

1988

### Death and Rebirth: Charles Brockden Brown and the Gothic Enclosure in Arthur Mervyn

Leonard W. Engel  
*Quinnipiac College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new)



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Engel, Leonard W. (1988) "Death and Rebirth: Charles Brockden Brown and the Gothic Enclosure in Arthur Mervyn," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 6 , Article 12.

Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new/vol6/iss1/12](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol6/iss1/12)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

DEATH AND REBIRTH: CHARLES BROCKDEN  
BROWN AND THE GOTHIC ENCLOSURE IN  
*ARTHUR MERVYN*

Leonard W. Engel

*Quinnipiac College*

H. P. Lovecraft has remarked that the early American novelist Charles Brockden Brown differed from Ann Radcliffe in her classic Gothic novels by "discarding the external Gothic paraphernalia and properties and choosing modern American scenes for his mysteries."<sup>1</sup> However, Brown did not discard the enclosure device which had marked Gothic fiction from the beginning. He used it, like his predecessors in the Gothic tradition, Horace Walpole, Radcliffe, "Monk" Lewis, and others, to effect terror and fear in his characters and heighten suspense in the reader. But where Walpole and Radcliffe used enclosures--dungeons, vaults, underground passageways, secret compartments--principally as horror devices, affecting external circumstances, Brown introduced a new element in his novels, using enclosures as instrumental factors that directly influence the internal growth and development of his characters. His enclosures would often separate a character from his natural environment, isolate him physically, and intensify his mental experience, sometimes causing a personality crisis that would lead to a change in behavior. Thus, in this aspect of the Gothic tradition, Brown serves as a transitional figure, bringing the enclosure device to America and influencing Poe and later writers of American literature.

What Brown's use of the enclosure device suggests, especially where the characters are enclosed in vaults or chambers below the ground, is the classical, epic pattern of the hero's withdrawal and return, where the hero retreats from the known world into a confined area usually filled with danger and prepares to undergo a test of his strength and endurance. If he is successful, his return to the world is often met with a hero's welcome, as he becomes the embodiment of the values in his society, for example, the necessity for Odysseus to leave his crew, descend into Hades, and be surrounded with the spirits of the dead before he can return home to Ithaca, rid his household of the suitors, and be reunited with his family.

To be sure, nothing as elaborate as this happens to the very American characters of Brown, but there does appear to be a parallel between the experience of the traditional epic hero and that of some of the significant characters in his stories. That is to say, the enclosure often becomes the focal point for the epic hero's withdrawal from the world and his preparation to return to it. It provides him with a specific

64 GOTHIC ENCLOSURE IN *ARTHUR MERVYN*

area of operation, a unique framework within which his experience may lead to his growing awareness and maturity, a test of his manhood. Symbolically, of course, it suggests a descent into his deeper self, a confrontation with his inner being, which often leads to self-knowledge and rebirth of some sort; in effect, he finds new levels of identity and selfhood.

While the characters of Brown are not of epic stature, to an extent they experience something of the epic pattern of "*separation-initiation-return*"<sup>2</sup> while in various enclosures. Their levels of awareness upon emerging may, at least in some cases, not be unlike those of their classical models. Such is the case, I believe, with the character of Arthur Mervyn, where Brown focuses our attention on Arthur's reactions to his predicaments. As Robert Hume has emphasized and I concur, "Brown's concentration on his protagonist's responses seems the defining characteristic of his method."<sup>3</sup> By dramatizing Arthur's reactions to each enclosure he experiences, Brown intensifies our concern with his psychological development.

Part I of *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) begins when Arthur, nearing the age of physical maturity, arrives in Philadelphia, having spent his early, formative years immersed in the pastoral life. Seemingly, the rural environment has had its lasting effect on his open and frank nature, for his mind is the American prototype of the Lockean *tabula rasa*.<sup>4</sup> However, he has recently been dispossessed of his inheritance, and he has left home to make a better life for himself in the world. Before arriving in the city, he is promptly swindled out of what little money he has and, upon arriving, is duped by a practical joker and forced to spend an embarrassing period of time confined in the closet of a bedroom in the home of a family whom he does not know. He finally escapes, but in the ordeal forgets his shoes in the closet. Obviously, these themes are not new to English and American literature—the healthy, rural life as opposed to the mystery and deviousness of the city, and the problems besetting the uninitiated protagonist as he moves from natural innocence to worldly knowledge. What is significant here is Brown's use of the enclosure device to dramatize Arthur's acquiring of experience and the resulting movement toward genuine maturity. That is, Brown depicts the crucial moments in his young hero's adventures using a series of small physical confinements, within the larger one of the city, that contrast with the openness and freedom of country life. As Arthur moves toward full maturity, he gains understanding and learns to accept the manners and morals of men in his society. Having been imbued with the pristine quality of country life, Mervyn must experience the pain and panic of a dark, confined, urban area before he can reach maturity, and each

enclosure Brown uses marks another stage in his learning and development.

Symbolically, the enclosure suggests the fear and horror Arthur must encounter within himself, for each successive enclosure he experiences serves as a test of sorts. He emerges from each more aware of himself and vowing to follow a more rational course of action that will reflect his newly acquired knowledge. Not an insignificant part of this process is the fact that, within each enclosure, Arthur usually forgets or loses some of his personal effects, an indication that something of the old self is left behind as his new self emerges. I believe Brown is suggesting through these enclosures Arthur's loss of innocence, naiveté, and country boorishness.

In addition to the embarrassing confinement in the closet, Arthur experiences three other enclosures in Part I that have varying consequences for him: the burial of the murdered Watson in the underground passage and its effect on his imagination, his unconsciousness in the same room as the first enclosure and near confinement in the coffin, and his narrow escape from death in the attic of Welbeck's house; each marks a new level of awareness for Arthur. In addition, he experiences a curious "baptism"—a rebirth of sorts—while submerged in the Schuylkill River, which I'll have more to say about shortly.

The second confinement occurs when Arthur accompanies his recently acquired mentor, Welbeck, into a passage beneath Welbeck's house to bury the body of Captain Watson, whom Welbeck has killed in a duel. Brown depicts the scene in a Gothic manner:

The vaults beneath were lofty and spacious. We passed from one to the other till we reached a small and remote cell.

The narrow cell in which we stood, its rudely fashioned walls and arches, destitute of communication with the external air, and its palpable dark scarcely penetrated by the rays of a solitary candle, added to the silence which was deep and universal, produced an impression on my fancy which no time will obliterate.

Perhaps my imagination was distempered by terror. The incident which I am going to relate may appear to have existed only in my fancy. Be that as it may, I experienced all the effects which the fullest belief is adapted to produce. Glancing vaguely at the countenance of Watson, my attention was arrested by a convulsive motion in the eyelid. This motion increased, till, at length the eyes

## 66 GOTHIC ENCLOSURE IN *ARTHUR MERVYN*

opened, and a glance, languid but wild, was thrown around. Instantly, they closed, and the tremulous appearance vanished.<sup>5</sup>

This passage, particularly the early sentences, anticipates Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), where Montresor leads Fortunato through a series of vaults until they reach a small, remote crypt in which he then walls up Fortunato, Montresor relates:

We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt, in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.

At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious....

It was in vain that Fortunato, uplifting his dull torch, endeavored to pry into the depth of the recess. Its termination the feeble light did not enable us to see.<sup>6</sup>

Professor Mabbott has carefully noted the many possible sources for Poe's "Cask," and this scene in *Arthur Mervyn* may well be yet another. Poe has changed the mission of his characters considerably, however, dramatizing the ironic, obsessed mind of Montresor, but there are striking similarities in atmosphere and description. In addition, the purpose of the underground journey in each case is fulfilled; that is, a body is buried.

Clearly, Brown's purpose in the scene from *Arthur Mervyn* is to emphasize the effects of the Gothic atmosphere on young Arthur's consciousness. "The narrow cell" with "its rudely fashioned walls and arches," the "palpable dark," and the "deep and universal" silence produce an effect on his "fancy" which causes an hallucination when he thinks he sees Watson's eyelids move and open. There is no reason to believe that Watson is still alive by this time. Apparently Arthur does not believe it either, for he has no compunction about burying Watson, nor is he troubled by it later. He seems to accept the fact that the incident existed only in his "fancy" and that his "imagination was distempered by terror." In short, Arthur, like Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ultimately accepts what his senses and reason indicate and is not misled by his imagination, and Brown, like Radcliffe and other Gothic writers, after building suspense through mysterious, seemingly preternatural events, finally offers more or less rational explanations.

This second enclosure scene in Mervyn's initiating experience, unlike the first, increases the "spooky thrill" by adding the element of

death and its impact on the imagination of the young man. Where the first enclosure is physically uncomfortable, it is not filled with terror nor is death a likely possibility. In the second enclosure, the events are much more serious, and Arthur's response to them more complex. Another part of his self is revealed to him, a part he had previously been unaware of—the distemporing of his imagination by terror.

The baptismal scene referred to earlier occurs when Arthur inadvertently plunges into the Schuylkill River. The rowboat he and Welbeck have been riding in is swept away in the current, and sensing the danger of his situation, Arthur quickly discards his "loose gown" and resolves "to commit" himself to the river to swim for his life. When he finally reaches shore and is lying on the bank trying "to repair his wasted strength" (p. 110), he decides to leave the city and return to the simple, safer life of the country. Although this scene does not involve an enclosure, at least not the kind I have been discussing, the psychological change in Mervyn is part of an organic process. His immersion in water serves the same purpose as the enclosures he has experienced; that is, it indicates another stage in his movement toward maturity and selfhood.

Another possible inference from this river scene underlines the difficulty of his journey and how it is often fraught with hidden snares. While he is swimming to shore, he tells us "I landed in a spot incommoded with mud and reeds. I sunk knee-deep into the former, and was exhausted by the fatigue of extricating myself." The "knee-deep" mud below the surface of the water, like the death of Watson which Arthur witnesses in Welbeck's cellar, symbolizes the ugly realities hidden beneath the surface of life, which he has been ignorant of until now. Arthur reflects: "The transactions of the last three days, resembled the monstrous creations of delirium. They were painted with vivid hues on my memory; but so rapid and incongruous were these transitions, that I almost denied belief to their reality. They exercised a bewildering and stupifying influence on my mind, from which the meditations of an hour were scarcely sufficient to relieve me. Gradually I recovered the power of arranging my ideas, and forming conclusions" (pp. 110-11). These events have seriously disturbed Arthur's psyche and have sent his mind into an hallucinative state bordering on the irrational.

Brown has arranged these experiences in such a way as to test Arthur with a trial he must endure, to disturb his consciousness and upset his naiveté, in effect, to shock him into new awareness. He describes Arthur's first movements after these thoughts with the following: "I resumed my feet. I knew not where to direct my steps. I was dripping with wet, and shivering with the cold. I was destitute of habitation and friend. I had neither money, nor any valuable thing in

## 68 GOTHIC ENCLOSURE IN ARTHUR MERVYN

my possession. I moved forward, mechanically and at random" (p. 111). Arthur's movements resemble those of a person regaining consciousness after deep sleep, and the simplicity of thought expressed in short, staccato sentences reinforces such an interpretation.

The subsequent decisions Mervyn makes further reflect his growing sense of responsibility and a wiser view of the world. He reflects: "The country was my sole asylum. Here, in exchange for my labour, I could at least purchase food, safety, and repose. But if my choice pointed to the country, there was no reason for a moment's delay. It would be prudent to regain the fields, and be far from this detested city before the rising of the sun" (p. 112). In short, as a young adult, Arthur is beginning to show more responsibility.

The events Mervyn experiences in these scenes are not unlike the trials in the *rites de passage* a young man must undergo to achieve adulthood in certain primitive societies. Charles Moorman writes:

. . . in most of these initiatory rites the youth is first of all thrust apart for a time...and his severance accomplished by drastic and severe acts...make clear the width of the gulf he is crossing. Then presented to him in isolation are ritual actions that introduce to him the duties and secrets of his new life. Most important, he learns these matters in isolation, often in darkness, completely cut off from his family and from any reminders of his former life. At length he emerges from this extended retirement a new man, ready to take his place as a fully indoctrinated citizen...and usually ready to establish a new place of residence in the village.

Obviously, the major symbols of such rites symbolize a death to the static world of childhood and a rebirth into a dynamic adult world.<sup>7</sup>

Joseph Campbell points out that, when "the time has ripened for the return to the normal world, the initiate will be as good as reborn."<sup>8</sup>

When Arthur leaves the rowboat, is immersed in the water, swims to shore, and subsequently heads for the country, beginning a new life, Brown symbolically suggests such a rebirth, and it is one that will eventually lead to Arthur's integration into society and his full acceptance of the values of a responsible citizen in that society.

The third enclosure is virtually a re-enactment of the first, but this time with more terrifying effects. Ironically enough, the entire scene takes place in the same room in which Arthur is locked during his first night in the city. However, unlike the first when Arthur was a rather naive, country innocent cruelly taken advantage of, the experience is

Leonard W. Engel

69

extremely serious, and the mistake that nearly entombs him in a coffin is horrifying. In his search for the missing Wallace, the young friend of the family in the country with whom Arthur has been staying, he has sought the room willingly and is confined to it indefinitely by a blow on the head. Mervyn narrowly escapes eternal confinement in the coffin by his opportune awakening, which is foreshadowed by his dream of being thrown into the abyss: "I conceived myself lying on the brink of a pit whose bottom the eye could not reach. My hands and legs were fettered, so as to disable me from resisting two grim and gigantic figures, who stooped to lift me from the earth. Their purpose methought was to cast me into the abyss. My terrors were unspeakable, and I struggled with such force, that my bonds snapt and I found myself at liberty. At this moment my senses returned and I opened my eyes" (pp. 140-41).

Ironically, Arthur awakens to a very different life. In rendering Arthur's second experience of confinement in the same house, Brown does not present him as the mere innocent he clearly was in the first. Now his destiny is intricately bound up with that of Wallace, and as he searches for Wallace through the deserted streets and alleys of pestilence-ridden Philadelphia, in and out of empty rooms and houses, picking up a clue here, finding a partial answer there, he is, in fact, searching for his own identity.

Arthur's experience in the city, with a large number of its inhabitants suffering from yellow fever and the rest living in fear of contracting it, is not unlike a Dantesque descent into Hell where one must experience one's own dark night of the soul before reaching selfhood and Paradise,<sup>9</sup> but Brown's version of the journey and the knowledge Mervyn receives from it are presented entirely in terms of the relationship between self and society. The Paradise Arthur arrives at is one exclusively created by society. There are significant differences, therefore, between the quest of Brown's young initiate and the quests of earlier seekers after true self and spiritual knowledge, such as Bunyan's Christian, and later seekers, like Melville's Ishmael. If the presentations of these two great authors concern universal and timeless questions, including patterns of epistemology, ontology, and theology, Brown's dramatization of Mervyn focuses mainly on the ethics and values of eighteenth-century society, particularly as seen in the United States.

Mervyn's open and innocent nature thus attests to Brown's optimism and belief in the goodness of human nature. As Marilyn Pease accurately notes, "The persistent triumph of Arthur's dogged innocence against the machinations of men and fate is in keeping with the optimistic moral philosophy of the eighteenth century which posited the perfectability of man."<sup>10</sup>



## 70 GOTHIC ENCLOSURE IN *ARTHUR MERVYN*

Similarly, James Justus equates Mervyn's Americanism with that of Ben Franklin: "Mervyn stands at the threshold of America's new century....his entry into Philadelphia is like Franklin's." "He combines," Justus points out, "the identity of an 'ignorant youth seeking experience' and that of 'a self-sufficient individualist' whose values are operable in spite of his experience."<sup>11</sup> He is, also, as Patrick Brancaccio has emphasized, "a young man who is moved by the ambitions and anxieties fostered by the American myth of success."<sup>12</sup> Arthur is, in short, a new American hero, robust, cocksure, ingenuous, and one who embodies the values and beliefs of the new, young, mercantilistic, post-Revolutionary, American society.

Arthur's final enclosure is back in Welbeck's house. He has contracted yellow fever and wishes to die alone, instead of in a public place. However, he is frustrated in his intent by officials ruthlessly searching for the diseased, and he is forced to hide in Welbeck's attic to escape detection. In his haste he allows the attic door to close and, consequently, faces a new danger, "my retreat proved to be worse than any for which it was possible to change it. The air was musty, stagnant, and scorchingly hot. My breathing became difficult, and I saw that to remain here ten minutes, would unavoidably produce suffocation" (p. 203). He finally finds a nail in the wood that allows him to raise the door, but before he descends from this "retreat" that has provided safety from the intruders but ironically has almost caused his suffocation, he scrutinizes the recess and discerns something that will set him "afloat on a sea of new wonders and subject...[his] fortitude to a new test...from which consequences may hereafter flow, deciding on my peace and my life" (pp. 204-205). Arthur, thus, experiences a remarkable revelation before he quits his final enclosure of Part I, and soon afterward he decides to leave Welbeck's home for a safer abode. However, he faints on the road from exhaustion and is found by Dr. Stevens, who takes him to *his* home and eventually restores him to health.

These four enclosures in Part I and the river baptism, taken together, correspond to the traditional rites of passage and thus mark progressive stages in Arthur's movement toward maturity. In addition, these experiences act in various ways as symbols for the diseased city of Philadelphia, forcing Mervyn's outer self (that which encounters society there) inward and causing his essential good nature to be more wary and discerning in his dealings with men.

What we witness, then, through these enclosures is not a *crise de conscience* which Arthur must endure to arrive at some spiritual truth, but rather a more secular growing awareness of himself in relation to the ways of the world and the manners of men. By the end of Part I, Arthur in a sense is ready to assume a new life, one for which Brown

has been preparing him and one in which he will be able to deal effectively, rationally, and benevolently with that world in Part II. Ironically, his reward for striving toward and finally assimilating these values of the eighteenth century is symbolized at the end of Part II by his proposed marriage to the worldly Mrs. Fielding. "He has attached himself to the older, more experienced Mrs. Fielding," Warner Berthoff comments, "for the simple reason that, like Welbeck, she can give him something for practically nothing." Arthur is "a chameleon of convenient virtue, able...to assume the form and role that others wish him to assume."<sup>13</sup> He renders an account of himself at the end of Part II, a narrative that is apparently intended to remove doubts about his character and his future. Nevertheless, it leaves the reader, as Patrick Brancaccio points out, "with a host of new questions." Brown has presented Arthur "not as a young man haunted by Gothic terror but as an American on the make in a competitive, moralistic business culture."<sup>14</sup> To be sure, ambiguities in Mervyn's character remain, allowing critics to interpret him and the book in a variety of ways. However, one thing is certain: Brown has marked the progressive stages in Arthur's movement from innocence to worldly knowledge with a well-executed series of enclosures that provide an artistic unity and coherence the novel would not otherwise have.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Howard P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York, 1945; rpt. New York, 1973), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York, 1949; rpt. Cleveland, 1970).

<sup>3</sup>Robert Hume, "Charles B. Brown and the Uses of Gothicism: A Reassessment," *ESQ*, 18 (1972), 17.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. David Lee Clark, *Charles Brockden Brown: Pioneer Voice of America* (Durham, 1952), p. 43. Concerning the influences of Brown in his youth, Clark points out that Brown "...showed an unusual familiarity with the main currents of eighteenth-century thought from Locke to Hume, from Descartes to Rousseau." Commenting on *Alcuin*, one of Brown's earliest published stories (1798), Clark states that Alcuin, "...with Locke...rejects the notion of innate ideas, holding that man was born in ignorance, and habit has given permanence to error" (p. 119). Further on, Clark comments that "with Locke, Alcuin holds that we are born ignorant, that ideas are received only through the senses, that our knowledge broadens with our experience" (p. 213).

## 72 GOTHIC ENCLOSURE IN ARTHUR MERVYN

<sup>5</sup>Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn*, ed. Warner Berthoff (New York, 1962), pp. 103-104. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses following the passage.

<sup>6</sup>Edgar Allan Poe, "The Cask of Amontillado," *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. III, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 3: 1260-61.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Moorman, "The Uses of Love: Chretien's Knights," *The Hero in Literature*, ed. Victor Brombert (Greenwich, Conn., 1969), p. 118.

<sup>8</sup>Campbell, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>*Arthur Mervyn* has been viewed by many critics as an initiation story. See Berthoff, "Introduction," p. xv, who calls it "the story of the young man's initiation into life."

R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1955), calls Mervyn "a guileless young man who comes from his country farm into the city of Philadelphia, and there discovers the prolific reality of evil" (pp. 92-93). Brown depicts Philadelphia during the plague as "the land of the dead...a land of spiritual crisis, a hell in which moral consciousness is either overwhelmed or transformed into the toughness of conscience." Arthur, Lewis emphasizes, "moving blindly toward that world, that city, coming fresh from the country...is the foolish, young innocent: the first of our Adams" (p. 97).

Marilyn T. Pease, "The Novels of Charles Brockden Brown: Studies in the Rise of Consciousness," (Diss. Fordham University, 1967), p. 75, points out that "throughout the two volumes of the novel, the uncorrupted Arthur sallies forth like an unromantic Don Quixote to meet assorted moral and physical evils."

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup>James H. Justus, "Arthur Mervyn, American," *AL*, 42:3 (November 1970), 306-308. Justus claims that "for all his resemblance to [Godwin's] Caleb Williams, Arthur Mervyn emerges as a distinctively American hero." "His self-realization occurs on American soil and in American terms" (p. 304).

<sup>12</sup>Patrick Brancaccio, "Studied Ambiguities: *Arthur Mervyn* and the Problem of the Unreliable Narrator," *AL*, 42 (1970), 18.

<sup>13</sup>Berthoff, p. xvii.

<sup>14</sup>Brancaccio, p. 26.