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The Discontents of Applied Teratology: A Crisis of Monstrosity in Charles Brockden Brown's "Somnambulism: A Fragment"

[E]very object whose end is unknown to us is provisorily monstrous.

(Borges 23)

The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself: the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world. In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble.

(Cohen 7)

Although Charles Brockden Brown abandoned his apprenticeship as a lawyer, he retained throughout his life an unflagging interest in the question of evidence, which, at its core, is a semiotic problem, a problem of representation. The writer's oeuvre, both fictional and non-fictional, reflects his anxiety about the credibility of evidence and his continuous interrogation of the sources of its validity. Not unlike his other literary works, Charles Brockden Brown's "Somnambulism: A Fragment," published in 1805 but most probably written in 1797 (Weber 249, quoted in Hamelman), revolves around hermeneutic uncertainty (Seed 122). Also, just as in other works, the writer with gusto leads the reader into the epistemological tangle that in this story arises from his treatment of monstrosity. Nowhere else does he seem to juxtapose so polarized concepts of monstrosity. In "Somnambulism: A Fragment" he pitches Nick Handyside's absolute exteriority against Althorpe's ultimate interiority.

The very subtitle of the story "A Fragment" seems to invoke the process of interpreting evidence, conceived of as piecing together a monster, because, as Jeffrey J. Cohen points out, "monstrous interpretation is as much process as epiphany, a work that must content itself with fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows, obscured glimpses – signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself)" (6). The text of "Somnambulism" consists of two parts: a newspaper report that, due to its unverifiability (Weber 250, quoted in Wilczyński 103), can be considered fictional

and therefore a part of the story, but which as a newspaper excerpt retains its historical ring, and a first-person account of a nocturnal tragedy that occurred in Norwood, U. S. The narrative structure of the story seems, by means of analogy, to gesture towards the protagonist, the “young Althorpe,” as the culprit guilty of murder. The extra- and heterodiegetic (editing) narrator precedes the fragment told from the point of view of the protagonist with a passage purportedly quoted from the *Vienna Gazette* of June 14, 1784, a report that relates the case of the murder of a young woman at Great Glogau, Silesia, a crime committed unknowingly by a sleeping, enamored somnambulist.

Althorpe’s first-person narrative relates the events that occur after Constantia Davis, a young lady he is hopelessly enamored of, and her father, who are guests at his uncle’s house, unexpectedly embark on a nocturnal journey. Miss Davis’s engagement to another man causes the narrator’s anxiety and barely suppressed anger, which he seems to channel by offering to accompany the guests, who, however, decline his civility. The young man’s efforts to stop or delay the departure of Miss Davis and her father by voicing his premonitions of some imminent danger related to a vast ancient oak looming in their way, prove equally ineffective. Meanwhile, frustrated, Althorpe falls asleep and has a vivid dream in which he seems to realize his wish of following the guests and attempts in vain to prevent Constantia’s murder by an assassin in an “artful disguise” (11), whom he believes he shoots and kills in retaliation for Miss Davis’s death.

In the morning, after his uncle finds Althorpe slumbering in an armchair, they learn of the nocturnal assault on their guests and of Miss Davis’s agony after being shot. The young man starts piecing together an uncannily omniscient account of the disaster from different witnesses’ recollections. He seems genuinely surprised that these events resemble his dream so closely. What appears to baffle him is that when sharing his grim premonitions with his guests he completely forgot to warn them about a rural monster, Nick Handyside, who might play mischief on the travelers. Conveniently, when reconstructing the events of the tragic night Althorpe takes advantage of the rumors about Nick’s nocturnal wanderings and pranks in order to create an alibi for his own pursuit of the Davises. “Like a demented detective,” Althorpe has no idea that Miss Davis died by his own hand and that “the miscreant he pursues is himself” (Hamelman).

Even a brief synopsis of the story suggests the range of issues with which the writer wrestles in the text. Brown explores a tangle of epistemological problems which reflect an intersection of the discourse of the American Enlightenment with the echoes of European tradition and the legacy of American Puritanism (despite the legacy of Brown’s Quaker descent).¹ Concomitantly with the question of physical stigmatization believed

¹ Slater observes that “[a]ttempts to show that Brown never swerves from Quaker orthodoxy have proved unconvincing.” See note 14, 202.

by applied teratology to reflect the subject's moral responsibility and accountability, the writer interrogates the psychological question obsessively discussed by the Scottish and American Enlightenment of the extent of control exercised over the self by itself. Simultaneously, the juxtaposition of different concepts of monstrosity enables Brown to ponder broader issues of philosophical significance and of political consequence.

In gauging epistemological limits imposed in the story by somnambulism, that is by questioning the efficacy of experiential knowing of both one's self and the external world, Brown reaches the limits of EnlightenmentLockeanepistemology. The full importance of a political dimension of this epistemological crisis seems to manifest itself in connection with the Alien Friends Act, passed in 1798, which gave the administration power over the "dangerous population of aliens who had disguised themselves as friends of America" (Gardner 434). It seems that Brown, steeped in the political atmosphere created by the urge to exorcise an alien element from the young Republic which led to the passing of the Alien and Sedition Acts, anticipated in "Somnambulism" the epistemological consequences and aporias inherent in an attempt to control the minds of citizens. It is noteworthy that any homogenization urge creates a monster that it subsequently seeks to exorcise. Cohen remarks that "[t]he monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities" (19). By asking what could possibly be a visible sign of the monster, the writer complicates and takes to its extreme the question of what "a visible sign of the alien in disguise" would be, a conundrum that led to the drafting of the Sedition Act, which located this visible sign in the act of seditious writing (Gardner 434).

As a systematic science which attempted to classify all monstrosities, teratology² was founded as late as in the beginning of the nineteenth-century, its name coined by the French scientist Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire in 1830 (Huet 108). However, as a blend of mythical and religious lore and magic coupled with the study and interpretation of anatomical deformations, the discipline has thrived since antiquity. In recognition of the fact that in Charles Brockden Brown's times scientific teratology had not yet been founded as well as to distinguish medieval monstrous discourse and the nineteenth-century systematic science of monsters from the long tradition of interest in the monstrous implications of physical deformation, which often goes by the name of teratology too, I will designate the latter as "applied teratology."

Reflecting on the cultural meaning and significance of the monster, Jeffrey Cohen observes that

² Etymologically, the term has been derived from Greek word: *têras*, that is "monster," *Gen. têtatos* (Kopaliński 509).

The monster is born only at [the] metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place... A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’ a glyph that seeks a hierophant. (4)

It thus comes as no surprise that by affording a forbidden glimpse into the mechanisms of culture and by functioning as a critique of its representation of itself to itself, monstrosity has excited curiosity and fascination for centuries. Believed in antiquity to be a portent or a prophecy as well as an outward sign of moral depravity punished by divine forces, the monster was, in turn, to Aristotle, an unnecessary deviation (Huet 91), a joke of nature. Leslie Fiedler observes that the tradition derived from Aristotle regards monsters and freaks as sources of amusement (231).

Monstrosity was often invoked in connection with questions concerning the validity of resemblance as, on the one hand, a principle underlying the order of the universe, and on the other an epistemological tool employed in effort to acquire insight into this order and into the ineffable (Huet 32-37, 95-96, 221-224; Williams 6-7, 23-60, 71-74). The concept of monstrosity proved instrumental when pointing to the reality beyond the material world because “[t]he Middle Ages had transformed the classical view of the monster’s metaphysical reality from one *contra naturam* to one *extra naturam*” (Williams 13). Poised between the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomistic scholasticism, the medieval monster looms as “a product of paradox, functioning to critique the overconfident constructs of rational analysis” (Williams 6). Constructing signs that were deformed and “transgressive of the process of signification itself” (Williams 7) guaranteed that the error of taking the sign for the thing would be avoided and the real would not be confused with its linguistic construct (Williams 7). Pseudo-Dionysius articulated it as follows: “Since the way of negation seems to be more suitable to the realm of the divine and since positive assertions are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible, a manifestation through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible” (Pseudo-Dionysius 141A, quoted in Williams 7).

Williams points out that “there are at least two major manifestations of the monster in the Middle Ages: the symbolic and the literal.” He observes that “the metaphorical and the figurative is steadily concretized to produce the idea of living races of monsters populating various remote corners of the world.” Thus, rather than excluding the symbolic, medieval literalism guarantees it (11).

[M]onstrous semiology is authorized by the physical existence of the monsters, despite the fact that this existence is invented. The fiction of an historical existence au-

thorizes a symbolic program that in turn produces signs that can be applied metaphorically to other 'things' so as to reveal their grotesque absurdity.... (Williams 11)

Paradoxes, ambiguities, monstrosities, and "grotesqueries" familiar from medieval art and literature deform the process of normal signification thus liberating the mind from the binds of language and logic (Williams 9).

It must be stressed that "the monstrous is not a contradiction of nature but of human epistemological categories" (Williams 13). However, while negating the very order of which it is a part, the monster articulates the philosophical principles on which this order is built by deforming them, and thereby gauges its cognitive limitations. The monster thus functions as a meta-commentary on the system and its horror stems from the impossibility of expressing the system's lack of coherence from within (Williams 14-15). Paradoxically, the deformed points to the gap between sign and signified and at the same time bridges it. On the one hand there is no difference between the monstrous sign and what it stands for because signifying nothing it stands only for itself, but on the other hand there is no similarity between the monstrous sign and the concept it stands for because its absolute deformity precludes it from standing for any real signified (Williams 12).

The Middle Ages transformed the tradition of the monster into a symbolic language that would express "the inadequacy of human cognition in containing the limitlessness of the real." However, along with the development of the more rational methods of scholastic logic and dialectics the deformed imagery migrated to "the culturally more marginal discourse of mediaeval mysticism" (Williams 6): "It is through the presence of the monstrous signs in the text... that the reader sees through the assertions of the discourse to its contradiction, and by the same grotesque mockeries that the reader hears the silence of the text and understands its meaning as what is not said" (Williams 15).

In developing Areopagite's³ thought, John Scotus Eriugena and Gregory of Nyssa identify man and God as the Unknowable. Appositely, in the apophatic tradition the monster is that-which-is-not, the unknowable, self referential – as much outside the system as the divine is. Indeed, in the tradition that originated with Pseudo-Dionysius, God is metaphorically represented as monster. Man, in turn, the creature made in the image of God, must be "similarly mysterious, unknowable, uncontainable, limitless, and formless" (Williams 93). Eriugena emphasizes that the radical identification of man and God has its source in the apophatic nature of both God and the human mind, "[f]or the human mind does know itself, and again does not know itself. For it knows that it is, but does not know what it is" (Eriugena 4.771A-B, quoted in Williams 93-94).

³ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

In calling attention to a void or abyss in the human – “man contains at the core of his being the superabundant nothing that is his source” (Williams 94) – Eriugena points to man’s identity as a monster. The philosopher warns of the terror that “arises from the ultimate confrontation with the mysterious truth: we are the monster we fear. Like the monster, humanity is paradox, both angel and beast, and like the monster humanity contains all the forms of creation” (Williams 94). It is noteworthy that the monster and the abyss have thus become interchangeable as tropes of the inexpressible.

In early modern times the monster becomes an object of systematic investigations aimed at exploring the causes of monstrosity rather than being interested in the monster in its cosmic significance or as a prophetic message or portent (Huet 36). However, despite this “progressive naturalization of the monstrous” the concept has retained its “complex, often conflictual status” (Pender 145) throughout the period. Pender emphasizes that the passage from the view of monsters as prodigies to monsters being considered by medicine a pathology was by no means smooth and there seems to have been a “more fluid interchange between the portentous and the merely anomalous” (145). Moreover, “[b]ecause monsters instantiate a particular relationship between inside and outside, between the deformed [ex]terior of the body and opaque interior, they were the occasion not only for analogical thinking but for sustained meditation on the dialectics of inside and outside” (Pender 151). Pender invokes the view of the seventeenth-century physician John Buwer, who argues that the deformity of the outside of the body effects a disfigurement of the inside thus disrupting “the resonances between the human and the divine” (153), while William Hay observes in 1754 that it is “natural to imagine... that the inward Parts of the Body must in some measure comply with the outward Mould” (Hay 20, quoted in Pender 153). The eighteenth-century interest in monstrosity and its abnormal anatomy was emblematic of what Barbara Stafford considers the “heart of a master problem for the Enlightenment,” that is the obsessive desire to penetrate into “the interior of things” (Stafford 47, quoted in Pender 154). The locating of monstrosity in the divide between Althorpe’s slumbering consciousness and his waking self seems to be in keeping with the Enlightenment obsession with the interior as well as emphasizing the growing awareness of and anxiety about the force of the unconscious growing beyond the control of consciousness, which anticipates the direction of the further evolution of Gothic fiction.⁴

⁴ See Cusick 148. Although Cusick discusses late nineteenth-century Gothic fiction in this article, he also comments on the parallel between the development of the Gothic since its emergence as a new genre and the rise of the analytical psychology. The scholar points out that over time the process of bringing unconscious content to consciousness in the Gothic fiction has accelerated and intensified.

Based on the developments in Scottish Common Sense thinking on dreams, late eighteenth-century American medical and fictional inquiry into the nature of dreams and the problem of the dreaming subject's responsibility for them may well be interpreted as reflecting an anxiety about the integrity of man's rational mind, a belief underscoring the Enlightenment vision of man (Susan Manning 41). Brown must have been familiar with the Scottish Common Sense inquiry into the nature of dreams through his participation in the meetings of the Friday Club and his close friendship with the medical doctor Elihu Hubbard Smith. Smith studied under Benjamin Rush, who, deeply influenced by William Cullen, a leading medical theorist and an important figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, initiated "a new, clearly American, school of medical thought at Philadelphia" (Susan Manning 43). In his diary Smith mentions Rush's lecturing on the subject of dreams in Philadelphia in 1790-1791 (Susan Manning 43). In his opus magnum, which appeared in 1812, Rush classifies dream as a transient kind of delirium but distinguishes it from madness (Susan Manning 43).

All accounts of the phenomenon of dreaming provided by the Scottish and Philadelphia Schools seem to be poised between metaphysical and pathologizing, i.e. medical, explanations. The evolution of Scottish Enlightenment views on dreams commences with Andrew Baxter's *Inquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul*, published in 1733, in which he asserts the demonological provenance of dreams. Baxter contends that the voices that speak in dreams come from outside of the dreamer's self and sarcastically dismisses, on the grounds of common sense, the possibility that these voices be traced to a part of the self of which it is ignorant (Susan Manning 40). Dugald Stewart dismisses Baxter's beliefs as whimsical in what is "probably the Scottish Enlightenment's most widely read chapter on dreaming" (Susan Manning 41), the first part of the *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, published only in 1792 but available to the public in nearly the same form since 1773, which viewed dreaming in the context of the associative powers of the human mind. Susan Manning argues, however, that it is Baxter who threw into relief the three key "issues that continued to dominate discussions of dreaming as they passed out of the hands of theologians and into those of philosophers, medical theorists, and finally of novelists." These are: "the provenance of the unauthorized voices of dreams, the implied inner division and doubling of the conscious and unconscious, waking and sleeping selves; and the place of will and moral responsibility in the matter of accountability" (Susan Manning 41).

Stewart allows for unconscious mental processes and thus "internalizes the dream to the dreamer," bringing it to the border of abnormal psychology and readily available to appropriation and pathologizing by medicine (Susan Manning 42). Dreaming disorders, now ascribed to the influence of the unconscious caused by dysfunctions of bodily or-

gans, such as, for instance the stomach, change their etiology from physiological to psychological thanks to William Cullen. He considered dreaming sleep as pathological and close to insanity (Susan Manning 43).

The entry on dreams in the third edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, compiled and published in Edinburgh in 1797, reveals that the link between moral corruption and the lack of control exerted by reason over imagination is fundamental to Scottish Enlightenment thinking on dreams. “[L]ike fever and madness,” dreams “demonstrate the operation of the mind under the suspension of reason, and become therefore a crucial site of moral ambiguity” (Susan Manning 44-45). James Beattie’s dissertation “Of Dreaming” is recommended for further reading in this entry, and was most probably familiar to Elihu Hubbard Smith, who records reading a “Scotch Encyclopaedia,” (Smith 399, quoted in Susan Manning 44). The essay transfers the discussion to the sphere of literature. Also, Beattie claims that in spite of the will’s passivity in dreaming, the waking self is to be held answerable for “the nature of its slumbering voices.” On the other hand, Beattie believes in the therapeutic value of bad dreams. Nevertheless, he insists on the fundamental inscrutability of the mystery of dreaming (Susan Manning 45). Brown embraces this view of dreaming in his works. The climate of moral ambiguity and mystery surrounding sleeping disorders invests all his dreaming characters with traits of monstrosity. Moreover, the writer’s literary use of dreams “reveals the sophisticated sensitivity... of [Brown] to the ambiguities inherent in combining within a cultural framework of enlightenment complex literary idioms inherited from, on the one hand, a broadly English literary tradition, and on the other, a Calvinist theological structure” (Susan Manning 40).

The possibility of a split in what seems to be a normal mind, a split that opens up a gap between consciousness and the unconscious, both repels and attracts the Enlightenment mentality. This is felt to be uncanny and often rejected as a logical absurdity (Susan Manning 40). The split is believed to destroy the evidence of self-consciousness, which in Cartesian philosophy and in Enlightenment thought is “the surest and most intuitive foundation of all our knowledge” (Baxter 53, quoted in Susan Manning 40). This must lead to the sense of monstrosity because there is no telling man from the savage then, a distinction of paramount importance for the Enlightenment. The credibility of the evidence provided by man’s appearance thus becomes ambiguous because it is not the sign (man’s appearance) that becomes deformed. Instead, the equivocality of the split consciousness distorts the simple relationship between the sign and the signified (the mind), and by the same token makes it monstrous.

Significantly, the writer communicates the operation of Althorpe’s double consciousness by a textual strategy which has affinities with the apophatic interpretative tradition.

By analogy, the *Vienna Gazette* report of a monstrous murder committed by a somnambulist implies the unspeakable truth impossible to elicit from the protagonist's first-person account. The Old World murder points to the unknowable in the New World Althorpe's split consciousness and his crime. Moreover, this strategy itself introduces double voice and double consciousness into the story. The report can be construed as a voice representing the public world, emblematic of consciousness, while Althorpe's fragmentary recollections can be read as emblematic of the unconscious voice. Thus the split is repeated on the level of the frame narrative. Incidentally, it is not unlikely that this split brings out Brown's ambiguity about the Old World and unacknowledged echoes of the past in both the writer's own oeuvre and the New World, contradicting its view as an altogether new and utopian project.

It seems that in "Somnambulism" the writer takes to its extreme the concept of the monstrous rooted in medieval apophatic tradition, a concept conceived of as "a deformation necessary for human understanding" (Williams 3), because in Brown's story it is the unidentifiable monster that reveals the impossibility of knowledge. Significantly, Brown thus returns to the exegetical tradition which contributed to the development of Puritan typology. Even if "[t]he concept of typology is certainly not identical for the medieval and for the Puritan theologian," Stephen Manning admits that "for that matter, it was not identical for all medieval theologians." Furthermore, he believes that "[a]lthough the Reformation also reformed typology, it did inherit enough of the medieval tangle as perhaps to make some observations about typology in medieval exegesis and literature relevant to the study of Puritan literature in America" (47).

Thomas M. Davis shows that though the Reformation broke sharply with the tradition of medieval allegoric exegesis, this position, in turn, changed over time into carefully guarded application of interpretative methods developed by the Church Fathers. Calvin, less severe in his condemnation of allegory than the earlier Reformers, accepts a restricted application of allegorical interpretation (13, 40-41). This evolution culminates in Jonathan Edwards' work. The eighteenth-century Calvinist, mystic, and revivalist, Edwards moves between the orthodox Puritan typology and an epistemology that is "analogous to the medieval habit of mind by which the physical universe was believed to represent the spiritual in a Platonic or allegorical fashion" (Lowance 223). In *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* Edwards transforms the nomenclature of scriptural typology in order to expound a cosmology of his own, firmly rooted in Platonism. Importantly, Edwards combines Lockean influence with a mystical inclination. He "turns to the vast Book of Nature for a faithful image of the spiritual realm" (Lowance 232) and then in graduated movement passes "from natural 'type' to spiritual truth," which is "Platonic in design, but... is also parallel to the process of revelation followed in mysticism" (Lowance 241).

Larzer Ziff makes a connection between Brown and Jonathan Edwards in “A Reading of *Wieland*” by observing with dismay that “[b]eginning consciously in the camp of the benevolent Philadelphians of the American Philosophical Society... Brown ends his journey through the mind by approaching the outskirts of Edwards’ camp” (54).⁵ Although John F. Slater admits that “[o]nly tantalizing scraps of information, at best circumstantial, and inconclusive, serve to associate the two men,” he insists that “[p]erhaps common sense alone persuades that Brown, one of the best-read men of his day was acquainted with the leading practitioner of a popular genre” (203). Also, Brown’s friendship with Edwards’ disciples and descendents is well documented, not to mention the writer’s high regard for theology and his editorial career during which he published numerous sermons, including some by Jonathan Edwards’ son (203). Moreover, the critic invokes the striking similarities between “Brown’s fixation with sleepwalking and Edwards’ Great Awakening” (205) and rejects the possibility that they might be coincidental.⁶ Indeed, Brown seems to draw on the allegoric tradition in Edwards’ manner but rejects a Lockean epistemological framework.

The Enlightenment’s obsessive fears that there may exist in the self areas unknown to itself, was to result in Romantic fictions of the *doppelgänger* (Susan Manning 40). Significantly, Brown explores the implications of this obsession by interrogating the extreme case of double consciousness manifested in the somnambulic dream disorder. It is noteworthy that not only does “Somnambulism” anticipate the Gothic fictions of the double by portraying the protagonist’s split self, but it also complicates the pattern of doubling. After all, Nick Handyside, a disfigured idiot openly referred to as a monster, can be considered the protagonist’s material double.

He... merited the name of monster, if a projecting breast, a mis-shapen head, features horrid and distorted, and a voice that resembled nothing that was ever before heard, could entitle him to that appellation. This being, besides the natural deformity of his frame, wore looks and practiced gesticulations that were, in an inconceivable degree, uncouth and hideous. He was mischievous, but his freaks were subjects of little apprehension to those who were accustomed to them, though they were frequently occasions of alarm to strangers.... Entirely bereft of reason, his sole employment consisted in sleeping, and eating and roaming. (14-15)

According to the traditional, applied teratology, the deformed body of the mentally retarded wretch should de-monstrate his moral degeneration, and constitute a certain proof

⁵ Slater cites Ziff and points to the varied reactions to his argument. See note 8, Slater 200.

⁶ Slater further remarks that “it would be surprising indeed to find any man of Brown’s era totally insensitive to the religious dimension of sleeping/waking motifs”; 205.

of his guilt. The deformed creature in the story is in fact a harmless though mischievous being, whereas the young handsome and promising man is a nocturnal killer. The writer thus presents the applied teratology as void of epistemological significance. Nick's overt exteriority, pathologized medically as well as psychologically (as an idiot he has no interior, e.g. reason), doubles Althorpe's covert demonic interiority. Interestingly, rather than being an external counterpart of one side of Althorpe's split consciousness, Nick's monstrous morphology embodies no consciousness at all. It is worth noting that the attribution of complementary appearances and morphologies – respectable and monstrous – to the split parts of personality were to evolve in the nineteenth century, famously manifested in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

What seems to be abjected in the juxtaposition of Nick and Althorpe as a pair of doubles is the lack of consciousness, understood as pathological mental disability, rationally comprehensible within a medical discourse, and thereby naturalized. It is, however, the impossibility of recognizing Althorpe's lack of consciousness that indeed inspires terror. The protagonist's serene lack of awareness of being an agent of crime and the absence of a sense of guilt on his part resulting from the complete independence of the unconscious from consciousness, render Brown's protagonist his own monstrous double unknown to himself and those around him. Thus, Althorpe's monstrosity is not simply "transgressive of the process of signification itself" (Williams 7) but it annihilates signification altogether by robbing signs – in applied teratology external deformation would function as such sign – of their ability to signify. Wilczyński emphasizes that in "Somnambulism" the "epistemological framework of the sublime" falls apart (103). After all, the monster capable of realizing neither its own state nor its epistemological status, which is identical with that of the abyss, can only remain dwelling in epistemological darkness.

Published in *The Literary Magazine and American Register* in 1805, the story was most likely written in 1797 as a fragment of Brown's by now lost novel, *Sky-Walk; or, The Man Unknown to Himself – an American Tale*, or perhaps as "a false start" (Weber 249, quoted in Hamelman) on *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*. If indeed a part of the lost *Sky-Walk*, "Somnambulism" can be construed as an explicitly bitter reflection on Crèvecoeur's question "What is an American?" Brown shows that an American is indeed a man unknown to himself, oblivious of his crime, who serenely, albeit not without an admixture of mystification and pity, views and comments on the havoc he himself has wreaked. The story paints a portrait of an American ignorant of his destructive force and sincerely interested in catching the culprit, unaware that he is pursuing himself.

Appositely, the principle of analogy operating in the story also invites a reading foregrounding the historical context of "Somnambulism." Althorpe's position in the text may

be interpreted as mirrored in that of the writer's vis-à-vis his political engagement. Brown was exploring the limits, or more accurately, limitlessness, of his American protagonist's oblivion in the political climate of the urgent need to define the national identity of Americans in order to exorcise from the nation menacing and treacherous aliens, in particular "un-American Americans" (Gardner 430). The writer's anxiety about the validity of the epistemological foundation on which such distinctions might rest manifests itself clearly in "Somnambulism." Ironically, written amid the "fiercely fought identity debates of the early national period" (Gardner 429) by the young republican novelist, the story was published by the "passionately Federalist pamphleteer" (Gardner 431). Reflecting, at the time of its writing, the republican's anxiety about epistemological validity of the terms later employed in the Alien and Sedition Acts, at the time of its publication the text betrays, in the spirit of the Sedition Act, which located the proof of sedition in the act of writing, the by then staunch federalist as a seditious un-American monster; a monster, who – like his compatriots and like the protagonist of his story – is unaware that he might be tracking himself.

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