Disease and Racial Frontiers in Charles Brockden Brown's Philadelphia

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The first American to earn a living as a professional novelist was Philadelphia's Charles Brockden Brown, who in late years has gained increasing respect from literary scholars and historians: as of 2000, there was finally a Charles Brockden Brown Society, dedicated to spreading his name. For historians of Pennsylvania, perhaps his most valuable work is the novel, *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799-1800), much of which takes place during the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of that year. The actual epidemic was one of the most traumatic events in the history of the early republic, a catastrophe that raised serious questions about the nation's future, and particularly the balance between urban and rural forces. It was also a watershed in racial history, since Black Philadelphians were at the forefront of relief efforts, and played a simply heroic role in treating the sick and disposing of the dead. The epidemic marks a vital moment in the history of free Black communities, and it occurs at an absolutely critical period in the history of American race relations. In a way, the early 1790s may be as significant as the 1860s or the 1960s in redefining racial boundaries and expectations.

I want to quote some brief passages from the novel that contain the few reference to African Americans in the whole yellow fever episode (as I will mention, other black characters do occur later in the book). As Mervyn enters the city, he encounters a hearse: "Presently a coffin borne by two men, issued from the house. The driver was a Negro, but his companions were white. Their features were marked by ferocious indifference to danger or pity. One of them as he assisted in thrusting the coffin into the cavity provided for it said, I'll be damned if I think the poor dog was quite dead. … damn it, it wasn't right to put him in his coffin before the breath was fairly gone." His companion answers "Pshaw, he could not live. The sooner dead the better for him; as well as for us. Did you mark how he eyed us when we carried away his wife and daughter?" (357). I do not think the Negro hearse driver is one of the speakers in this vicious ghoulish exchange – Brown tends to have his black characters speak in dialect - but whether he is or not, this is anything but a flattering account of the Black role in the epidemic. To say the least, the driver is in very bad company. In one other instance, Thetford cruelly treats his servant girl: instead of calling a physician, he "called a negro and his cart from Bush Hill", that is, the feared fever hospital. As Bill Christophersen remarks, "These black servants and liverymen, rendered visible by the plague, seemingly immune to its ravages, are with the exception of Austin, ominous figures, casual morticians carrying off the dead and dying whites, or… merely standing by unsolicitously as they die" (105).

This near-total omission of Blacks makes for a very odd and unbalanced coverage of the incident. The fact that Blacks are largely absent from his account is as telling in its silence as would be a history of the civil war that failed to mention slavery and abolitionism. I stress that I am not succumbing to a kind of political correctness here, naively demanding proper and proportional minority representation at every moment of American history. As I have remarked, the Black role in the affair was transparently obvious to contemporary commentators, and it is curious that Charles Brockden Brown, writing perhaps five years after the events described, has developed such a striking case of color blindness. When Blacks do appear, it is either as angels of death, or as perilous bandits. In perhaps the most threatening Black appearance in the book, Mervyn discovers a looted cabinet, and is knocked aside by the "tawny… apparition" perceived in the mirror, the Black thief who had broken into it. Blacks also rob the dead.

Why are these pictures so negative, so hostile? Christopherson argues convincingly that the fever serves as an extended metaphor for slave revolt, and this theme is certainly present, but I would argue for other contexts. In understanding the setting of Arthur Mervyn, and thus of Brown's puzzling silence, the concept of "frontiers" is helpful. In the official mind, a frontier or boundary is something meant to exclude, to delineate us and them. In more recent writing, however, frontiers are viewed much more positively, as places of encounter, and thus of meeting and mingling, exchange and hybridization, sites at which identities are particularly fluid and open to negotiation. Historically, too, frontiers tend to be more transient and porous than bureaucrats like to believe. By this standard, Philadelphia in the 1790s was precisely a frontier city, the meeting point of multiple worlds - northern and southern, to be sure, but also continental and Atlantic, free and slave. It was the heart of what had been the aptly named "middle colonies", and this role was nowhere more evident than in matters of race. As the major destination for freed or escaped slaves, Philadelphia was already what it would be at least until the civil war, namely the capital of Black America, in a sense the birthplace of free Black America. Although the construction of free identities remained a lengthy and challenging process, this was both the place and time at which were drawn the new racial frontiers which substantially remain in place for over a century. Moreover, the era itself had many of the characteristics of fluidity and open possibility that we associate with boundaries, an analogy that emerges when we use terms like "frontier years".

The epidemic of 1793 epitomized the frontier quality of Philadelphia at this pivotal era. Brown's silence on these issues is quite as eloquent as a more overt statement on Black rights, whether positive or negative. Perhaps unwittingly, he is accepting a picture of black behavior and character that reflects a newly emerging racial hostility, a puzzled and disturbed reaction to the new Black self-assertion. There is far more here than a straightforward fear of potential slave revolts, foreign or domestic. Free Blacks appeared quite as frightening as rebel slaves, and *Arthur Mervyn* foreshadows many of the dilemmas which white Americans would experience in the abolitionist years, and beyond. For the first time in American history, urban whites had to confront free black neighbors, and they responded with fear and uncertainty.

The Racial Inheritance

In the history of American race relations, the decade after 1785 occupies a place of singular importance. The revolutionary war for liberty and the rights of man was largely fought and won by slave-holding elites, a paradox of which many Americans were painfully aware. The first US census of 1790 showed that some twenty percent of the four million residents of the new nation were slaves. Between 1787 and 1789, the fact of slavery and the Southern Difference constantly provided troubling undercurrents during the constitutional debates. The extreme sensitivity of the subject is indicated by the fact that the words "slave" and "slavery" never feature once in the resulting document, an omission as amazing in its way as the Black near-absence from *Arthur Mervyn*. Partly, this caution was to avoid losing the sympathy of enlightened Europeans who retained their idealized notion of the USA as a pristine land of simple liberty-loving farmers. Nevertheless, slavery appears, albeit covertly in the constitution, which included the famous "three fifths of a person" compromise, by which, slave states could partially count their slaves in determining their total population, and thus their congressional representation. Also, the document includes a major clause on the slave trade, however innocuously presented, in the declaration that "The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the year 1808". The document thus preserves the slave trade for twenty years, but there is at least an implication that the practice would not long endure after that. This would fit well with the common sense in writings at the time that the zenith of slavery had passed, and that the institution would perish in due course. In all probability, even the hardest-core Southern states would ultimately follow their northern counterparts in introducing schemes of gradual abolition. Just what

to do with the resulting free Black population was a quandary over which even quite liberal abolitionists would agonize for decades to come.

These perceptions changed dramatically during the early 1790s, due to two remarkable developments. The first, which occurred at home, would not reveal its full significance for some time. In 1793, Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin created an unprecedented new demand for new supplies of cotton, which meant pressure to acquire new slaves, as well as the land on which new plantations could be created. Ultimately, this would mean a push for new territories and states in the west and south-west, with all the likely consequences of foreign conflicts and constitutional restructuring. In the Caribbean, meanwhile, the summer of 1791 brought the apocalyptic slave uprising on the French island of Santo Domingo, and initiated a bloody sequence of events which by 1805 culminated in the expulsion or outright massacre of the entire white population from the new nation of Haiti. Over forty thousand whites may have perished in all. The Haitian experience understandably terrified slave societies throughout the hemisphere, and particularly in the United States, where henceforward any suggestion of liberating slaves (without repatriating them to Africa) conjured forth visions of massacre and mutilation.

Suddenly, American slavery was not only vastly more profitable than ever before, but there seemed no way in which it ever could be ended. . Demonstrating the renewed power of pro-slavery sentiment, in 1793, the US Congress passed the first Fugitive Slave Act, granting federal backing to the institution. Meanwhile, racial tensions were powerfully exacerbated, all the more so when new generations of aspiring slave leaders explicitly cited the Haitian experience as a model that they wished to follow. In 1800, Gabriel Prosser of Virginia planned what would have been by far the largest slave uprising hitherto attempted on American soil, a pogrom which would have killed all whites in the Richmond area, except for Frenchmen, Methodists and Quakers. (Gabriel thus foreshadows other nightmare figures for the white south, like the better-known Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner). Racial frontiers became much more sharply defined throughout the south, which thus found itself increasingly divided from the north, in a pattern that would hold true until 1861.

A Philadelphia Story

Colonial Pennsylvania had known the institution of slavery, to the extent that in the 1760s, perhaps eight percent of the population of Philadelphia was unfree. Thereafter, the slave population declined steeply. By 1789, only some four thousand Pennsylvanian slaves, perhaps one percent of the state population, were directly affected by a new gradual abolition law passed by the state legislature: another seven thousand were already free. Though the new law did not provide overnight emancipation, the consequence was that by 1808, Pennsylvanians found it virtually impossible to own slaves. As the largest city in the new USA and the national capital, Philadelphia became a major destination for free Blacks, increasingly so after Pennsylvania's act of abolition, since the city was so conveniently located just north of slave centers like Delaware and Maryland. The city probably had around 2500 African-Americans in the mid-1790s, a population that grew to over 22,000 by the 1850s. Right up to the outbreak of the civil war, the city had the largest free black population in the non-slave states, and the largest in the nation, except for Baltimore

Already by 1790, Philadelphia was emerging as the cultural capital of free African America. One key figure was Richard Allen, who had fought with the Patriot forces in the revolutionary war, and who subsequently bought his freedom. He also experienced an evangelical conversion, which led him into the ranks of Philadelphia Methodism (we recall that Gabriel and the rebellious slaves had some affection for the Methodists). As a veteran and a member of a church pledged to Christian brotherhood, Allen had high hopes for the redefined racial boundaries in the new nation. In 1787, however, older frontiers reasserted themselves when white members of the Methodist church of St George's demanded that Blacks be confined to segregated seating areas during services. In response,

Allen and others walked out, and this conflict gave new momentum to the movement to form a new congregation specifically for free Africans. (There is some doubt about the exact date of the incident, which some scholars would place in the early 1790s).

In 1787, Allen and his colleague Absalom Jones had launched the first American social movement led by and targeted towards free Blacks, namely the benevolent group called the Free African Society. Between 1790 and 1794, they actively raised funds for the proposed church, with the support of some well-meaning white Philadelphia leaders, including Benjamin Rush and the Episcopal Bishop White (Benjamin Franklin was another activist in the cause, prior to his death in 1790). By 1794, St. Thomas' African church was opened, under the leadership of Jones, who became a deacon in the Episcopal church: in 1804, he was consecrated an Episcopal priest. Allen resented the Episcopal affiliation, and created his own church of Bethel, under what became the African Methodist Episcopal title. In 1795, Allen became a deacon, and would later be the first bishop of the AME church. Over the next half-century, the streets around "Mother Bethel" (at Sixth and Lombard) became a thriving Black residential and cultural center.

Within a few years in the early 1790s, Philadelphia's Black community had spawned one enormously influential denomination, the AME, and had established a tradition of Black clergy serving specifically free African urban churches. Within a decade, Philadelphia could offer a caucus of several black clergy, representing Presbyterian, Baptist and mainstream Methodist currents in addition to Episcopal and AME. They were beginning a tradition of black clerical leadership that in essence remains strong up to the present day: the AME church itself would be perhaps the most important single institution in black life over the next 150 years. In the coming decades, the AME would produce the first Black magazines and publications, and by the 1850s, the first African-American university.

Epidemic

This growing Black self-confidence and quest for autonomy provides the context for the response to the yellow fever epidemic that befell Philadelphia in August of 1793. Appropriately, in view of the potent racial symbolism that the episode would acquire, the disease may well have been brought by refugees fleeing the carnage in Santo Domingo. Many white refugees were to be found in Philadelphia, where there was already a sizable French community: these exiles would be significant for our story, in ensuring that the citizens were thoroughly acquainted with the new race lines being drawn in the Caribbean

Whatever its origins, the fever found favorable conditions in the stagnant pools in and around the city. By mid-August, doctors were noting a sharp increase in deaths, and Dr Rush noted that "I have not seen a fever of such malignity, so general, since the year 1762". Within weeks, everyone financially able to do so was fleeing the city, and the refugees included most of the leaders of the city, state and nation. Perhaps seventeen thousand fled, out of a total population of around fifty thousand in the city and the neighboring municipalities. President Washington himself rode out on September 10. Brown offers a classic journalistic description of the scene. Around the city, "Every farmhouse was filled with supernumerary tenants; fugitives from home, and haunting the skirts of the road, eager to detain every passenger with inquiries after news…. Families of weeping mothers, and dismayed children, attended with a few pieces of indispensable furniture, were carried in vehicles of every form. The parent or husband had perished; and the price of some moveable, or the pittance handed forth by public charity, had been expended to purchase the means of retiring from this theatre of disasters; though uncertain and hopeless of accommodations in the neighboring districts." (355)

This official exodus naturally increased panic and hopelessness. There are harrowing accounts of social and family breakdown, as friends and family members refused to have anything to do with

anyone who might have been exposed to the disease. As Brown writes, "The city, we were told, was involved in confusion and panic… Magistrates and citizens were flying to the country…. Terror 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. …. The chambers of disease were deserted, and the sick left to die of negligence. None could be found to remove the lifeless bodies. Their remains, suffered to decay by piecemeal, filled the air with deadly exhalations, and added tenfold to the devastation" (346). Though Mervyn initially believes such accounts to be grossly exaggerated, he comes to accept that "My preconceptions of the evil now appeared to have fallen short of the truth. The dangers into which I was now rushing seemed more numerous and imminent than I had previously imagined" (355) "The largest computation made the number of fugitives two thirds of the whole people, yet judging by the universal desolation, it seemed as if the solitude were nearly absolute" (371).

Within the city itself are scenes of a community of the living dead, in language which seems to owe much to Dante: "The market-place and each side of this magnificent avenue were illuminated, as before, by lamps; but between the verge of Schuylkill and the heart of the city, I met not more than a dozen figures; and these were ghost-like, wrapt in cloaks, from behind which they cast upon me glances of wonder and suspicion; and, as I approached, changed their course, to avoid touching me. Their clothes were sprinkled with vinegar; and their nostrils defended from contagion by some powerful perfume"

The defection of the official leadership placed the entire responsibility for fighting the epidemic on volunteers. Soon, Philadelphia was under the authority of an unofficial emergency junta led by Mayor Matthew Clarkson and merchant Stephen Girard (himself a French immigrant, incidentally). One courageous leader was Rush himself, who indomitably insisted on helping the victims at no small risk to himself. Unfortunately, we know in retrospect that the assistance he was offering was precisely wrong for the conditions, as Rush belonged to the school of medical thought which held to the virtues of bleeding and purging, and thereby of further weakening those already endangered by the fever. Other doctors practiced less interventionist techniques, and their patients had a far greater chance of survival. By far the best was Dr. Jean Devéze, another of the Santo Domingo refugees, whose hospital at Bush Hill offered the best care available in the circumstances: while Rush insisted on bleeding, Devéze offered rest, cleanliness, and mild stimulants. (In Arthur Mervyn, however, the prospect of being confined there causes terror about "that contagious and abhorred receptacle": 365).

Rush was however critical in shaping the response to the crisis. His call for volunteer aid was immediately answered by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, on behalf of the city's African community, and their offer was multiply tempting. White residents believed, wrongly as it would soon appear, that Blacks were immune from the disease, perhaps because of their tropical ancestry, so it only made sense for them to venture into afflicted areas. For Allen and Jones, who were currently engaged in a heroic attempt to redraw the racial boundaries of nation and city, the epidemic seemed grimly providential, offering as it did a chance to demonstrate African loyalty and patriotism, and thereby to earn white gratitude and respect.

Over the coming three months, as the epidemic played out, the struggle against it was above all a Black campaign, in which Blacks led the way as nurses, cart drivers and gravediggers. Victory was eventually achieved by November, and Washington re-entered the city on the tenth of that month. By that point, the disease had claimed probably five thousand lives, a catastrophic figure which represented about a tenth of all Philadelphia's residents: this total included about three hundred of the supposedly immune Blacks. Yet although the fever passed, the benefits which Allen and Jones hoped to reap from Black heroism were not forthcoming.

Far from being grateful to the Africans, at least some white survivors made extensive allegations about Black criminality during the crisis, charging that Blacks had used their opportunity to steal, loot, profiteer, and even commit murder. These are the charges reflected in Brown's encounter with the hearse-men, and they were commemorated in print by the work of Matthew Carey, the best-known historian of the epidemic, in his *Short Account of the Malignant Fever Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia*. Carey records that "The great demand for nurses afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of the blacks. They extorted two, three, four, even five dollars a night for attendance, which would have been well paid by a single dollar. Some of them were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick." Carey did however acknowledge that such actions were not typical of the Black contribution, but the accusations were severe enough. Significantly, the Carey position seems to have been a minority view, at least if we can judge by the outpouring of White support for the free African church in the following year or so.

Furious, Allen and Jones responded with their own pamphlet. This was *A Narrative of the Proceedings of Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793, and a Refutation of the Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications*. The *Narrative* has been described as probably the nation's very first African-American political publication, and it includes some ringing statements of black human dignity, and the degradations wrought by slavery (Foster et al). The ensuing controversy poisoned black-white relations, and may well have encouraged Allen to avoid contact with any institution under direct white control, even as benevolent-seeming a one as the Episcopal Church. The affair helped ensure that, even in the north, the new free black institutions would be separatist, demarcated from the white world by impermeable race boundaries. The lasting significance of the 1793 epidemic is suggested by the modern treatment of the affair, from an Afrocentric perspective, in John Edgar Wideman's 1996 novel *The Cattle Killing*.

Brown's Vision

With this account in mind, we can examine Brown's account of the pestilence in *Arthur Mervyn*. As a literary topic, the author found the epidemic irresistibly appealing on several grounds, above all because he was an eye-witness to the cataclysm: he had lived through history.. The disaster affected the Philadelphia that he knew so well. It also represented the kind of disruption, flight and upset which had marked his own early life. As Jay Fliegelman points out, so much of Brown's major works "turn on violent disruption: a loss of physical, familial and psychological security" (xiii). Brown of course was a child during the American revolution, when his own father was forced to flee as a suspected Tory. (Among modern authors, I am reminded of J. G. Ballard, whose repeated science fiction themes of urban ruin and destruction often recall the sights which he witnessed as a child during the fall of Shanghai to the Japanese.)

Brown aimed to present his novel as a didactic and moralistic work, not merely as a sensationalistic tract. As he wrote in the introduction, "The Evils of pestilence by which this city has lately been afflicted will probably form an era in its history. The schemes of reformation and improvement to which they will give birth, or, if no efforts of human wisdom can avail to avert the periodical visitations of this calamity, the change in manners and population which they will produce, will be in the highest degree, memorable. They have already supplied new and copious materials for reflection to the physician and political economist. They have not been less fertile of instruction to the moral observer, to whom they have furnished new displays of the influence of human passions and motives…. He that depicts, in lively colors, the evils of disease and poverty, performs an eminent service to the sufferers, by calling forth benevolence in those are able to afford relief, and he who portrays examples of disinterestedness and intrepidity confers on virtue the notoriety and homage that are due to it" (preface). The question then arises just why Brown fails to record the "disinterestedness and intrepidity" of people like Allen and Jones, and one key reason is that he was

not there to witness such things. In 1793, as in the 1770s, Brown was forced to flee the city, which had such ambiguous significance for him.

The epidemic demonstrated acutely American attitudes to the cities of the new nation. Might the fever actually carry a good long-term message, in warning of the evils of the city? As Thomas Jefferson wrote to Rush in 1800, "The yellow fever will discourage the growth of great cities in our nation and I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man. True, they nourish some of the elegant arts, but the useful ones can thrive elsewhere, and less perfection in the others, with more health, virtue & freedom, would be my choice." Or to quote Philip Freneau's contemporary squib,

> Nature's poisons here collected,
> Water, earth, and air infected--
> O, what a pity,
> Such a City,
> Was in such a place erected!

Brown does not quite share Jefferson's absolutist vision of urban evils, but Arthur Mervyn does present a clear dichotomy. On one side stands a city which is, quite literally, hellish, sunk under a miasma of disease, while a cleaner, safer countryside which lies across the Schuylkill, which almost becomes a mystical border between life and death. As one character remarks, "If you pass Schuylkill before nightfall, it will be sufficient." Where Brown differs from Jefferson is in lacking any illusions that the natural world is necessarily or uniformly pure or safe: threats are to be found everywhere, even across the Schuylkill. Yet it was obvious enough that given the choice, any sane man with adequate means would leave a Philadelphia in which houses are overwhelmed by "a vapor, infectious and deadly," "effluvia of a pestilential nature," "noxiousness and putrefaction", in short of catastrophe, of evil. He thus joined the throng who abandoned the city in September 1793, a fact which is crucial to reading the novel. The point at which Brown was leaving the city, and abandoning any claim to direct knowledge of conditions therein, is exactly the moment at which the fictional Mervyn is summoning up his courage to enter it.

While the epidemic was pursuing its grim course, Brown was staying with Elihu Hubbard Smith in Wethersfield, Connecticut, and he spent the next year in New York and Connecticut. In other words, for all its seeming verisimilitude, its first hand quality, *Arthur Mervyn* only describes the opening phases of the crisis with any accuracy. For the main phase of the epidemic, Brown was clearly dependent on other sources, on letters from friends, on pamphlets and newspaper accounts, and this reliance may well explain his curious neglect of the Black role in the affair. He omits the devoted Black effort because he does not know of it.

Brown and Race

But having said this, Brown's racial attitudes as indicated by *Arthur Mervyn* go beyond a simple credulity about black misdeeds, and the book contains what is for the time and place some quite startlingly hostile racial imagery. Now, it is rarely profitable to read eighteenth or nineteenth century texts with a modern eye, with a view to condemning what today appears to be mindless racism, but the passages in *Arthur Mervyn* are surprisingly negative in terms of the northern states in the 1790s. This is all the more true for someone like Brown, with his Philadelphia Quaker antecedents. He was thus a member of probably the first group in the Americas to make anti-slavery sentiment an integral part of its political doctrines. In 1775, Philadelphia Quakers had led the way in organizing the nation's first abolitionist organization, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. The Philadelphia elite already demonstrated powerful abolitionist and pro-Black sentiments, manifested especially in the fund-raising for the Black church.

I offer a couple of examples for Brown's sentiments, the first of which again reminds us of the presence of Caribbean refugees in the Pennsylvania of 1793. He writes: "I mounted the stagecoach at daybreak the next day in company with a sallow Frenchman from Santo Domingo, his fiddle case, an ape, and two female blacks. … The monkey now and then munched an apple which was given to him from a basket by the blacks, who gazed with stupid wonder, and an exclamatory *La! La!* upon the passing scenery; or chattered to each other in a sort of open mouthed, half articulate, monotonous and sing song jargon". Together, the party includes "the monkey, the Congolese, and the Creole-Gaul" (566). The picture requires little commentary. Words change their meanings over time, so that the implications of "stupid" are not quite as negative in Brown's time as ours, but the other phrases leave no doubt that the Blacks are meant to be seen as fit companions for the monkey, amusing perhaps, but less than fully human. The order of items in the description says it all.

A similarly condescending description is provided for all the black characters. In another passage, a few pages later, Mervyn meets a young girl "whose innocent and regular features wanted only a different hue to make them beautiful" (568). When Mervyn visits the house of Mrs. Maurice, the door is opened by Cato, a Negro "of very unpropitious aspect", who speaks "in a jargon which I could not understand". When ordered to evict Mervyn, Cato and a fellow servant are reluctant to lay hands on a white, but beg "in a whining beseeching tone, Why missee, massa buckra wanna go for doo, dan he wanna go for wee" [If the white master won't go for you, he won't go for us] (573-74).

Why is Brown so cool (to say the least) towards Blacks? Tentatively, I suggest two main reasons, both of which reflected conditions very specific to the early/mid 1790s. The first is clearly knowledge of Santo Domingo, and the continuing savagery there. Brown knew something of the situation from the refugees in Philadelphia (and in other cities, like New York), and this may be conditioning his view of Blacks as animalistic primitives. Bill Christophersen quotes some of his occasional writings on the Santo Domingo situation in these years, and speaks aptly of "Brown's tentative symbolic association of black revolt and yellow fever" (107, 110).

But I believe there is more to the story than this. A second factor involves more speculation, but I suggest that we should look closer to home than Santo Domingo, namely at the free Black community of Philadelphia itself. The character of the Black population in the city was changing rapidly at this time, from the vestigial slave community of the 1780s to the larger, more self-confident and more vocal free body of Richard Allen's age. For someone who left Philadelphia in 1793, and returned sporadically through the decade, the changing and expanding role of African-Americans in the city might well have provided a sense of concern, possibly even a symptom of urban decay. Racial frontiers are under threat, and Brown, like others of his age, responds accordingly. How exactly should free Blacks be treated? Are they neighbors and Christian brothers? Should they be as deferential as the slaves they or their parents had once been, or should they be treated as equals? Could a decent white man eat with them? Visit them? Sit beside them in church? The tension and uncertainty arising from all these questions is reflected in the pages of *Arthur Mervyn*.

Pestilence: Written During the Prevalence of a Yellow Fever by Philip Freneau

Hot, dry winds forever blowing,
Dead men to the grave-yards going:
Constant hearses,
Funeral verses;
Oh! what plagues--there is no knowing!

Priests retreating from their pulpits!--
Some in hot, and some in cold fits
In bad temper,
Off they scamper,
Leaving us--unhappy culprits!

Doctors raving and disputing, death's pale army still recruiting--
What a pother
One with t'other!
Some a-writing, some a-shooting.

Nature's poisons here collected,
Water, earth, and air infected--
O, what a pity,
Such a City,
Was in such a place erected!

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