Charles Brockden Brown's Contagious Unreliability

BEVERLY LYON CLARK, *Wheaton College*

Modern novels like *Ulysses* or *The Sound and the Fury* reflect our sense of the world as increasingly fragmented and normless when they reject the comfortable supports of traditional fictional techniques. The use of less reliable narrators and of more open endings, for instance, distinguishes modern fiction from much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, although the difference is less pronounced in American fiction, in its context of what Richard Chase has called a "culture of contradictions."[1] It may not be surprising, then, that traditional novelistic techniques are absent from the works of the eighteenth-century Charles Brockden Brown, whose works demonstrate the unreliability of the senses in providing knowledge. Such flouting of traditional techniques may be appropriate in the American tradition. But it also seems surprisingly modern. Brown reveals the unreliability of the senses in a variety of ways: through the symbolic double, through multiple perspectives, through the narrative breaks and shifts in mode that occur at least twice in each of his four major novels, and, finally, through what can be called the contagious unreliability of parallel or juxtaposed scenes. I can illustrate all four methods by examining *Edgar Huntly* (1799), and then go on to examine other occurrences of the fourth, which has not previously been studied.

The main way in which Edgar Huntly's reliability as character and narrator is impugned is through the use of the symbolic double, and there has been extensive discussion of this doubling.[2] Clithero not only provides Huntly with the example of a person attempting to cope with his own irrational impulses but also furnishes a symbol, a double who reflects aspects of Huntly that Huntly is not consciously ready to admit. Huntly's self-conception is thus not altogether reliable, for we must supplement it with our knowledge of his double.

Much as a double can suggest an alternate perspective, so too can multiple points of view. Although most of *Edgar Huntly* is from Huntly's point of view, the ending confronts the reader with multiple perspectives in an interchange of letters between Sarsefield and Huntly. Sarsefield's perspective here challenges Huntly's, and Huntly's reliability is further undermined.

Both symbolic doubles and multiple perspectives are more or less controlled ways of revealing the unreliability of the senses in purveying knowledge. This is not to say that Brown consciously controlled his use of these techniques—he may well not have been fully aware of the implications of what he was doing. But to a modern reader these are valid ways of conveying sensory unreliability, and the use of them for this purpose seems functional to us. After Poe and Joyce, doubles and multiple perspectives seem particularly appropriate for showing how a character's

[1]*The American Novel and its Tradition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), p. 1 et passim.

[2]See, for example, Kenneth Bernard, *"Edgar Huntly:* Charles Brockden Brown's Unsolved Murder," *The Library Chronicle,* 33 (1967), 33-52; Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel,* rev. ed. (New York: Stein & Day, 1966), p. 158; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 385-90.

perceptions may not be trustworthy. The modern reader is prepared to consider the use of these narrative techniques "controlled."

The modern reader is generally less willing, however, to accept narrative breaks or generic disruptions. Although we may have learned to accept a constant questioning of generic type, as in Nabokovian parodies of critical exegeses or family chronicles, we are much less willing to accept isolated, sudden shifts in narrative stance. Yet these too may reveal the untrustworthiness of a character's perceptions.

In *Edgar Huntly* two such narrative breaks undermine Huntly's reliability as a narrator who can give objective shape to his story. The first is a shift in focus from Clithero to Huntly. Yet a principle of unity underlies the shift, for both Clithero's and Huntly's actions reflect Huntly's inner state: Clithero's actions because he is Huntly's double, and Huntly's actions because they directly embody Huntly's internal concerns.[3] This shift is comparable to the generic breaks near the middles of *Wieland* (1798) and *Ormond* (1799), where a novel of sentimental seduction becomes one describing religious mania[4] and an intellectual seduction novel turns Gothic. But because of the continuing concern with Huntly's mental state the shift in *Edgar Huntly* is more of a development, far less of a disruption. The narrator here does not so entirely shatter his consistency as he does in the earlier novels.

The second narrative break in *Edgar Huntly,* however, is very disruptive. This radical shift occurs in an emphatic position at the end of the book (rather like Nabokov's rending of the fictional fabric at the end of *Bend Sinister* or, to a lesser extent, at the ends of *Pnin* and *Pale Fire*). The shift from Huntly's narrative to the interchange of letters between him and Sarsefield is likewise similar to the abrupt breaks at the ends of Brown's *Wieland* and *Ormond.* In these two novels the final breaks mark a return to order (however aesthetically unsatisfactory)—for Clara a return to rationality, for Sophia a *deus ex machina* return to Constantia's rescue. But the final break in *Edgar Huntly* marks an increase of disorder. In fact, it is the only place in the novel where an alternate point of view is introduced without being incorporated into and therefore subordinated to Huntly's narrative. And this alternate perspective clearly challenges Huntly's version of events and hence his credibility.[5] Specifically, Sarsefield's perspective denigrates Clithero, thus making Huntly's sympathetic account of Clithero suspect and also Huntly's benevolent intentions in telling Clithero the whereabouts of Euphemia Lorimer (who is now Mrs. Sarsefield). How can Huntly justify his sympathy for Clithero, especially since Sarsefield so clearly states that it is unjustified? As William Hedges notes (p. 134), the ending is ambiguous, for we do not really know whether Huntly or Sarsefield is right: we do not definitely know why Clithero has hurried to New York, whether he wants to kill Mrs. Sarsefield or perhaps wants simply to reassure himself that he has not already killed her. Because Sarsefield has the last word, we may be inclined to believe that he is right, that Clithero was immitigably evil and would have killed Mrs. Sarsefield. But while this may be the favored conclusion, its alternative is not entirely excluded. The apparatus of the ending as a whole—the introduction of an

[3]See, for example, Dieter Schulz, "*Edgar Huntly* as Quest Romance," *American Literature,* 43 (1971), 326.

[4]It can be argued, as William Hedges has done in "Charles Brockden Brown and the Culture of Contradictions," *Early American Literature,* 9 (1974), 141, that the shift in *Wieland* really involves an earlier shift from a failed attempt to deal with Wieland's fanaticism to an attempt to write a seduction novel. But in any case, whatever the nature of the break, there is agreement that the genre of *Wieland* changes.

[5]A comparable but less marked break occurs at the end of *Arthur Mervyn.* Although this one is a change from nested narratives (and hence an amalgamation of multiple perspectives) to Mervyn's relatively unadulterated perspective, thereby approximately reversing the change in *Edgar Huntly* from single to multiple perspectives, the effect is similar. The addition of Sarsefield's perspective undermines our reliance on Huntly's, much as the elimination of Stevens's perspective leaves us uncomfortable with Mervyn's.

alternate perspective—makes the ending of the book ambiguous and makes Huntly's narrative suspect, particularly with regard to his account of Clithero. And since Clithero is Huntly's double, Huntly's account of himself is tainted as well. At the very least, Huntly does not seem to have integrated his irrational and rational natures,[6] thereby augmenting our confusion at the end.

The end of *Edgar Huntly* also illustrates a fourth way in which Brown seems to reveal the unreliability of the senses. Warner Berthoff, in his seminal essay, "'A Lesson on Concealment': Brockden Brown's Method in Fiction," points out the extent to which Brown's novels are organized around thematic repetition.[7] But, beyond their structural value, repeated scenes can also augment the ambiguity of Brown's narratives. For if two scenes are parallel, and if one reveals that sensory impressions have been unreliable, the unreliability can spread by contagion to the parallel scene, much as a double can infect its original with unreliability. Again, we may wonder whether Brown consciously made scenes parallel in order to taint the second by contagion. He may very well not have. He may simply have repeated his themes and scenes more or less compulsively. Yet a modern reader who subjects a book to close textual scrutiny can detect similarities among the themes and scenes, and for such a reader the ambience of one scene may influence the ambience of a parallel one. If one scene subsequently appears to have been informed by unreliable sensory evidence, a parallel scene can be suspected of being similarly informed.

The following example of contagious unreliability contributes to the unresolved ambiguity of the ending of *Edgar Huntly,* contributing an element of ambiguity that has hitherto gone unnoticed. When Sarsefield mentions Clithero's death, he describes it as follows: "Scarcely had we passed the Narrows, when the lunatic, being suffered to walk the deck (as no apprehensions were entertained of his escape in such circumstances), threw himself overboard, with a seeming intention to gain the shore. The boat was immediately manned; the fugitive was pursued; but, at the moment when his flight was overtaken, he forced himself beneath the surface, and was seen no more."[8] Clithero has apparently drowned. But has he really? He is "seen no more"—but because he has "forced himself beneath the surface," not because he is floundering or has difficulty swimming.

To help decide whether Clithero has actually drowned, we might recall Welbeck's early "death" in *Arthur Mervyn:*

> We had scarcely moved two hundred yards from the shore, when he plunged into the water. The first conception was that some implement or part of the boat had fallen overboard. I looked back and perceived that his seat was vacant. In my first astonishment I loosened my hold of the oar, and it floated away. The surface was smooth as glass and the eddy occasioned by his sinking was scarcely visible. I had not time to determine whether this was designed or accidental. Its suddenness deprived me of the power to exert myself for his succour. I wildly gazed around me in hopes of seeing him rise. After some

[6]Paul Witherington, in "Image and Idea in *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly,*" *The Serif,* 3, No. 4 (1966), 26, suggests that Huntly ends up leading a more orderly life, but I am inclined to agree with Schulz, pp. 331-33, and with Slotkin, p. 390, that Huntly has failed to integrate his experiences, that in effect he has not yet learned enough.

[7]*Philological Quarterly,* 37 (1958), 47.

[8]Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly; or Memoirs of a Sleepwalker,* ed. David Stineback (New Haven: College & University Press, 1973), p. 261. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text, after the abbreviated title *EH*.

time my attention was drawn, by the sound of agitation in the water, to a considerable distance.

It was too dark for anything to be distinctly seen. There was no cry for help. The noise was like that of one vigorously struggling for a moment, and then sinking to the bottom. I listened with painful eagerness, but was unable to distinguish a third signal. He sunk to rise no more.[9]

Welbeck here appears to have drowned, but in fact he has not. He later returns to participate further in the story.

We might further recall Huntly's own "death" earlier in *Edgar Huntly.* Sarsefield thinks that Huntly has drowned, and he says, when later reunited with Huntly,

> You plunged into a rapid stream, from a height from which it was impossible to fall and to live; yet, as if to set the limits of nature at defiance, to sport with human penetration, you rose upon the surface; you floated; you swam; thirty bullets were aimed at your head, by marksmen celebrated for the exactness of their sight. I myself was of the number, and I never missed what I desired to hit.
>
> My predictions were confirmed by the event. You ceased to struggle; you sunk to rise no more; and yet, after these accumulated deaths, you light upon this floor, so far distant from the scene of your catastrophe, over spaces only to be passed, in so short a time as has since elapsed, by those who have wings. (*EH,* p. 221)

Huntly here, like Welbeck, proves to be amazingly resilient. Each one "threw himself overboard" and is not seen to rise to the surface a final time, so the observers consider him dead. And in doing so they fail to follow through on an early hint that the man may have survived. Mervyn notes his own inability "to determine whether this was designed or accidental." Sarsefield sees an early assumption proved false when Huntly plunges "from a height from which it was impossible to fall and to live," yet Huntly clearly survives the fall. The observer either admits to uncertainty as to whether the plunge was intentional or else shows how his certainty that the "man overboard" could not possibly survive an early fall turns out to be false. Yet without further considering the possibility that the "man overboard" could survive not only the first plunge but also the final submersion, the observers conclude that the man has in fact died—and they later prove to be wrong. In the last passage the observer even shoots at Huntly and feels sure of hitting him.

Can we be certain that Clithero, in the parallel first passage, is dead? Even the early hint that the victim may have survived is repeated in this passage, for Sarsefield notes Clithero's "seeming intention to gain the shore." And if Clithero is not dead, the ending of *Edgar Huntly* becomes even more ambiguous, even more unsatisfying. If, by contagious unreliability, we acknowledge that Clithero may not be dead, the disorder and ambiguity that the abrupt shift in narrative perspective produces at the end of *Edgar Huntly* becomes even more marked.

This example of contagious unreliability is one of several that appear in Brown's novels and that reinforce the unreliability and ambiguity generated by his

[9]Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn; or Memoirs of the Year 1793,* ed. Warner Berthoff (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), pp. 109-10. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text after the abbreviated title *AM.*

doubles and multiple perspectives. Very often contagious unreliability operates when someone is presumed dead yet may in fact not be, as in the following example from *Arthur Mervyn.* Near the end of the novel Mervyn dreams that his beloved Achsa's husband is not dead but returns to kill him. The dream may be an indirect expression of Mervyn's guilty—or at least troubled—feelings about marrying Achsa, but it also raises the question of whether Fielding is in fact dead. Earlier, Achsa has told Mervyn of her husband's fate and of the circumstances informing her of his death. First an English traveler discovered that Fielding was living in France under the name of Perrin. Then Achsa discovered that "the name of Perrin appeared among the deputies to the constituent assembly, for the district in which he resided" (*AM,* p. 408), and that he had married a Marguerite d'Almont. Finally, in reviewing "a list of the proscribed under Robespierre," she "discovered that Fielding, under his new name of Perrin d'Almont, was among the outlawed deputies of last year, and had been slain in resisting the officers, sent to arrest him" (*AM,* p. 410). Yet this evidence for believing Fielding dead is all highly circumstantial and may be based on sensory unreliability and inaccurate reports, rather like the evidence (in the passage cited earlier) suggesting that Welbeck has drowned.

For a parallel scene we might turn to a passage earlier in *Arthur Mervyn:* the evidence is similarly circumstantial when we are led to believe that Susan Hadwin's fiancé Wallace is dead. He is in Philadelphia at the height of the yellow fever epidemic, yet he maintains correspondence with the Hadwins so long as a neighbor visits the city daily to bring goods to market. On the neighbor's last visit Wallace not only fails to return home to the country, but also fails to appear at the market place with a letter, as he has customarily done:

> . . . on this morning, the young man had not made his appearance; though Belding [the neighbor] had been induced, by his wish to see him, to prolong his stay in the city, much beyond the usual period.
>
> That some other cause than sickness had occasioned this omission, was barely possible. There was scarcely room for the most sanguine temper to indulge an hope. Wallace was without kindred, and probably without friends, in the city. The merchant, in whose service he had placed himself, was connected with him by no consideration but that of interest. What then must be his situation when seized with a malady which all believed to be contagious; and the fear of which, was able to dissolve the strongest ties that bind human beings together? (*AM,* p. 126)

Mervyn then decides to seek Wallace in the city. He eventually discovers Wallace's former neighbor, who describes how Wallace's master disposed of Wallace as soon as the latter fell sick, and adds, "His attack was violent; but still, his recovery, if he had been suitably attended, was possible. That he should survive removal to the hospital, and the treatment he must receive when there, was not to be hoped" (*AM,* p. 151). Wallace's survival is thus highly unlikely. Yet he does survive: "Wallace had been dragged to the hospital. Nothing was less to be suspected than that he would return alive from that hideous receptacle, but this was by no means impossible. The figure that stood before, had just risen from the bed of sickness, and from the brink of the grave" (*AM,* pp. 158-59).

The circumstantial evidence for twice believing that Wallace has died has thus proved to be unreliable. How much more likely it is that Fielding is indeed alive, when our only evidence is a written report about a Perrin d'Almont. The report might be wrong in describing Perrin d'Almont as dead, or Fielding might not even be the person described as Perrin d'Almont. Furthermore, the same second or

third-hand evidence that has revealed Fielding's new name and also his death has likewise given us the name of his new wife. But in one place it is given as Marguerite and only two pages later it is given as Philippine (*AM,* pp. 408, 410).[10] Is this discrepancy a hint that errors may creep into second or third-hand evidence? Or is it an indication that there are two men named Perrin d'Almont, one married to Marguerite and the other to Philippine, and that it is not Fielding but another Perrin d'Almont who has died? In either case, the discrepancy fosters suspicion of the evidence that Fielding is dead.[11] Comparing Fielding's presumed death with other presumed deaths in *Arthur Mervyn* shows how unreliable such circumstantial and sensory evidence can be. Is the unreliability contagious, like Wallace's fever? Is Fielding truly dead? As in *Edgar Huntly,* this uncertainty about the death of a character contributes to the ambiguity of the ending. Arthur Mervyn attempts to conclude his novel with protestations of euphoria, but he protests too much, and his fiancée Achsa Fielding appears to be uneasy as well.[12] The uncertainty of Fielding's death underscores the uncertainty behind Mervyn's bravado and also Achsa's uneasiness.

For a final example of contagious unreliability I will turn to *Ormond.* This example is somewhat different from the preceding ones, for unreliability accrues through the contagion of the immediate context, and the unreliability does not seem as functional here—as reinforced by other techniques—as in the examples from *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Mervyn.*

At the end of *Ormond* Sophia Courtland reveals some information she has discovered concerning Ormond:

> At the period of Ormond's return to Philadelphia, at which his last interview with Constantia in that city took place, he visited Martinette. He avowed himself to be her brother, and supported his pretensions by relating the incidents of his early life. A separation at the age of fifteen, and which had lasted for the same number of years, may be supposed to have considerably changed the countenance and figure she had formerly known. His relationship was chiefly proved by the enumeration of incidents of which her brother only could be apprised.
>
> He possessed a minute acquaintance with her own adventures, but concealed from her the means by which he had procured the knowledge. He had rarely and imperfectly alluded to his own opinions and projects, and had maintained an invariable silence on the subject of his connection with Constantia and Helena.[13]

[10]There are two different names for Perrin d'Almont's wife in the original Maxwell edition of 1799 and again in the Goodrich edition of 1827 and in the edition edited by Berthoff in 1962, although in the McKay edition of 1887 (reprinted by Kennikat Press) the second reference to Perrin d'Almont's wife has become "Marguerite," in agreement with the previous reference. Assuming that Brown did himself use first "Marguerite" and then "Philippine," it can be argued that this is simply one of his unintentional inconsistencies, which he would have corrected if he had noticed. But the proximity of the two references (in the same chapter and only two pages apart in most editions) militates against such an interpretation. We are left then simply speculating whether we can believe the information about Achsa Fielding's husband.

[11]The reader might go even further and question the reliability of Achsa's reports about the reports of her husband. Patrick Brancaccio notes, in "Studied Ambiguities: *Arthur Mervyn* and the Problem of the Unreliable Narrator," *American Literature,* 42 (1970), 25, that "all Arthur really knows about her comes from the assertions she makes in the romantic tale of desertion and persecution by her husband." Once we begin doubting reliability, the ramifications are legion.

[12]See, for example, Brancaccio, p. 26; and W. B. Berthoff, "Adventures of the Young Man: An Approach to Charles Brockden Brown," *American Quarterly,* 9 (1957), 432.

[13]Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond,* ed. Ernest Marchand (New York: Cincinnati American Book Co., 1937), p. 241.

What is striking is that Martinette is convinced that Ormond is her brother chiefly "by the enumeration of incidents of which her brother only could be apprised," yet in the following sentence the source of Ormond's "minute acquaintance with her own adventures" more recently remains mysterious. Mightn't Ormond have acquired information about her early experiences in the same way he has learned about her later ones? Is he really her brother? In other words, the knowledge that Ormond has acquired some information secretly and mysteriously suggests by contagious juxtaposition that he may have acquired other information similarly, thereby undermining the reliability of Ormond's assertion that he is Martinette's brother. But to what end? Is such unreliability functional in the novel? There is no other hint that Ormond is not Martinette's brother. And while the unreliability contributes marginally to the ambiguity of who and what Ormond really is, an important issue in the novel, does it really matter whether or not he is Martinette's brother?

Unlike the examples from *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Mervyn,* the example of contagious uncertainty afforded by *Ormond* is not fully functional and hence seems uncontrolled, like the ambiguity generated by some of Brown's narrative breaks and shifts. Brown does appear to have an interest in the uncertainty of sensory knowledge, and he handles this interest in a more or less controlled (though still not necessarily conscious) fashion when he uses doubles and multiple perspectives. In switching from one perspective to another, in the narrative breaks that occur in his major novels, however, his ambiguity does seem to go out of control, or at least so it seems to a modern reader, for Brown seems to change his mind about what he is undertaking, thereby shattering the consistency of the novel. In the fourth technique, that of contagious unreliability, the ambiguity sometimes seems controlled and sometimes not. Because of this mixture of uncontrolled and controlled epistemological ambiguity, Brown sometimes seems inept, and sometimes surprisingly modern. Brown's ambiguity thus in some sense anticipates that of Melville or James or contemporary writers like Pynchon, even if his is not the controlled ambiguity and rich complexity of "The Whiteness of the Whale" or *The Turn of the Screw* or *Gravity's Rainbow.*