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Network Theory circa 1800: *Charles Brockden Brown's Arthur Mervyn*

STACEY MARGOLIS

Lowly, unpurposeful and random as they may appear, sidewalk contacts are the small change from which a city's wealth of public life may grow.

—Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Social networks are old; network theory is new. At least this is what we've been told in countless recent books that link the emergence of network theory to the rise of the digital age. Instant and global electronic connections not only have transformed our ability to form and manage groups, create new social ties, and foment political change but, these theorists maintain, have fostered a new interest in figuring out exactly how such networks function. According to Duncan J. Watts, who helped launch modern network theory with a 1998 essay on the "small world" problem, "the science of networks" emerged in response to a newfound sense of global connection: "Surprised by the meteoric rise of the Internet, stung by a series of financial crises from Asia to Latin America, and stunned by ethnic violence and terrorism from Africa to New York, the world has learned the hard way that it is connected in a manner few people had anticipated and no one understood." This "new science" of networks, in taking on the "world of people, friendships, rumors, disease, fads, firms, and financial crises[,] . . . speaks directly to the momentous events going on around it" (13).¹

No one would deny that the world has been transformed by digital technology. But there is something both implausible and unsatisfying in this depiction of a world just now waking up to the prevalence (and power) of social networks. Watts himself acknowledges that global financial crises (not to mention diseases, fads, and rumors) are nothing new. As Robert Darnton argues about the Old Regime in France, a pre-digital society is nonetheless an "information society." Indeed, part of Darnton's point in describing eighteenth-century Paris in these terms is to overturn our familiar and comfortable (but entirely inaccurate) sense of the world before the twentieth-century telecommunications revolution. We cannot help but think of the Old Regime, he writes, "as a simple, tranquil, media-free world-we-have-lost, a society with no telephones, no television, no e-mail, Internet, and all the rest." And yet, Darnton claims, despite the Old Regime's lack of modern technology, "it had a dense communication network" that was as complicated

¹ Recent books that link the study of network societies to the rise of digital information technology include David Easley and Jon Kleinberg; Manuel Castells; Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler; Clay Shirky; Yochai Benkler; Albert-Laszlo Barabasi; and Mark Buchanan.

and sophisticated to its participants as ours is to us (7).² If the idea of pre-digital innocence is simply a myth, can it really be the case that it is only at the turn of the twenty-first century that anyone bothered to investigate the hidden, widespread, and unexpected connections that make an information society possible?

This essay argues that the answer to this question is no, and it will, by way of illustration, examine in some detail a novel that attempts to theorize the information networks of the early American republic. Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* is at once an example and an analysis of the rise of an early information society that is, in its sense of disorienting transformation, much like our own. One could without too much trouble adapt Watts's formulation for our current "connected age" to Brown's post-Revolutionary moment: surprised by the meteoric rise of the newspaper,³ stung by a series of financial panics from England to the West Indies,⁴ and stunned by the violence of revolutions from France to Haiti, Americans learned the hard way that they were connected in a manner few people had anticipated and no one understood. Brown's novel both imagines a world threatened by revolution and reckless financial speculation and recognizes how little anyone understood the hidden ties that made a decision in one place wreak havoc in another. His desire to understand the hidden connections engendered by a modern urban center like post-Revolutionary Philadelphia is, I would argue, remarkably similar to Watts's desire to anatomize a "period in the world's history . . . that is more highly, more globally, and more unexpectedly connected than at any time before it" (14).

Brown's own attempt to comprehend the logic of these connections depends less on models of political and financial crisis than on the mysterious spread of disease. While critics of *Arthur Mervyn* have invariably read yellow fever in terms of its horrifying symptoms, what Brown seems to find most compelling about the disease is how it circulates.⁵ Although an epidemic is, according to Arthur, characterized by dangers "mysterious and unseen" (165), the disease itself is unmistak-

² Matt Cohen's work on colonial America follows Darnton's logic, arguing that communication among European colonists and Native Americans depended on complex and sophisticated information networks, which encompassed not only written texts but speech and performance.

³ According to David Paul Nord, "The Revolution and its aftermath left Philadelphia with a heightened taste for newspaper reading. By 1794 the city had eight newspapers, four of them dailies. . . . These newspapers carried at least ten times as much material as had the city's two weeklies in 1764" (202).

⁴ The Panic of 1797, sparked by the suspension of specie payment by the Bank of England, had disastrous effects on the American economy and, eventually, on trade with the West Indies. For an excellent account, see Richard S. Chew.

⁵ Critics tend to read the epidemic as either an allegory of post-Revolutionary politics or of financial corruption. The former position is articulated most clearly in Robert Levine. For political readings that stress race and empire, see Sean Goudie, Bill Christopherson, and Andy Doolen 75–110. The latter position is articulated most clearly in James H. Justus. See also Caroll Smith-Rosenberg; Steven Watts; Carl Ostrowski; and Teresa A. Goddu 31–51. In all of these readings, the fever is imagined in terms of its harmfulness rather than its function. One important exception is an essay by Sian Silyn Roberts, who reads the epidemic as a way of exemplifying the dissolution of individual boundaries in an emergent cosmopolitan society.

able. You do not wonder whether a neighbor has yellow fever in the same way that you might wonder whether he is plotting against you; the disease speaks quite gruesomely for itself. In *Arthur Mervyn*, yellow fever is characterized by both invisibility (the “mysterious and unseen” mechanism of its spread) and hypervisibility (the tangible marks on the bodies of the victims). Exactly how the disease was transmitted remained, in Brown’s day, a mystery. But its unmistakable spread had the potential to make perceptible surprising connections between individuals. In spreading mysteriously but announcing its spread in unambiguous terms, the epidemic made it possible for Brown to imagine the disclosure of an invisible process.⁶

That Brown is disclosing a network rather than a closed and organized system (like a conspiracy) is made clear in his commitment to the unpredictability of the disease’s path through the city. In its depiction of a fever that strikes at random, *Arthur Mervyn* highlights the unpredictability built into all such chains of transmission; like yellow fever, information moves in mysterious ways. Perhaps this is why a novel about an emergent information society, written during an unprecedented expansion of the print public sphere, simply ignores the newspaper and its meteoric rise. It is certainly a strange (and rarely mentioned) fact about the novel that its characters, although they live in the information hub of Philadelphia, get their news almost entirely through conversation and not, as we might expect, through printed sources like newspapers or written sources like letters.⁷ As the novel makes clear, the kind of information that counts in a modernizing world like post-Revolutionary Philadelphia is too shifting and unstable to be encompassed by print sources. Here, for example, is a typical response to one of Arthur’s many inquiries: “He looked at me with surprise. Thetford! this [*sic*] is not his abode. He changed his habitation some weeks previous to the *fever*. Those who last dwelt under this roof were an English woman, and seven daughters” (151).

Rather than a mark of nostalgia for an earlier age of “face-to-face” communication, then, this interest in casual and ephemeral channels of communication is a mark of the text’s modernity. What Brown recognizes in his analysis of such emergent networks is the power of the city to reorder social connections, enabling individuals to bypass official sources of information, play a role in the process of transmission, and become (often unwitting) participants in a transformed public sphere. In this regard, Michael Warner’s well-known attempt to shift the critical focus from the novel’s formal intricacy to its role in the political public sphere

⁶ It should be noted that while Brown wrote about yellow fever obsessively, his use of the disease was not consistent. For instance, in *Ormond* (published the same year as part 1 of *Arthur Mervyn*), Brown emphasizes the dissolution of public order in fever-ridden Philadelphia and the liberating effect of this breakdown on Constantia: “Such was the colour of her fate, that the yellow fever, by affording her a respite from toil, supplying leisure for the acquisition of a useful branch of knowledge, and leading her to the discovery of a cheaper, more simple, and more wholesome method of subsistence, had been friendly, instead of adverse, to her happiness” (94). Clearly, yellow fever obsessed Brown not only because he wanted to document its horrors but because it proved to be a useful literary device. In *Ormond*, the fever enables him to produce, out of chaos, a radical freedom that will be tested over the rest of the novel.

⁷ For the role of the newspaper in the yellow fever epidemic, see Mark A. Smith and Nord 199–224.

seems to point us in the right direction, despite the fact that the kind of public Brown evokes goes well beyond either “the performative virtue of republican textuality” or the “liberal national imaginary” that replaces it (169–70). The public, in *Arthur Mervyn*, takes shape not in print but in the disorienting world of the city, a space where information spreads through unforeseen channels, social influence works in unpredictable ways, and seemingly banal social interactions that leave no trace have profound consequences. In *Arthur Mervyn*, the yellow fever epidemic works as a fantasy of exposure, an impossible kind of social transparency that ultimately serves as a map for comprehending the mysterious workings of a “connected age.”

Brown’s formal experiment reverberates through antebellum fiction in ways that have not been fully appreciated. What later writers take from *Arthur Mervyn* has less to do with its style—its Gothicism or nascent realism—than with its brilliant depiction of a decentered urban information network. An important tradition of antebellum fiction, from Cooper to Melville, takes up the issue of networks first investigated by Brown; but these authors ask, as Brown did not, about their political utility. Hawthorne and Melville, for example, imagine that such networks transform the very notion of political agency, making it possible to rethink what counts as a political action and who counts as a political actor. But if later writers push Brown’s insights by linking networks explicitly to democratic politics, Brown’s analysis is perhaps all the more significant for its refusal of these connections. In *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown’s concern is not democratic politics, but the logic of the emergent social networks that underwrite it.⁸

Contagion

It has been all too easy for critics to assume that *Arthur Mervyn* is a novel about contagion. The reasoning generally runs as follows: the novel depicts yellow fever in sickening detail; yellow fever spreads rapidly through the population; yellow fever is therefore contagious; the novel is thus interested in the problem of contagion. From this starting point, critics have imagined the novel’s engagement with a variety of social issues in terms of contagion: benevolence is contagious; greed is contagious; revolutionary politics are contagious; commerce is contagious; “racial fear” is contagious; “racial violence and political unrest” are contagious; the emotions evoked by novels are contagious.⁹ For all of the analysis of contagion in *Arthur*

⁸ This claim about *Arthur Mervyn* is, in a sense, an elaboration of Leonard Tennenhouse’s argument about the early American novel more generally. For Tennenhouse, “the fact that the early American novel imagined the new nation as a cluster of local sites of exchange, connected to form larger circuits of information and thus a network,” explodes received ideas about the provincial nature of this literature, which is, he argues, oriented toward global interaction rather than national myth making (15). In this essay, I want to suggest that Brown’s interest in anonymous urban information networks might be understood not only as part and parcel of a world defined by “a transatlantic system of exchange” (16) but as the beginning of a trajectory that leads, by midcentury, to the reassessment of basic principles of American democracy.

⁹ Jane Tompkins claims, “Benevolence has a ripple effect: acts of mercy engender acts of restitution (the telling of stories) that engender other acts of restitution (giving back money, passing

Mervyn, however, few have bothered to ask whether the novel actually depicts yellow fever as contagious, and no one has considered whether there is a pattern to who gets sick. While many characters describe the disease as contagious, no one is shown to actually catch the disease from another person. An illness that moves from person to person should follow a discernable path, and yet there is no real pattern to the spread of yellow fever in the novel. If the disease were truly contagious, someone should have caught it from Arthur (who exposes both Stevens—along with his entire family—and Welbeck to the disease), and yet no one does. Someone should have caught the disease from Hadwin, who takes ill in Philadelphia and then returns to Malverton to die, but no one else in the Hadwin household gets sick. At the same time, entire families are wiped out by the disease—the Thetfords (including their boarder, Wallace, who falls ill but does not die) and the Walpoles (including Maravegli). One feels compelled to ask why, if Brown is thinking about the problem of contagion, he does not simply depict the problem of contagion?

Bleak House (1853), a novel that goes out of its way to highlight the issue of contagion, is illuminating in this regard. Unlike the fever in *Arthur Mervyn*, smallpox in *Bleak House* is perfectly traceable. It begins with the crossing-sweeper Jo, who most likely contracts the disease at the graveyard where Nemo is buried—"a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, when malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed" (165). Jo infects Charley; Charley infects Esther; and Esther, who imposes a rather strict quarantine on herself, manages to keep the disease from traveling any further.¹⁰

along information) in a continuing series. In short, benevolence begets itself; it is contagious" (71); Ostrowski claims, "Built into the plot of the novel is the idea that greed, like disease, is contagious" (13); Shirley Samuels claims, "The threat to the mutually dependent institutions of family and state was further seen as a contagious 'disease' imported from France" (43); Goddu claims, "The transmission of Lodi's manuscript and money to Arthur in the second half of part 1 reveals how seriously infected Arthur has become by the commercial contagion of the city" (37); Gesa Mackenthun claims, "Brown's novelistic—indeed 'gothic'—discourse, in translating the themes of financial greed and racial fear into the language of contagious disease, counters the optimism of national mythical models with the themes of amnesia and anxiety" (348); Doolen claims, "Brown's metaphor of contagion blurs the boundaries between past and present precisely because its logic was used to comprehend both the horrible yellow fever outbreaks every summer from 1793 to 1800 and mounting fears of racial violence and political unrest" (85); James Dawes claims, "Like Tolstoy, who saw 'infectiousness' as the primary quality of art, Brown found a model for the experience of reading in illness and contagion" (461).

¹⁰ I have not tried, in this essay, to do justice to the scope and complexity of *Bleak House*, especially its thinking about the web of connections made possible by the city. In a brilliant essay, Caroline Levine claims that in seeing "social relationships not as static structures, but as constantly superimposed, conflicting, and overlapping relational webs," *Bleak House* "paves the way for recent narratives about political, technological, economic, and social networks, including such films as *Traffic*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*" (517–18). From the perspective of my argument, Brown's and Dickens's shared interest in urban networks makes their different formal strategies for representing disease quite striking. For Dickens, as C. Levine points out, disease is one mode of connection among many (such as the law, philanthropy, and the extended family), so that if the chain of connection from Jo to Esther looks rather straightforward, it functions as one small component of a larger, complexly networked world. For Brown, disease comes to stand

In *Bleak House*, the transmission of the disease from person to person is very clearly marked—it works almost like a game of tag. Revealing that Jo, through Charley, will somehow “touch” Esther seems to be Dickens’s way of answering the question posed earlier in the novel: “What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in Powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom . . . ? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!” (235). Smallpox provides a literal, graphic link between wealthy, seemingly sheltered Londoners and the poor who are generally confined to slums like Tom-All-Alone’s—the churchyard is contagious, but avoiding it does not insulate you from the contagion.¹¹

Yet Dickens does more than suggest that individuals from vastly different social stations in distant parts of the country are in fact “connected” to one another. Smallpox also figures as a kind of poor man’s “revenge” on the middle and upper classes: “There is not an atom of Tom’s slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud . . .” (654). Jo is shunned by middle-class London—told repeatedly to “move on” and then literally turned out of Bleak House during his illness—but his illness remains and festers. The only problem with this reading of contagion is that the illness goes no further than Esther, and no one in the text is less like the “proudest of the proud” than Esther. Perhaps we are meant to see more subtle chains of transmission—ones that are refused by the plot but implied by the novel’s form. For instance, while Lady Dedlock does not die of smallpox, she seems the natural endpoint of a chain of transmission that begins with the buried body of her former lover and finds its way to her daughter. It comes as little surprise, then, that Lady Dedlock, who initially shrinks away from Jo and from the “deadly stains contaminating her dress”

for networks more generally. One way of understanding the interest of Brown’s project is that he analyzes, fifty years before *Bleak House*, nascent information networks, the complexities of which would be much more apparent at midcentury and inescapable by the beginning of the digital era.

¹¹ Given Esther’s symptoms (especially her disfigured face), most critics assume that she suffers from smallpox. See, for example, Susan Shatto. Indeed, as critics like F. S. Schwarzbach, Michael S. Gurney, and Nancy Aycock Metz have noted, Dickens chooses smallpox over cholera, which was much deadlier and more feared in the mid-nineteenth century, not only because smallpox was known to spread through personal contact rather than simply through “miasma” or bad air but because it scarred its victims and thus kept the disease ever present. I find these arguments convincing and continue the tradition of calling the disease smallpox. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that a few scholars have called this diagnosis into question, noting both that Dickens is careful not to name the disease and that Jo’s symptoms before he dies look more like typhus. (Gilian West argues that Jo’s typhus is a complication of erysipelas, another contagious, scarring disease.) It seems clear, given the overall structure of the novel, however, that the important point about the disease is the bare fact of its transmissibility. For an excellent argument about *Bleak House* that makes this point, see Emily Steinlight.

(243) at the burial ground, should be found dead on the steps of that same burial ground at the end. In this way, the chain of transmission figured by the disease ends up marking the buried familial connection between Nemo, Esther, and Lady Dedlock. One link in the chain naturally leads to another.

As I have already suggested, there are no similarly evocative chains of transmission in *Arthur Mervyn*. Instead, the disease emerges in seemingly random locations throughout the city, destroying some individuals and leaving others untouched. One might argue, as some critics have, that yellow fever is described in these terms because Brown was himself a confirmed anticontagionist who believed that the disease was not communicated from person to person but was instead caused by pollution. This anticontagionist view was shared by virtually all of Brown's cohort, including Elihu Smith, who started the *Medical Repository* with the aim of promulgating this position and advocating for sanitation reform as a response to future epidemics.¹² For Bryan Waterman, Brown's project and Smith's are aligned, so that the novel melts into the "information networks" that take shape around the epidemic and that strive to create "accurate information flow" about the disease (196, 199).¹³ That Brown engages with both Smith and the question of networks is undeniable. But his response to Smith's attempt to corral information for the purpose of public enlightenment seems skeptical if not openly critical. One could look to Brown's biography for evidence of this skepticism—his reaction to Smith's death from the fever in 1798 was despair over "the folly of prediction and the vanity of systems," a response, Waterman claims, that is overshadowed by "a conviction he shared with Smith that the 'national health' depended on regulating and disseminating . . . information" (228, 230).

Yet it is precisely this belief in the power of regulation that *Arthur Mervyn* works to discredit. In juxtaposing the chaotic movement of information around the city with the continued failure of any voice of authority to control such information, the novel relentlessly undermines the Smithian fantasy of top-down public instruction. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that the novel refuses to privilege scientific knowledge over public opinion. If Arthur initially dismisses rumors about the devastating effects of the yellow fever in Philadelphia as stories "distorted and diversified a thousand ways, by the credulity and exaggeration of the tellers," he is finally convinced of their truth not only because of the "consistency of the tale," which makes it impossible to "withhold [his] faith" (129), but because of his own experience in the fever-ridden city. This is not to suggest that Brown imagines rumors as inherently trustworthy. One of the novel's more disorienting features is that it puts the reader in the position of a citydweller who, bombarded with information from different sources, has no way to gauge the accuracy of any particular piece of information and thus no way to assemble a reliable "big picture." The controversy over Arthur's true character that has fueled scholarship on the

¹² For an illuminating account of the yellow fever debate, see Lloyd G. Stevenson.

¹³ For a reading of Smith's cultivation of information networks that supports Waterman, see Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan.

novel for the past fifty years is the pure product of Brown's refusal to settle the question one way or the other.¹⁴ Indeed, to settle the question of Arthur's character by authorial fiat would simply defeat his attempt to replicate the conditions of an early information society.

In the end, the fever works not only to motivate but, in its terrifying passage through the city, to represent the unpredictable and ungovernable circulation of information. It's true, as Waterman suggests, that fever is never merely a metaphor for something else (political unrest, financial corruption, etc.) and that the "seductive potential of 'contagion' as a metaphor" (198) has blinded critics to the fact that the yellow fever epidemic was, at bottom, an overwhelming and immediate crisis for Brown and his contemporaries. It does not follow, however, that Brown never thinks about fever metaphorically. Fever as brute fact puts a premium on information, but it is, in and of itself, a frustratingly enigmatic mode of circulation, one that Brown uses to great effect to illustrate the contingency built into urban information networks.¹⁵

Connection

What connection can there be, we might well ask of *Arthur Mervyn*, between Arthur, Hadwin, Wallace, and Thetford, all of whom contract yellow fever? In fact, it is relatively easy to map out the links between them: Arthur lives with Hadwin, who is the prospective father-in-law of Wallace, who works for Thetford. But there is no chain of transmission here, as there is in *Bleak House*, no way to trace the path of the illness as it moves from person to person. In *Bleak House*, smallpox is used to make visible and tangible the inescapable interimplication of the lives of the rich and poor in London. The yellow fever might in fact link disparate classes in Philadelphia—the rich (like Thetford) are clearly not immune to the disease—but we are given no clear-cut path, marked out by the transmission of illness, from the neglected poor to the disdainful rich. If one lists all of those named as victims of the fever—Arthur, Lodi, Hadwin, Wallace, the Thetfords, Maravegli, the Walpoles, Stevens's housemaid, and Estwick—it is impossible to rearrange this list into an

¹⁴ Critics of the 1970s and 1980s responded to earlier readings of Arthur as doomed innocent by constructing intricate, counterintuitive readings of the novel's eponymous hero as unreliable and ambiguous. In recent years, a number of critics seem to have made the surprising discovery that Arthur is exactly what he appears to be: an innocent from the country endangered by the corruption of the city, who becomes, finally, an example of republican virtue rewarded. For early readings of Arthur as ambiguous, see Emory Elliott, William Hedges, Michael Davitt Bell, Patrick Brancaccio, W. B. Berthoff, and Justus. For the most radical version of this line of argument, see James Russo. For a more recent example that expands on this tradition, see Gregory Eiselein. For recent accounts of the novel that see Arthur as virtuous, see Michael Warner 151–76, Waterman 189–230, and Jennifer Baker. Samuel Otter's reading of the novel contains an excellent critique of this line of argument. This desire to read the novel "straight" is a new spin on traditional accounts of the novel that preceded the "modernist" criticism that M. Warner condemns. See, for example, Kenneth Bernard and R. W. B. Lewis.

¹⁵ For an account of the cross-pollination of contagion as brute problem and as metaphor in American intellectual history, see Priscilla Wald.

orderly chain of transmission or even a reasonably coherent map of social interrelation. Indeed, the randomness that emerges when one begins to investigate patterns of transmission in the text is compelling in and of itself. From this perspective, the fever seems to have two crucial roles in the text: the first is to disconnect individuals; the second is to reconnect them.

Perhaps the most significant effect of the yellow fever was the violent disruption of the sentimental bonds of the family. In *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia* (1793), Mathew Carey describes the fragmentation of the family—the “frightful scenes that were acted, which seemed to indicate a total dissolution of the bonds of society in the nearest and dearest connexions” (30–31). Such tales would be amplified and repeated in later histories of the epidemic, including Brown’s. Arthur hears reports, later proved true, that the fear of the disease “was able to dissolve the strongest ties that bind human beings together”; that “[t]error had exterminated all the sentiments of nature. Wives were deserted by husbands, and children by parents. Some had shut themselves in their houses, and debarred themselves from all communication with the rest of mankind” (133, 129). And yet these ruptures seem far less radical when we consider the tenuous state of the family from the beginning of the novel. Even before the epidemic, families in *Arthur Mervyn* are splintered, weak, self-destructive: Arthur’s widowed father marries the milkmaid and disinherits his son; Welbeck abandons mistresses and children; Thetford tricks his wife, grieving over the loss of her child, into raising his own illegitimate child; Achsa is abandoned by her husband and then, in turn, abandons her own son. Erupting in a society of weakened families, yellow fever highlights the fragmentation that has already taken place.

The novel as a whole investigates the various responses to the decimation of the family. One of the most striking features of Brown’s chaotic city is the way it begins to organize itself into competing “plots.” Arthur discovers early on that the city is rife with conspiracies, the most compelling of which is directed at his mentor, Welbeck, by Thetford and his brother. But that is not the only one. Indeed, many scholars have made conspiracy the organizing principle of the novel, seeing Arthur’s story as a tale either of corrupted innocence (in which Arthur learns to navigate the corruption and succeed) or of a con artist (in which the primary conspiracy is the one enacted by Arthur himself). Either way, the energies of the family seem, in the modern city, to be channeled into organized crime. Thetford’s various schemes exploit the inherent trust in his relationship with his brother, his uncle, and his wife; Welbeck’s schemes exploit Clemenza’s belief in his promise to marry her and Mrs. Wentworth’s devotion to her nephew.

And yet, there is something old-fashioned in this idea of conspiracy that is belied by the novel’s overt interest in modernity, especially the way in which the city fosters accidental and transient connections between individuals. After all, believing in a world of conspiracy, as Gordon S. Wood has argued, depends on “particular assumptions about the nature of social reality and the necessity of moral responsibility in human affairs” (409). If belief in conspiracy conjures up a corrupt and dangerous world, it also posits a world that is governed by individual intention and comprehended by individual knowledge; it “presumes a world of

autonomous, freely acting individuals who are capable of directly and deliberately bringing about events through their decisions and actions, and who thereby can be held morally responsible for what happens" (409). In *Arthur Mervyn*, as the plague alone makes clear, intentional human agency is severely limited.

More compelling to Brown was the way in which the fever makes visible new forms of connection between individuals. The group of yellow fever victims in *Arthur Mervyn* hardly counts as "social," and yet it stands in the text as a principle of organization, a way of marking out seemingly unrelated individuals and insisting on their relatedness. If, in *Bleak House*, smallpox marks connections that are personal and sentimental, in *Arthur Mervyn*, yellow fever marks connections that are largely formal. Indeed, the group of yellow fever victims specified in the text more closely resembles a network than a social unit. Rather than an intimate band of family or friends, it is a group of interconnected acquaintances and strangers, none of whom is aware of all the other members of the network. This is not to say that yellow fever creates new communities. "Community" implies familiarity and identification, and the group organized by yellow fever cannot function as that kind of social unit because the relationships among the members are opaque, even to themselves. The group of fever victims proliferates but never becomes aware of itself as a group; individuals in the group can see only local connections. Hadwin, for example, is linked to Arthur, Lodi, Maravegli, and the Walpoles through yellow fever, but he never finds out about Arthur's illness and never hears of Lodi, Maravegli, or the Walpoles. This kind of opacity radicalizes Dickens's interest in the unlikely relationship between Jo and Esther. The fever gives Brown a stark, dramatic way of visualizing the city's reordering of social connection—its ability to foster accidental encounters, hidden lines of communication, and unpredictable influences. The novel documents not just the threat to the patriarchal family or the rise of the liberal individual but the creation of shifting, protean networks of individuals not necessarily linked by blood, interest, or even knowledge. Yellow fever exemplifies this kind of network without exhausting it.

In fact, it would be a mistake to read the second part of *Arthur Mervyn* (which leaves behind the problem of yellow fever) as a retreat from the questions of social and information networks that the fever exemplifies. Part two is characterized by forced encounters rather than accidental ones; we no longer see strangers taking Arthur into their homes (as Stevens, Welbeck, and Hadwin do); instead we see strangers desperately trying to get him out. What emerges in this part of the novel is Arthur's disturbing habit of home invasion, a pattern established by his unannounced return to the Hadwins ("I entered, without warning, the door that led into the parlour") and its unhappy effect on the inhabitants: as Caleb asks, "who's this that comes into other people's houses without so much as saying 'by your leave'?" Eliza faints, and Susan (for all intents and purposes) drops dead (272). From this point on, Arthur pays surprise visits to a series of people—Philip Hadwin, Mrs. Villars, Clemenza Lodi, Welbeck, Mrs. Wentworth, and Mrs. Maurice—entering uninvited and being told by each one (in Mrs. Villars's words) to "quit the room and the house" (319). Held up against the concerns of part one, this series of invasions begins to look like Brown's way of elaborating on the metaphor of the fever. Arthur's journey from house to house not only connects a series of individu-

als (only some of whom are aware of the others) but stages a similar allegory of exposure. His refusal to recognize the difference between public and private is a way of insisting that all space is public space. Arthur's ability to penetrate boundaries enacts a fantasy of pure publicity that was made manifest early in the novel by the unmistakable symptoms of yellow fever. This essay focuses primarily on Brown's use of the fever to illuminate hidden ties, but even this brief survey of part two suggests that Brown's concern with creating formal correlatives for emergent social networks organizes the entire novel.

One might begin to make better sense of *Arthur Mervyn* by thinking of it as a game in which Brown tries to reimagine modern urban life not by projecting dark, hidden agency but by proliferating new forms of nonsentimental social ties among strangers. It is only if they are read in the spirit of a game, in fact, that some of these ways of organizing individuals begin to make sense. Take for instance Brown's maddening habit of creating alliterative names: Welbeck, Wallace, Watson, Walpole, Wentworth, Wortley, Williams, Waring, Walter; Carleton, Colville, Clavering, Curling, Clemenza, Capper, Caleb, Cato; Mervyn, Maravegli, Medlicote, Maurice; Stevens, Sawny, Susan, Somers, Sally, Stedman; Arthur, Althorpe, Achsa, Austin, Amos. Such alliteration works both as a provocation to the reader—a way of simulating the confusion one might experience in a crowd (everyone looks the same)—and as a principle of organization, a way of distinguishing this group from that one. At one point, Wortley realizes that “the names of Welbeck and Watson” were “associated together” (245), a claim that has broader implications for Brown's use of names as an abstract form of “association.” We might understand this impulse to alphabetize more generally as an attempt to group individuals by resemblance, an attempt that extends to physical resemblance as well. In a gesture that is hardly relevant to the plot, Arthur resembles not only his mother (he is her “exact picture” (232) but Clavering and Lodi. Both this interest in naming and in resemblance have been read persuasively as forms of “repetition compulsion” that indicate not a psychological but a philosophical problem. Brown, from this perspective, has created Arthur as a kind of thought experiment, a “Humean man (i.e., empirical man in a world apparently as lawless as the plague)” for whom “experiences repeat but they do not group—no knowledge is ever produced” (Limon 60). This seems to be a fair account of Arthur without being a fair account of the novel. My sense, on the contrary, is that repetition here is indeed a form of “grouping,” one of many that the novel holds up and examines. The completely arbitrary nature of these groupings is, as we shall see, part of their appeal.

Characters in *Arthur Mervyn* do not merely act, they are *arranged*. Thus individuals in the novel are grouped by interest and resemblance as well as proximity, meaning not only those who live near each other but those who carry around and recite each other's stories. Brown's famous embedded stories, in other words, begin to look like another way of organizing individuals into groups. If Lodi's father's story is told by Lodi, whose story is told by Welbeck, whose story is told by Arthur, whose story is told by Stevens, then Lodi Sr., Lodi Jr., Welbeck, Arthur, and Stevens can be understood as a collective like that of Carleton, Colville, Clavering, Curling, Clemenza, Capper, Caleb, and Cato (linked by name), or that of Arthur, Clavering, and Lodi (linked by resemblance). In this sense, *Arthur Mervyn* is a novel about

formlessness (the chaos of the city) that presents itself as formless (the meandering plot, full of holes and loose ends), but that is, for that very reason, committed to proliferating patterns. The novel, I am arguing, proliferates such modes of organization not in order to choose among them or fantasize a better form of social organization, one that could replace threatened forms like the family. Indeed, these clusters can hardly be taken seriously as social groups—they are more like formal taxonomies. Rather, the novel proliferates such modes of organization as a way of thinking about the possibilities of the modern urban space—the way the city fosters emergent, depersonalized groups amid more familiar social territory.

Communication

What happens to public life when it becomes dominated by such quasi-social groups? This question is thrown into relief in part two of *Arthur Mervyn*, which begins with an examination of how a much more familiar kind of group opinion emerges, circulates, and exerts its authority. Having listened to the story of Arthur's adventure in fever-stricken Philadelphia, Stevens's investment in his protégé is momentarily shaken by the "unanimous report" of Arthur's neighbors (voiced by Mrs. Althorpe) describing his "immoral conduct." The neighbors' familiarity with Arthur and his family gives their opinions, at least initially, more authority than Stevens's. At the same time, the reports of the neighbors are indirect: "I cannot say much," Mrs. Althorpe admits, "of my own knowledge" (230). Stevens, it must be remembered, is also a "witness" to Arthur's behavior, and his absolute conviction is based on the primacy of firsthand experience: "Had I heard Mervyn's story from another, or read it in a book, I might, perhaps, have found it possible to suspect the truth; but, as long as the impression, made by his tones, gestures and looks, remained in my memory, this suspicion was impossible" (229).

In staging this contest between the neighbors and Stevens, *Arthur Mervyn* seems to echo William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793), pitting the power of individual judgment against the pressure to conform to a kind of "group think" emblemized by the unanimous opinion of Arthur's neighbors. Since Godwin's influence on Brown is well established, it would be tempting to read this scene as an illustration of one of the basic principles of *Political Justice*: the power of individual reason over the misguided authority of society. There are, however, two problems with this reading. The first is the impulsive nature of Stevens's devotion to Arthur, a devotion that seems based less on reason than on a kind of irrational desire; taken with his "uncommon, but manlike beauty," Stevens claims, "I scarcely ever beheld an object which laid so powerful and sudden a claim to my affection and succour" (6). The second is that this contest between Stevens and the neighbors has no clear winner—the novel leaves Arthur's true relationships with his father and Betty Laurence a mystery. In refusing to allow Stevens's opinion of Arthur to win out—in effect, equating his impulsive love with the neighbors' questionable disdain—the novel betrays a kind of impatience with claims for the power of familiarity, the idealization of the "face-to-face" encounter. Arthur himself dismisses this kind of idealization simply by rehearsing its problematic logic. His neighbors, he maintains, have drawn the wrong conclusions about him despite the fact that these con-

clusions were based on sound principles: “To decide contrary to appearances; to judge from what they know not, would prove them to be brutish and not rational, would make their decision of no worth, and render them, in their turn, objects of neglect and contempt” (341). In other words, to ignore the testimony of your own eyes would be “brutish,” and yet the testimony of your own eyes often leads you astray.

Given the novel’s obsession with proliferating quasi-social groups, the real contest here is not between the group (the neighbors) and the individual (Stevens) but between a world dominated by stable, old-fashioned groups (the neighbors who watch you grow up, or who just watch you) and one dominated by the abstract, shifting, impersonal groupings Brown simulates in his experimental arrangement of characters. From the perspective of the novel’s interest in reputation—not just what the individual is, but what everyone thinks he is—the creation of shifting, impersonal groups is a way of exploring the flow of information and opinion that a series of unmotivated encounters would make possible. One important feature of the nature of urban life (at least as Brown depicts it here) is that such shifting groups create unexpected connections between individuals and unprecedented channels of communication. What has always been read as Brown’s commitment to coincidence is better read as a commitment to the unpredictable results of pure accident—the chance encounter on the street or in a pub is imagined as a conduit in an emerging network.¹⁶ Thus Arthur, looking for Capper, accidentally meets Wallace, who inadvertently puts him in a position to discover something about Thetford, who is instrumental in the downfall of Welbeck. If, to some extent, all novels depend on such chance encounters, what makes *Arthur Mervyn* a “network novel” is that Brown does not simply use accident, he theorizes it. Chance encounters (and the rearrangement of characters that they make possible) are both the engine of the plot and the novel’s central preoccupation.

In shifting the focus from one model of opinion formation to another (from the personal to the impersonal), *Arthur Mervyn* imagines an information revolution that looks a bit different from what we have come to expect. Accounts of public opinion in the 1790s tend to see it as a tool that political operatives manipulated to their own advantage.¹⁷ Take, for example, the crisis over the Jay treaty in 1795–96. Ultimately, the fact that the pressure of public opinion led to the ratification of the treaty was a victory not only for the Federalists, who had achieved their political goals, but for the Republicans, who had succeeded in shifting an enormous amount of power to the public itself. Federalists had managed to manipulate public opinion more effectively; Republicans had managed to transform the balance of political power. The larger implication of this story for a number of recent historians is that opinion flows from the top down—people chose to believe either what

¹⁶ See, for example, Norman S. Grabo.

¹⁷ An arguably more influential school of thought contests this view, arguing that public opinion in the early Republic was, if not more authentically democratic, at least not so deeply hierarchical. There is a vast literature on this subject. Notable examples include Sean Wilentz, David Waldstreicher, and Mary Kelley. As my account of *Arthur Mervyn* should make clear, Brown does not depict public opinion as an expression of grassroots democracy.

the Federalists fed them or what the Republicans fed them. Both Federalists and Republicans claimed the support of a public opinion they had themselves created: "each party set out to measure or influence public opinion by mobilizing its own supporters," a process that "involved often elaborate and multifaceted campaigns designed to influence, shape, or 'seed' public opinion and then 'collect' this mediated and refined public opinion expressed in the form of petitions, resolutions, resolves of town meetings, and the like" (Estes 7).¹⁸

In Brown's hands, however, the complicated, shifting information networks of the early republic look less hierarchical. They are, indeed, more like Darnton's "early information society," a world that had "so many modes of communication" that "intersected and overlapped so intensively that we can hardly picture their operation" (7).¹⁹ Despite the fact that the Old Regime censored the press and attempted to police public speech, criticism of the court circulated wildly in pre-Revolutionary France through "modes of communication" that were decentralized, diffuse, and impossible to control. In Paris, these included gossip emanating from particular meeting sites (the tree of Cracow in the gardens of the Palais-Royal or any number of Parisian cafés), romans à clef based on "the talk of the town," and popular songs "scribbled on scraps of paper and traded in cafés" (20), which passed from hand to hand, often with verses added or changed by later copyists. For Darnton, far from exemplifying manipulation by political or economic elites, public opinion in the shape of songs is "a case of collective creation" that "created a field of poetic impulses, bouncing from one transmission point to another and filling the air with *mauvais propos*, a cacophony of sedition set to rhyme" (25).

That there is cacophony in *Arthur Mervyn*, but no sedition, is one of the novel's more interesting features. One way of accounting for this particular take on an early information society is that in fever-ridden Philadelphia civic order has simply collapsed; in place of a tyrannical court, there is a power vacuum. The chaotic Bush Hill hospital, where unsupervised nurses "neglect their duty and consume the cordials, which are provided for the patients, in debauchery and riot," seems the perfect emblem of the social anarchy that suffuses the entire city (173). In a world without law, sedition becomes nonsensical. Brown's response to this scene of chaos is to treat emergent information networks not as modes of sedition but as alternate forms of social organization that cannot help but fill up the void left by collective panic.

It is this potential of networks to create new forms of social order that captivates writers like Melville and Hawthorne, who harness the complex chains of transmission that Brown identifies to an explicitly democratic politics. In Hawthorne's "Lady Eleanore's Mantle" (1839), for example, the use of a smallpox epidemic to register revolutionary energy seems an obvious rewriting of *Arthur Mervyn*. In this case, the disease becomes part of a deceptively simple political allegory of the dangers of aristocratic pride. But in dwelling not only on the desire to trace the disease to its source ("by tracking its footsteps back" to "a lady's luxurious chamber") but

¹⁸ See also Joanne B. Freeman.

¹⁹ For a related account that focuses on eighteenth-century America, see Richard Brown.

on the unfathomable mystery of its origin, the tale belies any simplistic picture of power in a burgeoning democracy (662). Instead, it becomes a meditation on the mysterious sources of political influence and a fantasy about how such influence might be hijacked by those who appear to be powerless; it is, after all, the madman Helwyse who endows the “general whisper” (658) that surrounds Lady Eleanor and the disease she seems to cause with a revolutionary politics. Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” takes this idea of the utility of information networks for the disenfranchised even further, imagining both the utter powerlessness of the wage slave (whose impotence is figured by his motionlessness) and the strange ascendancy of his words. Bartleby dies imprisoned, but his complaint escapes, becoming a kind of contagion that “turn[s] the tongues, if not the heads” (25) of his coworkers. Rather than forming the basis of group solidarity—what Nancy Fraser has called a “subaltern counterpublic” (123)—Bartleby’s complaint forms part of a chain of transmission that reaches out to a heterogeneous and unpredictable public.

Networks

Clearly, the evanescent and primarily oral information networks that characterized the Old Regime and eighteenth-century America did not simply vanish in the nineteenth century or even, for that matter, in the digital age. For Malcolm Gladwell, “even in this age of mass communications and multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns,” such casual and seemingly innocuous word-of-mouth networks are “still the most important form of human communication.” Indeed, “word of mouth appeals have become the only kind of persuasion that most of us respond to anymore.” Investigating such networks in *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell looks at “word-of-mouth epidemics,” the process by which beliefs, opinions, fashions, and behaviors can spread suddenly and inexplicably through a large population (32). Trying to discover why, for example, Hush Puppies went from stodgy to trendy in the space of two years, Gladwell asks Dickens’s basic question about hidden social ties all over again: “What was the connection,” he asks, “between the East Village and Middle America?”—a connection that would explain “how those shoes went from something worn by a few fashion-forward downtown Manhattan hipsters to being sold in malls across the country” (21–22). His basic answer is that trends are caused by a few special people: “social epidemics,” he claims, can be explained in terms of individual agency; they are “driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people” (21) who are more charismatic, more energetic, and better connected than the rest of us. In the case of the Hush Puppies craze, Gladwell argues that “one of these exceptional people found out about the trend, and through social connections and energy and enthusiasm and personality spread the word . . .” (21–22).

As we have seen in the case of eighteenth-century conspiracy theories, this view can be a way of denying the complexity of causation, superimposing a rational universe—in which events can be explained in terms of individual motives—on top of the real one, in which unforeseen events occur as the result of multiple, uncoordinated individual actions. A version of this first idea is at the heart of Godwin’s

Caleb Williams (1794), an important source-text for Brown.²⁰ In Godwin's novel, Caleb's reputation is single-handedly destroyed by his corrupt master Falkland, who frames him for crimes he did not commit in order to shield his own good name. The reader never has any doubt about either Caleb's honesty or Falkland's treachery, not only because Caleb narrates his tale from the beginning (unlike Arthur), but because Godwin's impassioned social critique simply falls apart if Caleb is lying. One of the central issues of *Caleb Williams* is the abuse of inherited power, which is imagined to be virtually unlimited. Like God (or like one of the exceptional people that Gladwell calls "Connectors"), Falkland has power not only over certain individuals but over the public more generally. Falkland does not merely frame Caleb and send him to jail, he seems to create public opinion out of whole cloth. He hires a man named Gines to do nothing but trail Caleb and plant rumors about him among his neighbors: "The employment to which this man was hired was that of following me from place to place, blasting my reputation, and preventing me from the chance, by continuing long in one residence, of acquiring a character for integrity" (314).

In Godwin, as in Gladwell, word-of-mouth networks are powerful, persuasive, and subject to manipulation by exceptional individuals. Actually, Gladwell never describes the power of Connectors as manipulative, instead imagining a system based entirely on trust; the integrity of the powerful is ensured by "the particular standing they have among their friends," who "look up to them not out of envy, but out of love" (277). Godwin, on the other hand, tries to expose entrenched disparities of power—what he calls, in the preface to *Caleb Williams*, "the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism by which man becomes the destroyer of man" (3). Falkland, like one of Gladwell's Connectors, is also loved: his neighbors are "never weary of recounting his praises" and acknowledge in him a "superiority" that "excited congratulation instead of envy" (23). Where Gladwell sees Connectors, Godwin sees despots. But both imagine that word-of-mouth networks bend to the will of the charismatic individual, so that one could always trace a rumor or a trend back to its original source.

In his study of the "small world problem"—the idea that because the world is made up of a series of interconnected individuals, everyone can be reached by everyone else in only a few steps—Duncan Watts debunks this belief in the power of the "connected" individual. In order to prove that no one link in a network is essentially more important than any other, Watts undertook an experiment originally conducted by Stanley Milgram in 1967. Milgram's original experiment involved 160 subjects from Boston and Nebraska who were instructed to get a package to a stockbroker in Boston by sending it to a friend they thought might move it closer to the target. To Milgram's surprise, the packages that reached the target managed to get there in an average of six steps (from which we get the phrase "six degrees of separation"). In *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell sees this study as proof of his contention that certain well-connected individuals count more than

²⁰ C. Brown acknowledged the debt to Godwin while writing *Arthur Mervyn*. For a detailed discussion of Godwin's influence on Brown (though it deals primarily with *Wieland*), see Pamela Clemit. See also Peter Kafer and Dorothy J. Hale.

others: he points out (as had Milgram) that half of the packages had reached the stockbroker through the same three of his acquaintances. But when Watts and his collaborators repeated this study in 2003 (using a larger sample of 60,000 individuals who used e-mail instead of the postal service), they found that no single individual or small group of individuals stood out as transmission “hubs.” On the contrary, “At most 5% of messages passed through a single acquaintance of any target, and 95% of all chains were completed through individuals who delivered at most three messages.” They concluded from this data that “social search appears to be largely an egalitarian exercise, not one whose success depends on a small minority of exceptional individuals” (Dodds, Muhamad, and Watts 828). As Watts argues elsewhere, networks are completely decentralized modes of social organization, where “small events percolate through obscure places by happenstance and random encounters, triggering a multitude of individual decisions, each made in the absence of any grand plan, yet aggregating somehow into a momentous event unanticipated by anyone, including the actors themselves” (*Six Degrees* 52–53). Watts’s larger point about the fallacy of the exceptionally connected individual looks a lot like Wood’s larger point about the appeal of conspiracy theories: we want to believe in the power of individual agency, even (or especially) when such explanations no longer make sense.

When Brown imagines Arthur’s disorienting journeys around Philadelphia, he demonstrates the principles of social networks laid out by Watts despite the fact that the term *network* was not yet available to describe this kind of quasi-social connection. Indeed, Arthur becomes the figurative center of a number of different loosely organized groups, which resemble networks precisely because they depend on “random encounters,” incorporate large numbers of seemingly unrelated individuals, and connect individuals into an information system, the components of which no one in the group can fully perceive. The attempt to map such networks—to make them visible and their functions perceptible—makes *Arthur Mervyn* the first truly urban American novel.²¹ One historian has described late eighteenth-century Philadelphia as “[a] town of small houses, where most houses also served as stores, offices and workshops,” an arrangement of space that “encouraged people to live out upon the streets” and created “a more public, gossipy style of life than could later be sustained when a steady pace of work and larger interiors drove people into sharply defined spaces for work and residence” (S. Warner 19). While Brown takes these elements of turn-of-the-century Philadelphia for granted, he goes out of his way to highlight the unpredictability of life in the “walking city.” There is a clearly marked obsession in the text with Arthur’s propensity to wander aimlessly, to simply drift: “I found myself bewildered among fields and fences” (79); “I had lost all distinct notions of my way. My motions were at random” (111); “I moved forward, mechanically and at random” (117); “I proceeded, in a considerable degree, at random” (141); “I wandered over this deserted mansion, in a considerable degree, at random” (165). In emphasizing

²¹ This is true, I would argue, despite the fact that the narrative moves back and forth between the city and the surrounding countryside. The city organizes the novel because it enforces a mode of encounter that comes to define all social encounters, no matter where they take place.

Arthur's aimlessness, Brown seems to be less interested in revealing the peculiarities of his character than in the ordinary and unnoticed workings of urban life.

This kind of drift produces an array of new contacts, visible in the range of encounters Arthur has during his sojourn in Philadelphia. These contacts are typically casual, momentary, and forgettable—think of Arthur's encounter with the "taylor" who tells him about Thetford's dead child, or the "young girl" who refuses him a bed at the inn because her parents are ill (59, 141). But these kinds of accidental encounters are also the mechanism through which virtually every important piece of information in the story gets exchanged, and every important relationship in the novel gets established. Arthur's friendship with Stevens and his liaison with Welbeck both result from random encounters on the street; he first learns of the epidemic in the city through rumors circulated by strangers and of the plot against Welbeck through an overheard conversation. Brown likens this last discovery to Arthur's happening upon the "key" to a mystery: "An incident so slight as this was sufficient to open a spacious scene of meditation. This little word, half whispered in a thoughtless mood, was a key to unlock an extensive cabinet of secrets. Thetford was probably indifferent whether his exclamation was overheard. Little did he think on the inferences which would be built upon it" (77–78). It is fitting, then, that this moment itself serves as the very kind of key that it describes, revealing in a nutshell the basic mechanisms of this emergent information network: its unpredictability, its reliance on chance, its exploitation of weak ties.

In *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown attempts to map what is essentially unmappable: the unpredictable and intricate routes of opinion and information through chains of transmission that are by their very nature untraceable. There is a growing sense today that the Internet has changed the status of such ephemeral communications, not simply because it has created a much vaster and more complicated network but because it preserves in electronic form the kinds of informal exchanges that would otherwise have been unsalvageable. What was once unique and transient—a friend's comment, the offhand remark of a TV news anchor or radio talk show host—is now infinitely repeatable and sharable. What would have "floated off into the ether" instead goes viral and becomes virtually indestructible. "The ether," as David Carr has put it, "now has a memory." *Arthur Mervyn* is a very early attempt to perform a similar operation on the ephemeral experiences of daily life—to make permanent what is essentially transient, to illuminate quotidian interactions and thereby "unlock an extensive cabinet of secrets."

But more than that, *Arthur Mervyn* is an attempt to make ordinary information networks visible while acknowledging their customary invisibility. After all, Arthur participates in a number of these networks and witnesses others without ever recognizing his place within them, how they work, or even that they exist. Michel de Certeau argues that this invisibility is an essential element of the lived city, which is experienced rather than viewed. Those he calls the "ordinary practitioners of the city" are imagined as fragmented constructors of an impossibly complicated social mechanism; "they are walkers . . . whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it" (93). It is in this context that we must understand *Arthur Mervyn's* obsession with

broken circuits—paths that can never be retraced, objects that are lost and never recovered, people who are lost and imperfectly recovered. This pattern of loss and defective recovery dominates the novel, from the moment early on when Arthur loses his portrait of Clavering in the marketplace only to discover it in Mrs. Wentworth's possession, to the end, when he discovers in his new love, Acsha (encountered accidentally in a whorehouse and nicknamed "mama"), a bizarre substitute for his lost mother. In fact, the plot is driven by this doomed will to recover what has been lost: Welbeck and Clemenza's willingness to substitute Arthur for the dead Lodi; Welbeck's attempt to recover the \$20,000 he lost, only to have Arthur burn the bills before his eyes; Arthur's discovery of the long-lost Wallace, only to have him vanish just before his return to Malverton. These scenes of disrupted return become the novel's way of both acknowledging and rejecting the desire to trace effects back to originary causes—to discover a Falkland whose will is unassailable or a Jo whose effects are traceable.

In place of this kind of transparent universe, the text offers yellow fever as a readerly heuristic, a form of impossible illumination. Yellow fever does not just link individuals into a transmission network, it calls attention to those links by the dramatic way in which it manifests itself. For the reader, yellow fever serves as a network that is both random and visible. Since *Arthur Mervyn* undermines the belief that the fever is transmitted from person to person (the way smallpox is in *Bleak House*), the illness serves as an indirect link, as if the complete chain of transmission were unrecoverable. Yellow fever makes it possible for us to "read" networks that remain illegible to the participants themselves and thus, by extension, to imagine networks that are simply illegible. One way of conceptualizing Brown's project here would be to say that *Arthur Mervyn* does not represent the effects of information networks so much as attempt to represent the networks themselves. At the center of the novel there is no "momentous event" akin to the ones described by Watts and Gladwell but something more like a momentous process.²² *Arthur Mervyn* is about mechanism rather than content, action rather than effect, how something spreads rather than what is being spread.

It is the recognition of the radical decentralization of power produced by urban information networks that makes Brown's vision of life in Philadelphia so different from Benjamin Franklin's, despite the fact that the basic plot of the novel is deeply indebted to Franklin's story. Crucial to Franklin's myth (crystallized in the *Autobiography*) is not only his success as a "self-made man" but his recognition that one could control one's own public image. Franklin cultivates his image as

²² This is not to argue that there are no momentous events in the novel—the yellow fever itself is an "event," as is the slave revolt in the Caribbean (which the novel addresses both directly in Lodi's story and indirectly in its depiction of the black servant who attacks Arthur). I am suggesting that in the end, the novel seems more interested in how events are accessed than in the events themselves. Thus the fever first emerges as rumor, and the brief reference to the slave revolt in Guadeloupe is filtered through a series of storytellers (from Lodi to Welbeck to Arthur to Stevens), transforming the problem of political violence into a question of political knowledge.

an “industrious thriving young man” through a calculated public performance that, incredibly, never fails to produce the desired effect (73). This belief in the malleability of public opinion prompts Franklin to construct an elaborate social organization, designed to advance the interests of a small coterie. Though it begins as a small, secret club “for mutual Improvement” (65), the Junto ultimately becomes an extended network as each member creates his own “subordinate Club,” keeping secret its “Connection with the Junto.” According to Franklin, since information travels up to the original Junto while influence travels down to the subordinate clubs and their members, these subordinate clubs “were useful to themselves, & afforded us a good deal of Amusement, Information & Instruction, besides answering in some considerable Degree our Views of influencing the public Opinion on particular Occasions . . .” (112). For Franklin, information networks are, to certain privileged individuals, legible, controllable, and passive. Nowhere in his description of the subordinate Juntos does Franklin worry that influence might be traveling the wrong way, from bottom to top, or that his own Junto might itself be subordinate to another group of which he knows nothing. What Brown’s experimental proliferation of groups makes clear, especially in its suggestion that yellow fever might be understood as just another network, is that information networks are subordinate to no one. They spread of and by themselves, with no coordination, no possibility of top-down control.

The point of Brown’s experiment is not to celebrate the democratic nature of such networks or to assert that power emanates from below and is therefore unassailable. It is later writers who will both insist upon and test such connections. *Arthur Mervyn*, as well as almost everything else Brown ever wrote, reflects a stronger interest in individual powerlessness than in collective power. Moreover, there is nothing truly “collective” about the kind of power Brown tracks in these emergent networks—the novel does not entail a politics. For Brown, the point is functional rather than political; he attempts to make visible complex modes of communication and opinion formation that were obscure precisely because they emerged out of such ordinary and forgettable individual interactions. What is interesting about such networks, at least in Brown’s estimation, is not that they are democratic but that they are unmanageable. Rather than revealing (as writers from Hawthorne to Watts would) the “egalitarian” nature of such structures, Brown’s analysis highlights their instability and unpredictability. If Brown sees no clear democratic trajectory, his account of emergent information networks suggests, at the very least, that the wholesale manipulation of public opinion by press or pulpit (a prevalent fear in the partisan 1790s) was a practical impossibility.

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