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1 Like his novels Wieland and Edgar Huntly, Charles Brockden Brown’s fragment of fiction called “Somnambulism” is set on the American frontier between civilization and the wilderness. And as is the case with the novels, the fragment’s setting and action reaffirm Brown’s ability to use this frontier as a space for exploring ideas about an American life in transition. Within this setting, Brown utilizes some rather typical Gothic conventions—darkness of night, a young woman in danger, an unknown presence, and the like—to tell the story of a tragic murder and the search for information that hopefully will lead to the author of the crime. The narrator of the story, Richard Althorpe, lives his waking life in a world governed by neoclassical decorum, by reason, restraint, and order, the civic virtues promoted by the Federalist agenda of his time. Within this social and political context he struggles—often unsuccessfully—to manage his romantic spirit: “My imagination was vivid. My passions, when I allowed them sway, were uncontroulable. My conduct, as my feelings, was characterised by precipitation and headlong energy” (3: 337).

Thus in “Somnambulism”, Brown applies the “intellectual forcefulness” Berthoff identifies in his fiction (46) to the exploration of ideas forming at the point of tension between a fading eighteenth-century rationalism and a nascent nineteenth-century non-rational individualism.

2 Brown’s editorial headnote—largely an apparent extract from the 14 June 1784 issue of the Vienna Gazette—provides what seems to be a key to understanding the fragment. The clipping reports the arrest of a male somnambulist for the murder of a young woman who “was the object of his affection” and on a “journey... which... had given him the utmost anxiety for her safety”. The young man commits the murder “while asleep, ... entirely unknown to himself” (3: 335). In “Somnambulism”, Brown explores in fiction the situation presented in the report as fact, giving emotional and psychological drama to the story of a distraught lover and sleepwalker. Between the elliptical dashes with which the
story begins and ends, with which Brown indicates that more of the story exists beyond the confines of the printed text of the fragment, Althorpe never discovers—except vaguely in a prophetic dream—who murdered Constantia Davis. Although alternative interpretations exist, readers generally understand that Althorpe is the story's sleepwalker and that he himself murdered her.

Mr. Davis and his daughter Constantia are visiting a friend—Althorpe's uncle, with whom the young man lives—in the sparsely populated countryside of Pennsylvania. One particular evening, just as the Davises are about to retire from the hearth and prepare for bed, a messenger arrives with an urgent missive for Mr. Davis, who decides to set out immediately in order to return to his own home as soon as possible. Althorpe—in love with Constantia in spite of her being engaged to another and desperate not to lose what he considers his only opportunity to win her for himself—protests against their departure along a dark road and through a countryside unfamiliar to them. But Mr. Davis and Constantia see no logical reason that they should not make the night journey the father's business seems to demand. They have with them a guide, and they feel the various dangers of the American road pose no threat to them as long as they remain alert and cautious. But Althorpe's fears push him “to enumerate and magnify the possibilities” of danger, and his “emotions arose to terror”. “The strength of a belief, when it is destitute of any rational foundation”, he says in a rational observation on such irrational trains of thought, “seems, of itself, to furnish a new ground for credulity. We first admit a powerful persuasion, and then, from reflecting on the insufficiency of the ground on which it is built, instead of being prompted to dismiss it, we become more forcibly attached to it”.

His sense of himself as a romantic hero—one who feels he knows the country road almost as well as his own “chamber floor”—leads him into a social blunder: “I made bold enquiries into the importance of the motives that should induce them to expose themselves to the least hazard”. Thus he crosses the line of “scrupulous decorum” and deference, and his uncle's guests become suspicious of his motives (3: 337). Althorpe can find no rational grounds for his heightened emotions. The others see his imagination as misleading him into envisioning dangers that exist only in his own irrationality, an irrationality which Miss Davis will privately attribute to the young man’s believing that he is in love (3: 341).

But the tension between the romantic and the neoclassical arises not only between Althorpe and the Davises but also within Althorpe as an individual. Once the father and daughter are resolved to leave with no assistance other than that of their hired guide, the intense struggle between imagination and reason moves to the interior of Althorpe’s mind. Faced with reasonable arguments against his fears and forebodings, conscious also of a duty to be obedient to his uncle (who believes with the Davises that there is no real danger in their journey), Althorpe finds himself left with no choice but to relent and attempts to restore to his character and actions some sense of self-restraint and rational order. But he exhibits these neoclassical, republican virtues only while the outside community exerts pressure on him to do so. “As long as their representations rung in my ears”, he says, “I allowed myself to be ashamed of my weakness, and conjured up a temporary persuasion that my attendance was, indeed, superfluous, and that I should show most wisdom in suffering them to depart alone” (3: 338). As this largely self-aware young man recognizes, however, his dutiful restraint of individual desires and humble submission to the will of his superiors—virtuous actions in a republican citizen—are only a “temporary persuasion”, a “conjured” illusion. As soon as the communal influences of
reason and social order are removed by the departure of the Davises and his uncle’s retiring for the night, Althorpe’s internal struggle resumes, and he finds himself “breathless with fear of some unknown and terrible disaster that awaited” father and daughter on the dark road (3: 338-39).

At this point, the upcoming somnambulistic event begins to take form, and soon Althorpe himself—an individual released from the restraints of republican society, released in this case by sleep—will become that “unknown” which he fears. “A hundred times I resolved to disregard their remonstrances”, he says, “and hover near them till the morning”. And as many times, he decides against this idea. At last, however, still wrestling with these alternating resolutions, he closes the gate and haltingly returns to his uncle’s house. There he spends “a drooping and melancholy evening” during which his “imagination”, he claims, “continually hovered over our departed guests”. Memory and “fancy” blend as he remembers his brief time with Miss Davis, and in an excess of sensibility, his “eyes overflowed with tears”; “There insensibly arose a sort of persuasion”, he concludes, “that destiny had irreversibly decreed that I should never see her more”. Sleep finally overtakes him, however, and he “sinks into a profound slumber” (3: 339).

In the dream which naturally follows the ideas and desires that consumed his conscious mind, a dream in which he is unable to save Constantia but then tracks down and assassinates her assassin, Althorpe finds his thoughts “full of confusion and inaccuracy” (3: 340). This confused state reflects early psychology’s understanding of dreams. As Allan Gardner Smith has shown, Brown—in *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly*—made use of contemporary scientific ideas about sleep and dreams, especially as these ideas appear in Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia*. That Althorpe’s dream is as typically confusing and inaccurate as most dreams are results from what Smith terms the “lack of volition”. “Normally”, Smith writes in describing Darwin’s theories,

> the mind follows trains of association which are quite well established and incorporate some acts of volition within them, as we compare our passing trains of thought with our acquired knowledge of nature. But in sleep the lack of volition causes these habitual connections to be dispered, and to fall into new “catenations”. Therefore dreams display the kind of inconsequence that Brown describes so frequently, often in the form of nightmare. “Incubus”, as Darwin calls it, is accounted for by a combination of uneasy sensations and profound sleep. (12-13)⁷

Althorpe certainly experiences this “combination”, and even though in waking life he finally exhibits self-control and does not follow Constantia and her father, in his dreams—and in his somnambulism—he follows to disastrous effect. Not only does the young man find himself unable to save his love in the dream (while killing her in reality), but he also appears unable to adhere to either civil law or to a code of honor when in his nightmare he discovers her assailant; instead of acting in accordance with the waking “train of thought” that should, in a man of honor, demand the criminal either be brought to justice or faced in a fair fight, he murders the murderer in a fit of passion. As Althorpe himself puts it, “I did not employ the usual preliminaries which honour prescribes, but, stimulated by rage, attacked him with a pistol, and terminated his career by a mortal wound” (3: 340).

Having experienced this cathartic dream, having committed as well the unconscious and perhaps in some way cathartic action of assuring that Constantia will never belong to another, Althorpe—“quietly reposing in the chair in which I had fallen asleep”—awakes...
the next morning “refreshed and invigorated” and with a lighter heart goes about his daily chores until news comes of the tragic attack on Constantia.

9 Upon his arrival at the home of Dr. Inglefield, as Alfred Weber says, Althorpe, “the former first-person narrator, steps into the background and gives an objective, detailed, and graphic account of the nocturnal events, in which the father and daughter become the protagonists” (“Beginnings” 14). The remainder of the story is theirs.

10 Having no concrete reason to fear anything along their way, and being as well on an errand of apparently important business, they set out on the dark American road that passes Althorpe’s uncle’s gate. “After they had parted from us”, Althorpe says, spinning a narrative from the later accounts of Mr. Davis and the guide,

they proceeded on their way for some time without molestation. The clouds disappearing, the star-light enabled them with less difficulty to discern their path. They met not a human being till they came within less than three miles of the oak which I have before described. Here Miss Davis looked forward with some curiosity and said to her father, “Do you not see some one in the road before us? I saw him this moment move across from the fence on the right hand and stand still in the middle of the road”.

“I see nothing, I must confess”, said the father...

The carriage slowly advancing, and the form remaining in the same spot, Mr. Davis at length perceived it, but was not allowed a clearer examination, for the person, having, as it seemed, ascertained the nature of the cavalcade, shot across the road, and disappeared. The behaviour of this unknown person furnished the travellers with a topic of abundant speculation.

... At length Mr. Davis said, “A thought has just occurred to me. The person whom we just now saw is young Althorpe”.

Miss Davis was startled: “Why, my dear father, should you think so? It is too dark to judge, at this distance, by resemblance of figure...” (3: 340-41)

11 For the next while, father and daughter grow increasingly uneasy. The mysterious figure comes and goes; “As I live’, exclaimed Mr. Davis, 'that thing, whatever it be, haunts us. I do not like it. This is strange conduct for young Althorpe to adopt”. Like Hawthorne’s Goodman Brown on the dusky forest path, the Davises are unable to see anything distinctly either in the road ahead of them or alongside it. But whereas the young Puritan’s inability to see shakes his “faith” in his education and in the Christian leaders of Salem Village, the Davises’ inability to see shakes their rational certainty of control over their environment, their reasonable expectation of safety, and the strength of purpose with which they had set out on their journey. As the pair and their guide approach the point where the road disappears into a stand of forest, Mr. Davis seems more fearful and uncertain than Constantia: “‘I know not how it is’, said he, 'but I begin to be affected with the fears of young Althorpe. I am half resolved not to enter this wood’” (3: 342).

12 Just then the Davises hear “a noise, at a small distance behind them, as of shutting a gate” (3: 342). They call out, and a Yankee farmer “approached the chaise, and enquired who they were, whence they came, whither they were going, and, lastly, what they wanted” (3: 342-43). From him they learn that the figure shadowing them is probably that of a local character named Nick Handyside—“a fellow that went about the country a’ nights. A shocking fool to be sure, that loved to plague and frighten people”’. “Nick is an odd soul to be sure; but he don’t do nobody no harm, as ever I heard, except by scaring them”, the farmer assures the Davises. “‘He is easily skeart though, for that matter, himself. He loves to frighten folks, but he’s shocking apt to be frightened himself. I
reckon you took Nick for a ghost. That’s a shocking good story, I declare. Yet it’s happened hundreds and hundreds of times, I guess, and more” (3: 343).

13 Furnished with this rational explanation of the mysterious figure in the night, Mr. Davis and Constantia resume their journey somewhat more at ease, even developing a lively curiosity—perhaps typical of “enlightened” individuals with an empirical mindset—to see this strange native of the frontier and hear his screams. They hear “rustling leaves or stumbling footsteps”, but the ghostly human only “occasionally hovered in their sight” and never approaches to perform for them (3: 344).

14 Almost as soon as Althorpe’s narrative provides an apparently reasonable solution to the mystery, it begins to question that solution. Brown’s use of language supplies a first hint that the figure in the night is indeed Althorpe and not Handyside. That whoever haunts the Davises sometimes “hovered” where he might be seen echoes Althorpe’s earlier internal struggles: “A hundred times I resolved to disregard their remonstrances, and hover near them till the morning”; “My imagination continually hovered over our departed guests” (3: 339). Moreover, the man who haunts the road does not behave according to Handyside’s reputation. The idiot trickster, Althorpe says, “took pleasure in the effects which the sight of his own deformity produced, and betokened his satisfaction by a laugh, which might have served as a model to the poet who has depicted the ghastly risibilities of Death”. Apparently satisfied with the Yankee farmer’s explanation of the mystery, however, Mr. Davis and Constantia, along with Althorpe in his role in this section as third-person narrator, seem not to notice that their shadow exhibits an ominously different behavior:

On this occasion... the monster behaved with unusual moderation. He never came near enough for his peculiarities to be distinguished by star-light. There was nothing fantastic in his motions, nor any thing surprising, but the celerity of his transitions. They were unaccompanied by those howls, which reminded you at one time of a troop of hungry wolves, and had, at another, something in them inexpressibly wild and melancholy.

15 When the carriage arrives at the edge of the wood and Mr. and Miss Davis alight to walk, “the spectre, which, till now, had been occasionally visible, entirely disappeared” in direct contradiction to the manner in which Handyside was supposed to behave (3: 344).

16 In the darkness beneath the trees of this frontier wilderness, where, metaphorically, reason and rational order are on tenuous ground, father and daughter talk about Handyside, who is “no longer an object of terror”; Constantia “declared she should be highly pleased by hearing his outcries, and consoled herself with the belief, that he would not allow them to pass the limits which he had prescribed to his wanderings, without greeting them with a strain or two”. Althorpe the sleepwalker stands hidden nearby, “at less than twenty paces from them”, and he utters a “scream, dismally loud, and piercingly shrill”, startling both the Davises and their horse (3: 345). The effect of the scream is to separate father and daughter. Mr. Davis foolishly goes after the bolted horse, leaving Constantia—at the story’s climax—unprotected against the lovelorn, sleepwalking, and tragically armed Althorpe.

17 What cultural work might “Somnambulism” have performed for readers of the Literary Magazine in 1805? Discussing in Sensational Designs Brown’s Wieland, a story similarly set on the American frontier and similarly peopled with supposedly rational characters, Jane Tompkins says that “Wieland’s rural decencies are the seedbed of a holocaust. Dramatizing the precariousness of Crèvecoeur’s ‘perfect’ society, the novel’s plot offers a
direct refutation of the Republican faith in men’s capacity to govern themselves without
the supports and constraints of an established order” (49). Similarly, Christopher Looby
writes that Brown promotes in Wieland “a politics that recognizes the necessity of a
respect for traditional authority as the only bulwark against the uncertainties and
distortions that can afflict reasoned discourse” in a revolutionary society, that in the
novel Brown’s “persuasions, dramatized and allegorized, reveal him to be a complex
counter-revolutionary writer” (202). While in part true, these readings fail to recognize
that Brown’s novel also provides, at the same time, a “direct refutation” of traditional,
Federalist assumptions that “an established social order” was indeed possible. Thus
Wieland, this “American Tale” of “Transformation”, shows that, in the new nation’s
increasingly liberal society, faith in either rational order or social balance was just as
precarious as the rising liberal individualism Brown himself promoted to a large extent in
the Literary Magazine. Brown was no “party-man” (2: 446); Wieland critiques the agendas of
both the Federalists’ classical republicanism and the French Revolution’s radical
democracy. The same exploration or testing of ideas, I argue, takes place in
“Somnambulism”.

As Tompkins and Looby suggest, Brown’s story attacks the ideas of radical democracy,
exemplified by the chaos of the French Revolution. In his somnambulistic state, Althorpe
is disconnected from all restraints, excepting physical limitations. The sleepwalker, like
the revolutionaries in France, acts unconsciously, without reference to the authority of
the conscious individual’s natural aristocracy—the reason, moral values, character,
education, manners, and so on that prohibit an individual’s acting from pure selfishness
and licentiousness. Nick Handyside is obviously irrational, a social outcast, and one of the
unknowns Mr. Davis and Constantia potentially face on the frontier, but his freaks are
easily detected and easily stopped; the Yankee farmer explains the madman’s behavior
and tells the Davises that a stern, authoritative voice will serve to frighten him away. On
the other hand, Althorpe, when conscious, seems a known quantity—if sometimes a
contrary one—in society as it is represented by Mr. Davis, Constantia, and his uncle. When
separated from the restraint that society places on him, however, especially when his id
is separated by sleep from the control of his ego, he becomes a far more dangerous
unknown than Handyside. Had the Davises been able to see Althorpe clearly as he
shadowed them, outwardly he would have seemed a recognizable, knowable, and
probably a welcome member of the community, but inwardly he is a nightmare, like
France during the Terror, of licentious freedom and irrational, radical democracy.

“Somnambulism” not only suggests the dangers of democracy but also the inability of
Federalist ideology to counterbalance these dangers. Popular fiction in the late
eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries supplied example after example of individuals
who go against Federalism’s rational, moral agenda and pay dearly for their
transgressions. Given the popularity of Rowson’s Charlotte Temple and Foster’s The Coquette,
given as well the proliferation of sentimental, moralistic fictions in magazines available
in America at the time, Brown’s readers must have been at least subconsciously aware of
Federalist assumptions that life should be organized and coherent and that, in order to
achieve such organization and coherence, citizens should behave morally and virtuously,
subordinating their private desires to the public good.

Brown’s “Somnambulism” attacks these assumptions. All of settled America was, to some
degree, a frontier, a space between the established civilization and order of the Old World
and the young American nation’s own primitive hinterland, the wilderness to the west.
Understood in this context, life in the new nation was as yet uncertain, unpredictable, even dangerous. Brown suggests that neither rationalism nor republican civic virtue serves to protect the individual from the threat of physical and psychological unknowns. Mr. Davis and Constantia assure themselves and young Althorpe that the night journey holds no dangers, but their assurances are based on the known—darkness itself cannot hurt them, sloughs can be avoided, other impediments such as rocks and trees in the roadway are to be watched for, and so on. Even when the figure in the night begins to seem threatening to Mr. Davis, Constantia calmly defers to logic: “Nay, my father, ... be not disturbed. What danger can be dreaded by two persons from one?” (3: 342). In a limited way, this makes rational sense, but the unknowns—the abilities, character, and condition of this particular “spectre”, the unfamiliar road, the dark woods—call her judgment into question. Out in the world, Brown suggests, rationalists such as the Davises deceive themselves into believing that life is ordered according to reason and that aberrations such as the figure that haunts the road—be he Nick Handyside or another “thing”—can be dealt with on rational terms. Like the Enlightenment itself, which Brown believed did not exist on as wide a scale as European and American intellectual and political leaders claimed (4: 111-14), rational republican order and balance do not necessarily dictate life on the frontier of liberal America.

Readers of Rowson and Foster, taking up “Somnambulism”, faced a dilemma for which there was no rational solution. Constantia dies the same as Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton, albeit more violently. But the story does not fit the Federalist model. What moral code, Brown’s readers must have asked, has Constantia broken? She has neither been seduced by novels nor been flirtatious and become pregnant. What crime against convention has she committed? She naturally chooses to accompany her father on the journey that leads to her death, but she could not have known she was making so fatal a choice. What instruction does the reader receive from her tragic end?

Like Brown’s essay “Is a Free or Despotic Government Most Friendly to Human Happiness?” (3: 178-81)—published in March 1805, only two months before the story of Althorpe and Constantia appeared—“Somnambulism” suggests that elements moving within a free society often collide, sometimes violently. The violence of the collisions in this state of liberal individualism depends on the degree of the various physical, psychological, or ideological difference between the colliding elements. Understood in this context, “Somnambulism” represents an exploration of extreme oppositions: the violent collision of a man in love with a woman who does not return his love, of the incautiously rational and the uncontrollably irrational, a staunch Federalism and a radical democracy, neoclassical reason and romantic imagination. Had Althorpe remained “conscious”, the worst collision in the story would have been that moment of argument over the night journey, when the democratic Althorpe displayed his inability to be governed by decorum and a virtuous sense of deference. Both parties in the conflict are ruled by self-interest, but dangerous violence erupts only when Mr. Davis and Constantia naïvely assume the world to be rational, knowable, and Althorpe loses consciousness—and with it his conscience—and becomes the unknowable in their path. For Brown, this view of the world and of human relations, although extreme, seems to have been more realistic—and more useful—than that of the sentimental, moralistic fiction appearing in contemporary novels and magazines. His own moral in “Somnambulism” suggests that to be educated and wide awake (conscious) provides an
individual—and a new nation—with safeguards against such tragic experiences as those of
Constantia Davis and Richard Althorpe.

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NOTES

1. Although unpublished until Brown included it in the Literary Magazine for May 1805,
“Somnambulism” is generally believed to have been written several years earlier, between the
time in 1798 when Brown wrote the unpublished—and now lost—novel “Sky-Walk” and 1799
when Edgar Huntly appeared. The story has been identified by various scholars either as originally
part of the former novel or as a false start for the latter. See Bennett’s dissertation, “The Charles
Brockden Brown Canon” (208-10), Krause’s “Historical Essay” (332-36) and “Introduction” (xii-
XXIII), and Weber’s “Bibliographical and Critical Notes” for his edition of Brown's Somnambulism and Other Stories (249-50).

2. The narrator of “Somnambulism” identifies the setting as “Norwood” (3: 344), a place whose name and description sound much like Norwalk, the landscape through which somnambulists Clithero Edny and Edgar Huntly roam in Brown’s fourth novel. While both Norwood and Norwalk appear to be similar frontier areas, the latter seems somewhat wilder and more rugged.

3. All quotes from “Somnambulism” will be identified by the volume and page number of the story’s original publication in Brown’s The Literary Magazine, and American Register (1803-1807).

4. The entire headnote reads as follows:

The following fragment will require no other preface or commentary than an extract from the Vienna gazette of June 14, 1784. “At Great Glogau, in Silesia, the attention of physicians, and of the people, has been excited by the case of a young man, whose behaviour indicates perfect health in all respects but one. He has a habit of rising in his sleep, and performing a great many actions with as much order and exactness as when awake. This habit for a long time showed itself in freaks and achievements merely innocent, or, at least, only troublesome and inconvenient, till about six weeks ago. At that period a shocking event took place about three leagues from the town, and in the neighbourhood where the youth’s family resides. A young lady, travelling with her father by night, was shot dead upon the road, by some person unknown. The officers of justice took a good deal of pains to trace the author of the crime, and at length, by carefully comparing circumstances, a suspicion was fixed upon this youth. After an accurate scrutiny, by the tribunal of the circle, he has been declared the author of the murder: but what renders the case truly extraordinary is, that there are good reasons for believing that the deed was perpetuated by the youth while asleep, and was entirely unknown to himself. The young woman was the object of his affection, and the journey in which she had engaged had given him the utmost anxiety for her safety”. (3: 335)

That Brown himself created this “extract” is possible. Scholars have been unable to locate this story either in the Vienna Gazette or in any of the extant periodical literature from that time. No one has been able to produce a copy of the article from among Brown’s papers, nor has anyone been able to find for certain that the Gazette was even published in 1784 (Krause, “Historical” 334-35, n38).

5. “Somnambulism” is one of Brown’s best works of short fiction, but it remains relatively unexplored. To date, the most detailed analysis of the story is William J. Scheick’s essay “Assassin in Artful Disguise: The De-Signed Designs of Charles Brockden Brown’s ‘Somnambulism’”. Scheick finds in “Somnambulism” the “perfect miniature of Charles Brockden Brown’s enigmatic literary manner”, and over the course of his essay analyzes the fragment in terms of plot, moral stability, structure, readership, authorship, and aesthetic design. He suggests that design (as both intention and scheme) is effectively de-signed as the narrative signs of “Somnambulism” lead to various culs de sac of self-referential configurations. Brown’s chronicle, which adumbrates fin de siècle Aestheticism, intimates that the mind is evidently ontologically bereft and epistemologically lost. It is nonetheless capable of unwittingly inventing, rather than of consciously discovering, philosophical, moral, political, and social signification—design as intention and pattern. (27)

The tendency of the few further mentions of the story in Brown scholarship has been to focus on its obvious relationship to “Sky-Walk” and to Edgar Huntly. Still, Sydney Krause and Alfred Weber have each laid a strong foundation upon which other interpretations of “Somnambulism” might be built. In discussing the relationship between Althorpe’s conscious life and his sleepwalking, Krause says that Brown begins “to show the tortured ego (technically the ‘id’ in this case) attempting to compensate for its practical defeat”—that is, Althorpe’s inability to convince Constantia of the dangers of the night journey or of the reality of his love for her. The unconscious somnambulistic event not only “release[s] the inner man” but also sets in motion an unknown entity who “acts, often dangerously”. “Also implied is the response of the pleasure-principle denied”, Krause continues, “the backlash of man’s raw emotional nature. And these energies are not simply worked off passively in the wish-fulfillment of a dream” (“Historical”
Unfortunately these intriguing ideas are presented in the context of a discussion of Edgar Huntly and are not deeply explored in relation to “Somnambulism” as a separate work. Approaching the story from a different angle, analyzing how Brown and his short fiction participate in the development of the American short story, Weber rightly identifies the tale as a mixture of Gothic romance, psychological study, and crime fiction and ultimately claims that it is “the first American detective story, published thirty-five years before Poe’s ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’” (“Beginnings” 18, 12). I am indebted to Professor Weber for sending me the typescript of his essay, “The Beginnings of the American Short Story and Charles Brockden Brown”, for my use.

6. For a lucid examination of the subject of somnambulism as it was understood in Brown’s day, see Krause’s “Historical Essay”, especially section V, 336-57. Krause’s discussion relates directly to Edgar Huntly, but much of the factual information presented and some of the literary interpretation suggested can be applied to “Somnambulism” as well. As for the murder, William J. Scheick suggests three “feasible explanations”. The first suggestion is that “Althorpe... murdered Constantia while he was dreaming and sleep-walking”. A second is that Nick Handyside or some other unknown assailant shot her. The third possibility Scheick suggests is that Althorpe “committed the murder on purpose”. This last is based on the idea that Althorpe is indeed shadowing the Davises, that he overhears Constantia claim that she could never be interested in the young man, and that, overhearing her disparaging words, Althorpe thus has a motive for murder (31). My own interpretation remains the first of these possibilities, that Althorpe murders Constantia while in his disturbed somnambulistic state.

7. Brown had easy access to at least the first two volumes of Zoonomia at the time he was writing “Somnambulism”. The first volume had been published in 1796 by New York printers T. & J. Swords, who also printed Wieland and worked with Brown on the Monthly Magazine. In 1797 the second volume issued from the press of Philadelphia’s Thomas Dobson. If Brown revised “Somnambulism” before its appearance in the May 1805 number of the Literary Magazine, he might also have seen all three parts of Darwin’s work as they were published by Boston’s Thomas and Andrews in 1803. Brown was probably familiar as well with the writings about sleep by his fellow Philadelphian Benjamin Rush, who suggests that “there are cases in which the change that is produced in the state of the brain, by means of sleep, affects the moral faculty likewise: hence we sometimes dream of doing and saying things, when asleep, which we shudder at, as soon as we awake” (qtd. in Smith 12). Thus only in sleep can Althorpe escape his inhibitions and follow the Davises in the night; his affected “moral faculty” might also have made it possible for him to shoot Constantia at the foot of the giant oak.

8. Although in the July 1804 number of the Literary Magazine Brown had disagreed with a foreign writer’s judgment that extreme inquisitiveness was a prominent feature of the American character (2: 253), here in this Yankee farmer he creates just such an “inquisitive person”. The character also represents one of Brown’s most direct—and successful—attempts to recreate a provincial American personality and a colloquial American language:

As to what you seed in the road, continued [the farmer], I reckon it was nothing but a sheep or a cow. I am not more scary than some folks, but I never goes out a’ nights without I sees some sich thing as that, that I takes for a man or woman, and am scared a little oftentimes, but not much. I’m sure after to find that it’s not nothing but a cow, or hog, or tree, or something. If it wasn’t some sich thing you seed, I reckon it was Nick Handyside. (3: 343)

9. At this point Althorpe interrupts the narrative to wonder why he or his uncle had not thought to warn the Davises about Handyside, whose apparently harmless freaks were the only unpredictable events to be wary of on the night journey. According to Althorpe’s description, Handyside “was an idiot. He also merited the name of monster, if a projecting breast, a misshapen head, features horrid and distorted, and a voice that resembled nothing that was ever before heard, could entitle him to that appellation” (3: 343). Thus Handyside serves the plot by
suddenly becoming the prime suspect in Constantia’s murder. Moreover, in this unfortunate individual, as Weber suggests, “The ghost motif of the 'gothic romance’ has been transmuted into a figure whose appearance and whose actions have the same horror effect, but who, in spite of his ghost-like character, is given human traits” (“Beginnings” 15).

10. Why does Althorpe scream? Perhaps, knowing the caprices of Nick Handyside, Althorpe simply reacts to Constantia’s spoken desire to hear the harmless madman scream; her wish either suggests to Althorpe that he is Handyside or prompts the somnambulistic young man so hopelessly in love with her—so focused on her in the disconnected world of a dream—to attempt to grant her request. Perhaps only the mere suggestion of screaming reached him where he stood, and he responded, experiencing that “lack of volition”, as Smith calls it, which would have restrained him while conscious. Perhaps, sleepwalking within the dream recounted earlier in the story, Althorpe screams in the moment of uncontrollable “rage” that leads him to murder Constantia’s assassin.

11. In the context of Tompkins’s argument, the use of “Republican” here specifically refers to Jeffersonian Republicanism.


13. True, she is alone in the darkness when the sleepwalking Althorpe attacks, but I would suggest that this situation is itself the result of her father’s and her separating, an irrational act, which he too late attempts to correct by giving up the hopeless pursuit of the horse and returning to his daughter.

14. In discussing Romanticism in Brown’s Wieland and Edgar Huntly, Robert Hemenway says, “I believe that Brown’s novels are ‘Romantic’ because he creates dilemmas which are insoluble through Neo-classical principles of coherence and rationality. Brown’s novels are Romantic because he implies that irrationality is the governing force in human affairs, and that man’s efforts at ordering existence, his presumptions of an ability to reason, are self-delusive” (97). “Somnambulism”, I argue, participates in this same type of Romanticism.

ABSTRACTS

Dans “Somnambulisme”, Charles Brockden Brown montre la tension qui se manifeste dans ce début de l’histoire des États-Unis entre le républicanisme rationnel du XVIIIe siècle et l’individualisme non-rationnel du XIXe lorsque le premier cède sa place au second. D’une part, la nouvelle réprouve les positions rigides des Fédéraux; d’autre part, elle s’élève contre le programme d’une démocratie trop laxiste. Autrement dit, elle explore l’opposition entre extrêmes: amour et indifférence, rationnel et irrational, rigidité et laxisme, raison et sentiment

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