, and abjured every claim to esteem that was not founded on integrity. There was no tribunal before which I should faulter in asserting the truth, and no species of martyrdom which I would not cheerfully embrace in its cause" (200). The possibility not considered by the novel is that the assertion of truth is itself a tribunal, that in representational polity no one is martyred for having made a public assertion, because the standard of publicity defines the legitimate. When Welbeck complains under the discipline of that publicity, he can only be seen as "fondly" leaning on illicit secrecy.

The strategy of disclosure confers the power of the law upon the publicity exemplified in writing. It can do so because of the close identification of the public and the legitimate in representational polity, for the consequence of that identification is that the secret and the hidden automatically appear as illegitimate. The connection is vividly imaged in the scene in

which Stevens realizes that some banknotes have been buried on the corpse of one of Welbeck's victims:

> It was just to restore these bills to their true owner; but how could this be done without hazardous processes and tedious disclosures? To whom ought these disclosures to be made? By what authority or agency could these half-decayed limbs be dug up, and the lost treasure be taken from amidst the horrible corruption in which it was immersed?
>
> This ought not to be the act of a single individual. This act would entangle him in a maze of perils and suspicions, of concealments and evasions, from which he could not hope to escape with his reputation inviolate. The proper method was through the agency of the law. It is to this that Mervyn must submit his conduct. The story which he told to me he must tell to the world. Suspicions have fixed themselves upon him, which allow him not the privilege of silence and obscurity. (252)

In this luridly thrilling passage Stevens' language—with such terms as "entanglements," "evasions," "escape," and "submit"—displays the violence with which the law defines Mervyn's person: suspicions "have fixed themselves upon him." Under this boundless inspection Mervyn's fixed position resembles nothing so much as that of the corpse, since both await the unearthing agency of the public eye. To resist inspection, as Welbeck does, is to be illegitimate; hence Stevens' dread of "concealments" and his notion that they would violate one's reputation. Suffering the rigors of the law, Mervyn's only defense is to adopt the very same agency of disclosure that subjects him, and thereby to render himself a function of that agency. Thus, if Mervyn resembles the corpse as the object of the law's exhuming vision, by adopting the strategy of disclosure he also becomes the law's agent.

Stevens' logic in this passage has grand implications for the written context of the novel. Telling the story orally, Stevens implies, did not satisfactorily justify Mervyn because that narration was not sufficiently public. "The story which he told to me," Stevens says, "he must tell to the world." Again, Brown calls attention here to the relation between the narrative mise-en-scène and its publication as a printed artifact. Because he identifies the public with the legitimate, submitting Mervyn's conduct to "the agency of the law" is seen as naturally coincident with telling his tale "to the world." Despite Stevens' decision that Mervyn must submit his conduct to the agency of the law, however, there is no trial scene in *Arthur Mervyn*. Only the existence of the novel itself answers the imperative expressed here by Stevens: in telling Mervyn's story to the world, it performs the agency of the law. The change of the novel's mise-en-scène is again revealing, for Mervyn's justification becomes final only after Welbeck's death, when he takes up the pen. At the moment of his writing no perils of dependence remain for him and his identification with the novel's vantage is complete. The strategy of disclosure reaches completion in the publicity of the novel's written context. Through it, Brown implicitly identifies his writing with the validity of the public sphere. It is not an allegory of publication as such that interests him, but a fantasy of publication that carries the full authority of law. (Note here the extensive similarities with *Wieland,* where the same conflict of personality structures finds resolution in a fantasy of disclosure. There a key role in the narrative is played by the transcript of a courtroom trial, and again the villain shows himself addicted to forms of secrecy.)

What does this analysis of *Arthur Mervyn* prove? I have tried to indicate that republican print discourse creates both the imperatives and the problems of the text. On thematic and unthematic levels, it produces narratives of virtuous literacy. Formally it creates a problem in the relation between the narrative organization and the mise-en-scène, because of their conflicting symbolic political valences. And last, republican categories allow a fantasy of disclosure as the solution to the contradiction of a republican narrative. I believe that, although the details of these patterns are specific to this rather ingenious if chaotic novel, the underlying cultural imperatives are givens for the novel as a genre in the republican national context. As a publication, the early American novel strives for the performative virtue of republican textuality.

I have by no means accounted for all of this novel, let alone all of early American novels in general. In some ways I have omitted the most interesting parts of *Arthur Mervyn.* The most obvious omission is the latter part of the book, which becomes increasingly devoted to the psychodrama of Mervyn's romance with a character named Achsa Fielding. As more and more of the narrative becomes devoted to the then-emergent ideology of love, Mervyn becomes more and more a site of imaginary erotics. The elaborate otherness of Achsa Fielding—maternal, foreign, and Jewish—allows the appearance of an eroticized self/other problematic, in a way reminiscent of Goethe's *Werther:* "You say she loves; loves *me!* me, a boy in age; bred in clownish ignorance, scarcely ushered into the world; . . . I shall be anxious, vacant and unhappy in her presence. I shall dread to look at her, or to open my lips lest my mad and unhallowed ambition should betray itself" (434–435).

Insensibly the premises of the novel have changed. Thematically, civic virtue is no longer an issue. Narrative tension is no longer a struggle between ignorant dependence and lettered transcendence. Fantasies of disclosure no longer address the structuring problem. Instead, problems of intersubjective recognition and mutual esteem have brought Mervyn's ego into focus ("She loves; loves *me!* me . . .). One consequence is that the novel's exorbitant but repressed erotics—masochistic, narcissistic, anal-paranoid, necrophiliac, aggressive, and homoerotically utopian—get charged with a sudden relevance. They return to trouble the ideal of the citizen's literate transcendence of his unacknowledged male body. And it is on the site of that supercharged contradiction that the novel struggles for closure. In the novel's concluding paragraph, Mervyn forsakes his pen ("Lie there, snug in thy leathern case"), not for enlightenment but for an unpictured reintegration that he can obtain only in the intimate recognition of romantic love.

Because of cross-currents such as these, I do not claim that *Arthur Mervyn* is a text unified by the context of republican discourse. What seems most interesting is the way its internal shifts reproduce the contradictions between republican print discourse and a liberal-national imaginary. These contradictions are just what make Brown's novel illustrative of its contemporaries. The novel as a genre articulated a troubled divide in the culture. Simultaneously a *publication* subject to the diffusion of literature *and* a site of private imaginary identifications, the early American novel produces endless variations on the contradictory symbolic determinations of its own form. In Brown's novel that means a contradiction between the narrative of Mervyn's performative virtue and the narrative of his self/other ego-erotics. That these are deeply contradictory can be seen in how they represent the problem of esteem. Mervyn's ego-anxieties *("me!")* find their solution in the valued esteem of Achsa Fielding ("she loves"). Her esteem is a sentimental model for the reader's relation to the text. In the republican narrative, however, the need for esteem is the problem to be transcended. And it can be transcended only through the fundamentally performative virtue of literature.

Arthur Mervyn must narrate rhetorically before an often skeptical audience, because he inhabits a credit economy and a social order of managed esteem. And the environment of credit and esteem, which accounts for the profusion of fictional analogues in the novel, exhaustively constitutes the novel's stock of evils. Fictiveness finds its chief analogue in the personality structure embodied by Welbeck. Against Welbeck's polite self-presentation, his forgery, his fraud, his seduction, his plagiarism, his

"dependence on the world's erroneous estimation," his "devotion to imposture" (199), even his mobile wealth—against all these Mervyn commits himself to acts of publication. "I was unhabituated to ideas of floating or transferable wealth," he says, explaining the impression made on him by Welbeck's opulent appearance (56).

As Mervyn narrates his tale before Dr. and Mrs. Stevens, he is repeatedly interrupted. And in the intervals between narrations, other characters appear with rival narratives. The result is a central scene of audition, analogous to the reader's position, which the novel constructs as a perilous tribunal of credit. "I can keep hold of your good opinion," Mervyn acknowledges to Stevens, "only by a candid deportment" (15). But a rival narrator, one Wortley, tells Stevens: "If, after this proof, you can give credit to his story, I shall think you made of very perverse and credulous materials" (226). Wortley goes so far as to invoke legal proceedings, making the narrative fully juridical: "The suspicions to which he is exposed will not easily be obviated; but if he has any thing to say in his defence, his judicial examination will afford him the suitable opportunity. Why are you so much afraid to subject his innocence to this test? It was not till you heard his tale, that your own suspicions were removed. Allow me the same privilege of unbelief" (248).

It would be forcing the issue to read this drama of credit as a conscious thematization of novelistic fictionality. But it *can* be read that way for the simple reason that it derives from the same anxieties about personality structure and social order that made fiction so suspect in republican America. Those anxieties go to the heart of the nature of economic and political personhood, and Wortley himself makes the connection with capital explicit. He suspects Mervyn of abetting a fraud. But he sees fraud as merely an extension of commercial speculation, citing with scorn a merchant "who employed money, not as the medium of traffic, but as in itself a commodity." Wortley here identifies the capitalist economy as the threat to virtue, and it is against that danger that the narrative raises its tribunal of credit. Wortley wants to try Mervyn's personal credit because he believes himself to be Mervyn's victim in the domain of economic credit. "Happily," he reminds Stevens, "you are a stranger to mercantile anxieties and revolutions. Your fortune does not rest on a basis which an untoward blast may sweep away, or four strokes of a pen may demolish" (227). Remember that Arthur's adventures begin with his departure from his yeoman-father's farm, toward the urban world of the capitalist market. And it is a significant index of the novel's republican anxieties about capital that nothing survives of the original Jeffersonian setting: Arthur

eventually returns to find that his father has sold the farm in a disastrous land speculation.

Brown fills the novel with analogues to fiction: forgeries, look-alikes, bank notes, seductions, credit schemes, and the like. But he interprets them in the republican mode, as a corrupt environment. Only in retrospect do they appear as figuring the emergent liberal-capitalist model of personality and social relations. The thematic and narrative device of disclosure is directed against that model. The wish at the core of *Arthur Mervyn,* at least in its republican mode, is that the book might have the value of a publication as opposed to the value of a fiction or of a narration. It (vainly) strives for the same performativity as the Constitution.

What are we to make of this book? Although it would seem that the dense figuration of republican literature within the narrative testifies to the power held by the republican paradigm over Brown's imagination rather than to an allegorical intention on his part, it must also be remarked that this reading—which apparently depreciates the novel's merit—is entirely compatible with Brown's criteria of value. Republican literature, in the extreme formulation represented by Brown's career, establishes the criteria of public benefit and law for all questions of value. It therefore defines as irrelevant those criteria which pertain to the author's control, or voice, or expression. If it is thus difficult to see how republican writing could be judged inferior on its own terms (unless it were to promote luxury and vice), Brown's rhetorical purpose in writing—to bolster the republic through the diffusion of literature—also subordinates to the point of insignificance any appreciation of his role as author. Criticism typically commends authors rather than the public discourse privileged in *Arthur Mervyn,* and the available terms of critical praise—that Brown presents a message about virtue in the novel or that the novel is social criticism or an allegory of writing—are inappropriate to the novel because they ultimately valorize the author's utterance rather than the generality.[12] Republican literature, in short, defines itself by means of political standards for which criticism currently possesses no vocabulary of commendation. And although I read *Arthur Mervyn* as a dense and fascinating text, to do so is to be struck by the final incommensurability between our own standards of appreciation and those of Brown's republican literature.

In another sense, the tensions I have traced in *Arthur Mervyn* show that the paradigm of republican literature was already undergoing transformation. The novel was already turning a civic ideology of publication into the kind of private imaginary appropriate to nationalism. Though Brown's ambition was undoubtedly that of "embodying virtue in a novel," as a

contemporary observer put it, a novel cannot embody virtue.[13] That is why Brown goes to such great lengths to fill *Arthur Mervyn* with what I have called fantasies of publicity. His republican cognitive vocabulary for print values a book as publication; but its public value can only be imagined through the mediation of private virtues. In the best of cases the reader's imaginary identifications become the means for the reader's reflective self-management. Those imaginary identifications also produce a pleasure in the same suspension of knowledge, the same narrative duration of ignorant temporality, that is the source of Brown's deepest republican anxieties. Where the disclosure of knowledge is linked to the public authority of publication, and where the temporal and dependent condition of ignorance is construed as the obstacle to civic participation, the pleasure of narrative identification must be private in a strong sense. It becomes cognitively possible and enjoyable only through the reader's negative relation to the public. So although Brown finds ways to identify the reader's calm surveyance with publicity, the reader simultaneously identifies with the character's ignorant dependence, *precisely in opposition to the full knowledge of the public sphere.* And because novel-reading, given this symbolic order, produces that experience of privacy as such, the reader can claim Arthur's public success through a private appropriation that is tangibly imaginary.

This imaginary participation in the public order is, as I have suggested, a precondition for modern nationalism, though it is anathema to pure republicanism. The modern nation does not have citizens in the same way that the republic does. You can be a member of the nation, attributing its agency to yourself in imaginary identification, without being a freeholder or exercising any agency in the public sphere. Nationalism makes no distinction between such imaginary participation and the active participation of citizens. In republicanism that distinction counted for everything. So the early phase of post-Revolutionary nationalism is marked by a gradual extension of a national imaginary to exactly those social groups that were excluded from citizenship—notably women. Women were more and more thought of as symbolic members of the nation, especially in their capacities as mothers.[14] But this symbolic reclassification changed the nature of the nation and the imaginary of its extension more than it changed the access of women to the public sphere. For the public of which women were now said to be members was no longer a public in the rigorous sense of republicanism, and membership in it no longer connoted civic action. Politics was developing into a specialized social system, entrusted to career experts and mediating institutions, while the nation was developing an

imaginary and a discourse divorced from the self-contained institutions of politics.[15]

The emergent vocabulary of sentiment was designed to attribute public value to reader identification. And the triumph of sentiment in the novel marks a crisis for the paradigm of republican literature in which Brown writes. The connections between sentimental discourse and women, or between sentimental discourse and the private liberal subject, are now well known.[16] The turn toward sentiment can be seen as a key element both in the extension of the national imaginary to the female readership of novels and in the emergence of a liberal paradigm for appreciating printed texts. If the privatizing discourse of sentiment marks a break with the republican paradigm of diffused literature, nevertheless in the 1780s and 1790s the two lead a tense coexistence in the American novel.

American novels of the period typically revolve dramatically around an ethical-political conflict between the personality structures of virtue and politeness. This is true of adventure narratives, such as *Fortune's Foot-ball,* as well as seduction narratives, such as *Amelia; or the Faithless Briton.* In Hannah Foster's *The Coquette,* both of the main characters, seducer and seduced, represent the ethical order—or unethical order—of politeness. Foster stresses to no end that Sanford, the gallant rake, is the epitome of politeness. He equally epitomizes the credit economy. We learn from the beginning that he lives on credit alone, and his ruin comes about through the enlightenment of his creditors. But Eliza Wharton, the heroine, also represents the reflective management of esteem, here called by its female name: "coquetting artifice."[17] Predictably it ruins her as well, and the reader is called to identify with a chorus of minor characters who admonish her to a more republican comportment. One of the ideological functions of the seduction novel in such a case was to integrate the authority of public opinion with self-present virtue rather than reflective management of esteem, an integration that could come about most easily with the charged subject of a woman's reputation. As one female character tells Eliza: "Slight not the opinion of the world. We are dependent beings; and while the smallest traces of virtuous sensibility remain, we must feel the force of that dependence, in a greater or less degree. No female, whose mind is uncorrupted, can be indifferent to reputation."[18] But neither can any female, whose mind is uncorrupted, *manage* her reputation. The seduction plot focuses the ideological ambivalences surrounding the personality type of modernity. It dramatizes the order of politeness in order to supply, against it, fantasies of virtue and authoritative publicity.

Moreover, early American novels sustain a relatively continuous the-

matic content that links them to the public discourse. They deliberate explicitly the issues of the republic. Part of the reason for this prevalence of public themes is that, as publications, the novels were taken to be part of the public discourse. But more pointedly, the public themes taken up in novels tend to be those with the most potential for valuing publications as civic activity. Cathy Davidson has remarked the rather extraordinary fact that all early national novels, without exception, contain a discussion of the theory of education, a topic that always implicitly contained a specially political value for the diffusion of letters.[19] The obsessive discussions of education in the novels both align the characters with the personality structure of virtue in a diffuse public sphere and express the fantasy that novels themselves carry the political valence of publication.

The most striking example of a thematic continuity with the public sphere is Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry,* a comic epic about the tribulations of a virtuous freeholder whose activities consist largely of trying to sustain the identity between letters and the public sphere. Farrago, the main character, finds himself faced repeatedly with the challenge of his servant, Teague. For Teague, though illiterate, manages to have himself elected to office. The illiterate Teague even manages, in a fantasy that says much about the paradigm of republican literature, to write a book. Such episodes continually provide a staging ground on which Brackenridge can deliberate the nature of the republic, always keeping in view the value of letters for the republic. But even where republican literature recedes from the thematic focus, its value remains implicit simply in the fact that the novel regards itself as an exercise in republican theory for a freeholder public. All of its extended considerations of policy and constitution imply the integration of the text with other publications in the political discourse.

Finally, the antifictional prejudice itself testifies to the power of Americans' desire to maintain an identity between publication and public discourse. Americans endlessly avowed a fear that fiction would detach readers' sentiments from the social world of the polity, substituting a private drama of fancy. They wrote of such fears in virtually every magazine and newspaper in the country; no figure of the period seems to have been exempt from the anxiety (or at least from the discourse of anxiety)—including the novelists themselves. William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy,* generally called the first American novel, declares in its full title that it is "Founded in Truth" and thus not a fiction at all. *The Coquette,* according to its title page and popular knowledge, was "Founded on Fact." Most eloquent in the attack on novel-reading, however, was Tabitha Tenney's

Female Quixotism, a novel devoted entirely to the plight of a reader no longer able to distinguish private imaginary from general virtue. Novels of the period in this way typically argue against their own generic conditions, paradoxically claiming exemptions for themselves on the grounds that they teach the authority of publicity as against the private fancy of the reader. Even *Arthur Mervyn* bears the subtitle *Memoirs of the Year 1793;* its preface explicitly classes the novel among "the medical and political discussions" of the plague of that year. Brown, as I have noted, considers his novel as different from public treatises only insofar as the convenience of narrative allows him to "methodize his own reflections." Defenses of novel-writing thus exhibit the same logic as attacks on novel-reading. Both uphold an ideal of republican literature in which publication and the public sphere remain identical; both worry that the environment of fictitious identification might no longer entail public knowledge or civic activity.

In the American culture of the late eighteenth century there was no independent language of value for novels. And on my reading, the peculiar American combination of outright hostility and uneasy defensiveness toward novels was, given the nature of the republican public sphere, no small ideological prejudice. Until the joint triumphs of literary publishing and of nationalism in the liberal society of the nineteenth century, when the political system and publication became specialized in a mutual separation, novels could only narrate their anxieties about the hazard to the republic that they themselves posed.

33. Abel Boyer, *The English Theophrastus* (London, 1702); quoted in Lawrence Klein, "The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18 (1984): 186–214, at 190. See also Klein's "Berkeley, Shaftesbury, and the Meaning of Politeness," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 16 (1986): 57–68.

34. Lemay, *Men of Letters in Colonial Maryland,* 185.

35. Hamilton, *Itinerarium,* 193.

36. On Byles, see Arthur W. H. Eaton, *The Famous Mather Byles* (Boston: Butterfield, 1914).

37. *Spirit of Laws,* book 4, chapter 2, from *The Works of Monsieur de Montesquieu,* trans. Thomas Nugent (London, 1777).

38. Althusser, *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx,* 73.

39. Ibid., 72.

40. Some colonists could frankly declare the relation between the norm of politeness and the differentiation of rank. Hamilton of Maryland, for instance, complains in his journal of some "aggrandized upstarts," their names "not worthy to be recorded in manuscript or printed journals . . . who never had the opportunity to see, or if they had, the capacity to observe the different ranks of men in polite nations or to know what it is that really constitutes that difference of degrees."

41. Klein, "Third Earl," 191.

42. Ibid., 194, 199.

43. Benjamin Franklin, *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North-America* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 969–974.

44. See Timothy Breen, *Tobacco Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

45. *Pennsylvania Gazette,* April 13, 1732.

46. *American Apollo,* December 21, 1792.

47. Thomas Jefferson to Robert Skipwith, August 3, 1771, in *Jefferson,* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 740–745.

48. *Gazette of the United States,* November 17, 1790. I infer the commonness of the sentiment in part from the fact that the quoted passage, headed "An Extract," is the entire article (source unlocated).

49. *The United States Magazine* 1 (1779): 22–25, 53–58, 101–106; 23.

50. Samuel Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (Walpole, N.H., 1794), 331.

51. *United States Magazine* 1 (1779): 9. Hereafter this issue will be referred to parenthetically as *USM.*

52. Smith, *Remarks on Education,* 183; Beresford, *Plea for Literature,* 15, 21.

53. Fisher Ames, "American Literature," in *Works,* 428–442; hereafter cited parenthetically. For an astonishing but typical instance of critical misreading, see Robert E. Spiller's headnote to Ames's essay in his anthology *The American Literary Revolution, 1783–1837* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 73: "Ames, in this essay, is notable as one of the earliest to seek in other than superficial factors the causes for the failure of the new nation at once to produce a literature. The argument that equalitarianism and commercialism, as basic elements in the structure of American life, are in themselves destructive of the human spirit, and

that therefore America cannot hope to develop a life of the mind and the arts, will be heard again many times but perhaps not with the same passionate eloquence and gloomy despair." Spiller's summary of Ames's argument is exactly wrong, in ways that I make clear later in this chapter. He is able to read the essay as he does only by the strength of his assumption that a national "literary" culture is self-evidently desirable, and that Ames is discussing "literature" in this modern sense.

54. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England* (1936; repr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 13.

VI. The Novel: Fantasies of Publicity

1. Charles Brockden Brown, "Walstein's School of History," *Monthly Magazine and American Review* 1 (1799): 335–338, 407–411; 410.

2. Warner Berthoff, "Introduction" to *Arthur Mervyn* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1962), xviii.

3. Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 59, 56.

4. "Historical Essay," in *Arthur Mervyn* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1980), 473.

5. Ibid., 219. Further references to the Kent State edition will be made parenthetically.

6. In the diary of Elihu Hubbard Smith (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973), or in the early documents reprinted in the Allen biography, it appears that Brown was inordinately eager to debate with his friends on the absolute value of sincerity. And through his mouthpiece, Stevens, Brown tells us that Mervyn embodies that absolute value (229). Bell is fully aware of both the textual and the contextual information (see pp. 44, 46–48, 50, 56–58 in his book), but his desire to read the novel as a "literary" text—exhibiting signs of the author's governing distance from the work—leads him finally to ignore the overwhelming weight of his own evidence.

7. William Dunlap, *Life of Charles Brockden Brown,* 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1815), 2:41.

8. Ibid., 2:89.

9. *American Daily Advertiser,* February 27, 1810, quoted in David Lee Clark, *Charles Brockden Brown, Pioneer Voice of America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1952), 292.

10. Quoted in ibid., 293.

11. In saying this, again I am supported by "Walstein's School of History": "A man, whose activity is neither aided by political activity nor by the *press,* may yet exercise considerable influence on the condition of his neighbours, by the exercise of intellectual powers . . . His benevolence and justice may not only protect his kindred and his wife, but rescue the victims of prejudice and passion from the yoke of those domestic tyrants, and shield the powerless from the oppression of power, the poor from the injustice of the rich, and the simple from the stratagems of cunning . . . The pursuits of law and medicine, enhance our power over the liberty, property, and health of mankind. They not only qualify us for imparting benefit, by supplying us with property and leisure, but by enabling us

to obviate, by intellectual exertions, many of the evils that infest the world" (409). At the beginning of this passage, Brown cites the press, along with politics, as a self-evident example of opportunity for virtue. Because he is the editor of the magazine in which the essay appears, the analogy between his own career and the others mentioned is all but explicit. The other career models in the passage are those of the novel. Brown's characterization of Mervyn corresponds with that of the man whose benevolence, "by the exercise of intellectual powers," rescues the simple from the snares of the wily tyrant; and both Stevens and Mervyn practice the beneficially intellectual medicine that Brown describes at the end of the passage. In the essay their careers are seen as only approximating the power of the man of the press ("may yet exercise considerable influence"); in the novel, however, they represent that power by implied analogy.

12. These strategies of commendation are so deeply rooted in critical assumptions that even Jane Tompkins, in a book noted for its attacks on conventional definitions of literary value, attempts to redeem the value of Brown's novels by reading in them an authorial "message." "*Arthur Mervyn,*" she writes, "is a novel that must be read structurally—that is, as a series of abstract propositions whose permutations and combinations spell out a message to the reader, a message whose intent is to change the social reality which the narrative purports to represent" (Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], 40–93; 67). To be sure, she recognizes the political intent of the novels, but the idea of literary expression governs her interpretation of that intent. Her description of Brown's political messages suggests that Brown wanted his readers to distance themselves from the novel, abstract from it his desired message, and then act accordingly. As Tompkins puts it in regard to *Wieland,* "Brown identified the value of *Wieland* with its usefulness, and therefore must have assumed that its *meaning* would be clear to his readers, since the usefulness of his book would naturally depend upon its being understood" (41). She is both right and wrong. Brown certainly predicates the value of his writing on its usefulness, but he imagines a much more direct translation of the reading of his novels into public virtue—one accomplished in the arousal of curiosity and inquiry, not in a moment of collected abstract interpretation. Given Brown's slightly magical notion of the virtue of letters—which, though magical, was underwritten by a long republican tradition—the question of the novel's *meaning* never properly arises.

13. John Davis, *Travels of Four Years and a Half in the United States of America* (New York, 1909), 163–164 and 222–223.

14. Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (1987): 689–721; and Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

15. This part of the history and theory of nationalist society remains undeveloped. For one challenging version, see Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy,* trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). Luhmann connects the differentiation of society, including the public sphere, with the emergence of the discourse of love and its special mode of subjectivity. He also sketches a connection between the subjectivity of love and that of novel-reading. In these two important respects,

though not in regard to his general system-theoretical approach, my argument relies on his.

16. On sentiment, see David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), esp. 167–192; and *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

17. Hannah Foster, *The Coquette,* ed. Cathy Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 92.

18. Ibid., 133.

19. Cathy Davidson, *The Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 66.