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"New Forms of Sublimity": Edgar Huntly and the European Origins of American Exceptionalism

EZRA TAWIL

I passed through the cave and reached the bridge which my own ingenuity had formed. At that moment, torrents of rain poured from above, and stronger blasts thundered amidst these desolate recesses and profound chasms. Instead of lamenting the prevalence of this tempest, I now began to regard it with pleasure. It conferred new forms of sublimity, and grandeur on this scene.

Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly*

In the recent renaissance in Charles Brockden Brown criticism, a range of complex cultural-historical questions have displaced the old obsession with Brown's paternity of the American literary tradition.¹ Brown has emerged from a this criticism as a largely new figure—"revised and expanded," as Bryan Waterman has recently put it. This work has made a great deal more of Brown's varied and multi-generic oeuvre than was possible under an earlier exclusive focus on his novels and has simultaneously placed his writing in the richer context of transatlantic political and literary relations at the turn of the nineteenth-century. As a result, the earlier critical assumption that Brown ought to be read exclusively in relation to "Americanist exceptionalism and continualism" now seems questionable (Barnard ix). In fact, the most interesting such scholarship has put some distance between Brown and nationalist ideology, finding in his fiction of the 1790s and his political writings in the following decade a dissenting voice to early American exceptionalism and expansionist ideology (Levine; Kamrath).

In this essay, I return to the unfashionable question of Brown's literary "Americanness," and even focus on the novel traditionally adduced to do so; yet I attempt to approach the question with the nuance of recent Brown criticism, and informed more generally by recent work on transatlantic literary relations at the end of the eighteenth century.² By doing so, I arrive at some counter-intuitive answers to the familiar questions. It is not without reason that earlier generations of critics found in Brown an available figure for literary exceptionalism and a

¹ For an overview of these changes, see Barnard et al., "Introduction"; see also Waterman.

² See for example Ellison; Giles's *Transatlantic Insurrections* and *Virtual Americas*; Tennenhouse; and Fink and Williams, eds.

point of origin for an indigenous American literary tradition. But what is most illuminating is how Brown staked his claim to literary indigeneity by working in an established European literary form (the “gothic romance”) and self-consciously adapting concepts from British aesthetic philosophy (the notion of poetic novelty and the descriptive theory of the sublime). Brown’s most profound borrowing from European culture was perhaps the most counter-intuitive, for it is the one that was most successful in establishing his claim to literary autochthony: his fictions exploited a long-standing European representation of the New World as a place of peculiar aesthetic power. If Brown did produce what we can consider an early version of literary exceptionalism, he did so, paradoxically, out of given European materials. This is not merely a curious irony of Brown’s aesthetic practice, but in fact tells us something significant about how eighteenth-century arguments for American literary nationalism were quite explicitly shaped by the European culture of the aesthetic.

Brown is frequently described as “the self-conscious pioneer” of a distinctly American literary mode (Hamelman 175); indeed, the notion of self-consciousness is a recurrent one in Brown criticism. The phrase is apt because it registers Brown’s abiding awareness of his writing and its goals—a concern we can trace in his prefaces, letters, advertisements for the fiction, and magazine sketches such as “The Rhapsodist” and “Walstein’s School of History.” Yet a certain formal self-consciousness is also woven into the novels themselves. Surely one of the most notable and familiar aspects of Brown’s fiction is its nearly obsessive concern with reading, writing, interpretation, and the whole realm of signification more generally. This is not only obvious when his characters read and talk about books, but also in a range of episodes in which manuscripts are written, read, lost, or found, characters write letters or draw sketches, and scenes of storytelling that thematize the workings of narrative from within the narrative itself. Cathy Davidson has thus described Brown’s novels as “metafiction,” or a “fiction about the making of fictions” (355).

In order to put this self-reflexivity into its proper context, we must recall that the kinds of *mises en abîme* in which his fiction abounds are characteristic of the novel form in general as practiced by American authors in the 1790s. Many of the first novels published in the United States—such as William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Enos Hitchcock’s *Memoirs of the Bloomsgrave Family* (1790), Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* (1797), and Tabitha Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* (1801), to name just a few—contain scenes in which characters or narrators themselves read or talk about novels. “What books would you recommend to put into the hands of my daughter?” asks Mrs. Bourn of the assembled company in *The Power of Sympathy*, thus setting off a series of discussions among the characters about the literary and moral value of writing in various generic and national contexts (20; 15-30 *passim*). Such explicit discussions of reading provide only the most obvious moments of self-referentiality, alongside other episodes in which all manner of books, letters and interpolated tales call the reader’s attention to the activity of reading itself and the utility of the novel in his or her hand.

Certainly, such moments constitute neither a distinctly American literary characteristic, nor a particularly modern one. The question, then, is what function this metaliterary dimension served in the American literature of the early Republic. Perhaps the most compelling answer is the simplest: during the decades after the Revolution, the question of what relationship American literature would have to the English models that dominated the marketplace became increasingly insistent. "America must be as independent in *literature* as she is in *politics*," declared Noah Webster in 1783, "as famous for *arts* as for *arms*" (4). Placed in the context of the subsequent burgeoning literary nationalism, it is reasonable to assume that one function of literary self-reflexivity was to join the self-conscious project of producing an "independent" literature with a simultaneous process of representing and theorizing that literature as new and specifically American. Put simply, it was a moment when American literature appeared to be thinking of itself.

As Carlos Alonso has suggested in an illuminating study of a comparable phase in Latin American literary history, works which claim cultural autochthony—a concept central to my reading of Brown here—may be particularly prone to such formal self-reflection. Since the writer of such a text is forced to reflect on the features of his or her own cultural context, rather like "becoming an anthropologist to one's own culture," Alonso argues, "the project of writing an autochthonous literary text is as much a critical endeavor as a literary one, or more exactly, one where literature and criticism swiftly become entangled" (5, 6). Such works may tend towards an aesthetic self-referentiality that authorizes the work to function simultaneously as its own criticism.

In just this way, I will argue, Brown used his fiction not only to provide instances of "American romance" but also to guide readers' reception of this new mode along the way. By both enacting and simultaneously theorizing the distinctness of American literature, and doing so in explicit relation to contemporary theories of aesthetic experience, Brown's novels in effect operated not only as criticism, but more radically as a kind of aesthetic theory by other means.

It is an irreducible paradox of Brown's quest for an indigenous literature that he turned to the gothic novel, a form that was very much in vogue in Europe in the 1790s (Miles). In terms of my argument here, it makes perfect sense that Brown would do so. For in the European context, the gothic novel was peculiarly self-conscious about the aesthetic effects it aimed to produce in the bodies of its readers. The closely related genre known in Germany as the *Schauerroman* (literally, "shudder novel" or "thrill novel") bore perhaps the most obvious connection to the discourse of aesthetics in both its broad philosophical sense, as the science of sensation and its relation to knowledge, and in the narrower eighteenth-century sense of the study of taste and the pleasure produced by the beautiful. In the British context, Horace Walpole made his own aesthetic intentions explicit in the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*. Explaining how he came to the literary form that his subtitle was the first to designate the "gothic story," he explains for several pages how much his new genre could lay claim to novelty and how much it relied on imitation and convention. "Desirous of leaving the powers of the fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms

of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations," he attempted to "blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (65) and thereby to fashion "a new species of romance" (70). Clara Reeve's preface to *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* similarly aimed to "elucidate the design, and, it is hoped, ... induce [the reader] to form a favorable, as well as a right judgment of the work before him" (3). In doing so, Reeve makes particularly clear how closely linked were the two senses of the "aesthetic," for she invokes the technical language of faculty psychology to frame her artistic goals as designs on the reader's mind and body:

The business of Romance is, first, to excite the attention; and, secondly, to direct it to some useful, or at least innocent, end.... To attain this end, there is required a sufficient degree of the marvellous, to excite the attention; enough of the manners of real life, to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic, to engage the heart in its behalf. (4)

But it was in Ann Radcliffe's hands that the gothic novel was at its most theoretically robust in the sense that it displayed an abiding intertextual engagement with contemporary aesthetic theory. Scholars have excavated in her fiction the echoes of and near-explicit allusions to such works as Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) and Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783). In its explicit descriptions of the power of terror and its paradoxical association with pleasure, the gothic novel almost cannot help commenting on its own relation to its readers, subjected to analogous negative affects and yet presumed to have the aesthetic competency—or, to use the eighteenth-century term, the taste—to experience delight in their presence. By tracing the intricate changes in a character's sensation and cognition, Radcliffe's fiction showed the reader the way to effect this kind of transformation. When, for example, Madame de Menon of *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) finds herself overwhelmed with anxiety about the fate of her former charge, Julia Mazzini, her evening walk through the "wild and grotesque" scenery with its "terrific aspect" inspires her with "reverential awe" and "thrilling and delightful wonder" (104). Immediately after this elevation of perspective, as if being rewarded for it, she finds the long-lost Julia.

Brown may have been drawn to the gothic novel form, then, in part because it had proven to be a genre well-suited to producing aesthetic effects while simultaneously thematizing those effects. Like Walpole and Reeve, Brown cannily used his prefaces to announce his aesthetic goals. Like Radcliffe, he subjected his characters to aesthetic effects fundamentally related to those occurring at a higher register in his readers' relation to his text. To use such borrowings to build an argument for a "native" literary voice was necessarily a delicate proposition. The rhetorical maneuvers in Brown's 1798 prospectus for his novel *Sky Walk* demonstrate the point. In it, he announces to the readers of *The Weekly Magazine* the upcoming publication of "a tale that may rival the performances of this kind which have lately issued from the English press" and one that "will be unexampled in America." The remainder of the advertisement keeps circling back to

these terms, attempting to claim at once a kinship with English forms and some kind of “native” originality:

To the story-telling moralist, the United States is a new and untrodden field. He who shall examine objects with his own eyes, who shall employ the European models merely for the improvement of his taste, and adapt his fiction to all that is genuine and peculiar in the scenes before him, will be entitled at least to the praise of originality. (Brown, *Rhapsodist* 135)

More than making a virtue of a necessity, this performs an effective rhetorical slippage: literary underdevelopment becomes instead unprecedented and limitless potential: a “new and untrodden field.” According to a logic that would become central to literary exceptionalism, the country’s very cultural youth—its lack of “models” of its own—authorizes it as a potential source of “unexampled” originality and novelty.

One inescapable irony of Brown’s claim to literary novelty is that the assertion itself is an entirely conventional rhetorical feature across the western literary tradition. Ernst Robert Curtius traces “[t]he topos ‘I bring things never said before’” to ancient Greece, where it was used to signify the “rejection of trite epic material” (85-86). But the claim becomes particularly pervasive in the modern novel, which by virtue of its name bears an obvious relationship to novelty as a value. And the eighteenth-century gothic novel, in spite of its connection to antiquated times and modes of representation (its practitioners most often called it the “gothic romance” in order to distinguish it from the new novel), insisted on its own peculiar access to novelty. As Robert Miles comments in a study of the genre in the 1790s, “the Gothic follows the first law of genre: to deviate and make it new” (58). Walpole initiated his generic experiment with the claim of writing a “new species of romance” (70), and nearly every subsequent work in the mode, to a more or less implicit degree, followed suit in claiming some kind of innovation.

In *Edgar Huntly*, Brown takes the novelty topos about as far as it will go, for he moves the claim out of its traditional paraliterary locations—the title page, preface, or prologue—and stitches it into the narration itself. We can attribute this narrative strategy not only to authorial brazenness, but also more productively to a formal decision on Brown’s part: the entire novel (save its last few pages), is a letter written by the eponymous hero to his fiancée, Mary Waldegrave. By virtue of this thinly-stretched epistolary conceit, Brown can essentially have his narrator, who is also its fictive author, repeatedly testify to the work’s novelty from within.

Probably the clearest example of this follows the long narrative of the Irish immigrant Clithero Edny. When Brown’s first-person narrator describes his reaction to Clithero’s tale, he does so in a way that seems designed to guide the reader’s reception of the novel itself:

I did not consider this tale merely in relation to myself. My life had been limited and uniform. I had communed with romancers and historians, but the impression

made upon me by this incident was unexampled in my experience. My reading had furnished me with no instance, in any degree, parallel to this. (87)

The passage nearly flaunts its metaliterary dimension, not only because it references the writing of “romancers and historians,” but also because it simultaneously comments on the nature of the story Brown has just inserted into his own novel. Through this combined intertextuality and self-referentiality, the novel can attest to its “unexampled” uniqueness among all the other texts provided by the protagonist’s reading. Apparently, in all the annals of literature we will not find a story like it. It is thus not difficult to hear, beneath the narrator’s commentary, the author’s prod to his own reader similarly to become conscious of the radical novelty of the work in hand.

Similar passages in which Brown essentially has his narrator insist on the novelty of the work can be found throughout *Edgar Huntly*. Describing his pursuit of Clithero through the wilderness, for example, Huntly attests, “[m]y rambles were productive of incessant novelty,” as “[n]ew tracks were pursued, new prospects detected, and new summits were gained.” All of this newness naturally brings with it unaccustomed and unusual effects; though he had grown up in the region and thought himself familiar with its features, Huntly tells us, none of his previous excursions “had led me wider from my customary paths than that which had taken place when in pursuit of Clithero” (93).

In a related cluster of passages, Huntly interrupts his narration to mark the difficulty of giving adequate expression to his experience: “Here, my friend, thou must permit me to pause. The following incidents are of a kind to which the most ardent invention has never conceived a parallel” (151). He sounds a similar note some pages later when he must narrate another ineffable experience and hence finds himself at another representational threshold: “No fancy can conceive a scene more wild and desolate than that which now presented itself” (174). In both these cases there is an implicit authorial bravado lurking beneath the insistence on experiential newness: no other faculty of “fancy” or “invention”—that is, no prior or contemporary artistic imagination—can beat the scene which is about to be painted. In effect, these passages use the classical topos of inexpressibility as a kind of authorial throat-clearing, setting the reader on notice that what is about to come is a putatively unparalleled aesthetic performance.³ At one point, Brown’s narrator-author makes this boast almost explicit, symbolically vaunting over the bodies of previous romancers and poets: “Few, perhaps, among mankind have undergone vicissitudes of peril and wonder equal to mine. The miracles of poetry, the transitions of enchantment, are beggarly and mean compared with those which I had experienced. Passage into new forms, overleaping the bars of time and space, reversal of the laws of inanimate and intelligent existence had been mine to perform and to witness” (229).

It is quite easy to understand such claims to formal innovation—whether in a preface, periodical notice, or woven right into the fabric of a literary work—simply as advertising copy aimed at claiming a larger market share. Let us grant that it served that promotional function; but it did much more than that.

³ On “inexpressibility topoi,” see Curtius 159-62.

For the concept of literary newness and originality was linked via the philosophical discourse of the aesthetic to the impact a work could hope to have on the minds and bodies of its audience. "Novelty" was not only the preeminent buzzword but also perhaps the most universally legitimate value of eighteenth-century criticism. It is clear not only in an explicitly physiological theory of aesthetics such as Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (whose first section is entitled "Novelty"), but across the range of aesthetic theory that a work of art could spur the imagination only if it was delivered by something novel. "Novelty ... is the parent of admiration," wrote Sir Richard Blackmore in a 1716 treatise (Ashfield and de Bolla 41). Thus a poet's language must not only be elevated, but must also engender surprise, utilizing the extraordinary and unaccustomed to "open" the reader's mind. Blackmore used an eighteenth-century physiology of emotion to explain the power of poetry. According to this model, "admiration" served as a kind of pump-priming: "when the poet intends to give delight and convey instruction, as admiration engages attention, so it prepares and opens the mind to admit the force of the poet's sentiments, and receive from them deep impressions" (40). Poetry is a delivery mechanism for sentiments; the more wonderful the language, the more the reader's mind is opened and prepared to receive the impressions deeply. By contrast, the familiar or the customary tends to produce in the reader a psychological state of indifference akin to the physiological state of lethargy (Clery 28). Custom, then, emerges as the enemy of sublimity, as John Baillie explained in his 1747 *Essay on the Sublime*:

Uncommonness, though it does not constitute the sublime of natural objects, very much heightens its effects upon the mind: for as great part of the elevation raised by vast and grand prospects, is owing to the mind's finding herself in the exercise of more enlarged powers, and hence judging higher of herself, custom makes this familiar, and she no longer admires her own perfection. (Ashfield and de Bolla 90)

As if heeding this philosophical warning, the gothic literature of the period answered the call with unrelentingly uncommon settings, themes, and events. As E. J. Clery has suggestively argued of Walpole's fiction, "like Burke's theory, *Otranto* originates in the problem of boredom and satiety" (29).

American writers in the last decades of the eighteenth century necessarily had a different relationship to this cult of novelty. In the most general terms, it is not difficult to imagine how post-revolutionary Americans could appropriate aspects of such an aesthetic in a self-serving manner. A "new Republic," after all, particularly one situated in a "New World," might reasonably be expected to provide a unique point of access to aesthetic novelty, originality, and power. And since its governance was not founded on ossified forms of authority, it seemed immune to the lethargy of the given and the customary. This new society thus occupied a symbolic location akin to the primitive societies of antiquity, whose poets (according to eighteenth-century antiquarians, as I will discuss more fully below) enjoyed a privileged access to artistic originality because no traditions, customs, or regular cultural forms had yet arisen to constrain their primitive imaginations. By analogy, then, to observe the newly forming modern society in

this new quarter of the world is like returning to a moment when everything was by definition novel and unfamiliar; in essence, it is to be afforded a vision of the original first stages of civilization. According to this recurrent temporal paradox, if America was a "neotopia," it was simultaneously a place of primitive aesthetic power—a new old place.

It is critical to emphasize, however, that long before the Revolution, America served this aesthetic function first for European eyes. Just as "America" in Enlightenment political theory connoted the zero degree of society—"[I]n the beginning," wrote John Locke in *Two Treatises on Government*, "all the world was America" (II.49)—the New World also functioned in aesthetic philosophy as a limit case for inquiries into beauty and taste. Influenced by accounts of New World travel and exploration since the Renaissance, eighteenth-century aesthetics turned to American examples and imagery to convey the extremes of aesthetic experience.⁴ This writing frequently recruited the aboriginal American as a proxy for those experiences, and the "sublime savage" thus became a commonplace of aesthetic philosophy: "An American chief, at this day," wrote the Scottish literary scholar Hugh Blair in 1763, "harangues at the head of his tribe, in a more bold metaphorical style, than a modern European would adventure to use in an epic poem" (2).⁵ In Germaine de Staël's work at the end of the century, it was not the aboriginal American but the European creole in the New World who represented this supreme aesthetic potential. Though she did not regard its literature as mature enough to warrant the systematic treatment she accorded other national literatures in *On Literature Considered in its Relationship to Social Institutions* (1800), "America" occupies a very significant location in her argument, for it represents a space of unparalleled cultural possibility:

The literature that should characterize a great people is always interesting to examine, I believe: the literature of an enlightened people, who have established liberty, political equality, and manners in harmony with such institutions. Right now the Americans are the only nation in the universe to which these reflections are

⁴ British critics often used the language of exploration in general, and the image repertoire of the New World discovery narrative in particular, in order to convey the aesthetic experience of the sublime. When, for example, John and Anna Laetitia Aikin published their seminal gothic tract, "The Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" in their 1773 *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, they metaphorized the experience of the imagination in the presence of "gothic romance" as the exploration of a "new world": "A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of 'forms unseen, and mightier far than we,' our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers" (Cley and Miles 129). In the British context, these tropes of discovery were simply a convenient and resonant way to allude to the experience of the marvelous, long associated in the European imagination with the radical novelty encountered by Renaissance explorers. But the same language would have resonated quite differently to Anglo-Americans throughout the colonial period, and was taking on an even more forceful resonance during the 1770s, when the Aikins wrote. On European constructions of the New World see Greenblatt, Greene, and Campbell.

⁵ Compare Immanuel Kant's discussion of Native Americans in section four of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (111-12). "Among all savages," writes Kant, "there is no nation that displays so sublime a mental character as those of North America" (111).

applicable. Americans may still have no developed literature, but when their men in public office are called upon to address public opinion they obviously possess the gift of touching all the soul's affections with simple truths and pure feelings. Any-one who can do this already knows the most useful secrets of style. (185)

In a sense, Staël can represent America quite literally as *sui generis*—"the only nation in the universe" of its kind—precisely because it is presumed to have no developed character of its own, and hence can embody a kind of pure plasticity. And yet its already-established "gift" for political expression ensures for it a positive literary destiny.⁶ Though Staël appears not to have been aware of Charles Brockden Brown's work, Brown's prefaces at roughly the same historical moment, as I have already noted, also represented America as an "untrodden field" capable of generating "unexampled" literary work. Staël's formulation of American cultural exceptionalism here is as extravagant as anything American intellectuals would articulate until Walt Whitman's 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, but she herself was already drawing on a long European tradition for which America was a place of peculiar aesthetic power.

Thus, when eighteenth-century Americans adopted these concepts of novelty and sublimity in order to claim a unique New World aesthetic, they were in effect acting out a philosophical script that had already been written in European thought. Brown was by all appearances the most successful at manipulating this set of concepts for his own purposes; thus, it is against this transatlantic cultural backdrop that we must understand his claim that what is new about his fiction is intimately linked to what is American about it. From the first page of the preface to *Edgar Huntly*, the value of his "new performance" is bound up with the claim to produce a form of literature in keeping with the new nation. Here again invocations of novelty and originality quickly accumulate in a familiar fashion. Just as "America has opened new views to the naturalist and politician," it should supply the novelist with "new springs of action, and new motives to curiosity." As a result, the "native of America" can draw on "sources of amusement to the fancy and instruction to the heart, that are peculiar to ourselves" as they are "opened to us by our own country" and hence "differ essentially from those which exist in Europe" (3).

As we move out of the novel's preface and into the action of the novel, however, it is at first difficult to grasp how exactly it aims to make good on this promise. Clithero's extended interpolated tale constitutes chapters four through eight of Brown's novel, and a significant portion of the chapters immediately preceding and following them serve the narrative function of framing Clithero's story. The story's events make a cosmopolitan sweep from rural Ireland to the continent, then back to Dublin, and from there to the New World via East-India trade routes. As for its thematic content, the tale is filled with what we must call

⁶ Staël's assessment of American literary promise seems to have been based on the "voice" of political documents such as the Declaration of Independence rather than on any work of "literature" in the modern sense that she herself was helping to codify. It thus supplies a perfect example of Jay Fliegelman's argument in *Declaring Independence* about the meeting point of political, rhetorical, and literary discourse in the Revolutionary period.

stock "Old World" plot elements—vassalage in Europe, aristocratic libertines and their dissipated sons, and marriages constricted by the exigencies of rank and situation.

What kind of way is this, we might well wonder, to begin to tell an "American story," one "opened to us by our own country" and hence essentially different from "those which exist in Europe"? It would be relatively easy to say that the "American" part of the story arrives only with the novel's second half, and even to argue that Clithero's European back-story stands in precisely as the sign of what will be displaced by the novel as a whole. Yet from another perspective, Clithero's tale plays a more direct and straightforward role in the claim of an American literary mode. The key to understanding how lies not in the tale's content but in the way Brown uses setting to stage the scene of its telling. For the narrative framing of Clithero's European story everywhere emphasizes the regional American geography in which it is told, and against which this telling is narrated.

Though Clithero's story will not actually be told until the fourth chapter, we might say that a place is prepared for it from the novel's first pages. At the moment Clithero is first encountered as the moonlit "shape of a man" unaccountably digging in the earth, Brown is careful to plant this "figure, robust and strange" in the distinctive regional geography of Western Pennsylvania, in "the desert tract called Norwalk" and the neighboring "Solebury" (10, 19, 23). Almost all of what passes for action in the opening chapters is constituted by Huntly's pursuit of Clithero "through breaks and dells" in a landscape that is "in the highest degree, rugged, picturesque, and wild" (18, 19). When, after a long period of evasion and pursuit, Clithero finally agrees to tell his story, the novel rather explicitly sees to it that the telling itself will occur in an appropriate setting: Clithero suggests that "we could go into the wood together: and find some spot, where we might discourse at our leisure, and be exempt from interruption" (33). Huntly immediately accepts this "invitation" and the two search for a suitable place:

We turned from the road into the first path, and proceeded in silence, till the wildness of the surrounding scenery informed us, that we were in the heart of Norwalk. We lighted on a recess, to which my companion appeared to be familiar, and which had all the advantages of solitude, and was suitable to rest. Here we stopped. (33)

Solitude is a simple enough motivation for heading into the woods to "discourse," but as the narrative lingers over these details it becomes clear that the change in scene to accompany Clithero's narrative performance also is designed to provide certain aesthetic benefits: wild nature, the substitution of the path for the road, and particularly Brown's favorite type of space, the recess, all provide the ideal "surrounding scenery" for the drama about to be enacted. Similarly, after Clithero completes his story, he abruptly "started from the spot where he stood ... and disappeared amidst the thickest of the wood" (86).

However cosmopolitan are its actual events, then, Clithero's tale is literally embedded in the local geography by the scenery of its telling. And however

relentlessly “Irish” is Clithero’s history and character, it becomes clear that the “robust and strange” figure and this particular “uncultivated region” are peculiarly made for each other. Lest we miss the point, Brown has his narrator effectively say as much during a later round in his pursuit of Clithero: “[S]hould he have concealed himself in some nook or cavern, within these precincts, his concealment was not to be traced. This arose from the nature of that sterile region” (91). Indeed, by this point in the novel we have already had abundant evidence that the land provides a natural labyrinth which not only assists, but makes possible Clithero’s habitual concealments:

The track into which he now led me was different from the former one. It was a maze, oblique, circuitous, upward and downward, in a degree which only could take place in a region so remarkably irregular in surface, so abounding with hill-ocks and steeps, and pits and brooks as Solebury. (23)

If we take the narrator’s assertion seriously, the features of the region are explicitly said to be not only unique, but uniquely suited to the mysterious events taking shape. Such passages clue us in to Brown’s larger project in this novel: using putatively distinctive features of an American landscape to announce the arrival of a distinctively American literature.

American literary historians have long identified the relationship between the country’s geography and its literature as the most distinctive mark of American literature, or to be more precise, of the ideology of the “American tradition.” So, too, Brown’s particular use of American settings is an extraordinarily obvious feature of his writing, since he himself underscored it in his prefaces, and later generations of literary critics essentially repeated Brown’s self-promotional gestures, celebrating his “native turn” on behalf of an “American gothic.” But if we read this use of landscape solely as declaring a “break” from European forms, rather than a claim that is profoundly and inextricably linked to European thought, we run the risk of confusing a specifically eighteenth-century cultural politics of the aesthetic with later forms of cultural nationalism.⁷

We might begin by taking a somewhat more literal reading than is customary of Brown’s stated aesthetic goal, “to exhibit a series of adventures, growing out of the condition of our country” (3). Critics most commonly read this as an allusion to political and social conditions, and hence as a rationale for reading Brown’s fiction in relation to the political upheavals of its historical moment—an interpretive emphasis which has generated rich and varied historicist readings. But what might we add to such readings if we understand “the condition of the country” to refer quite concretely to certain geographical and topographical features of “America”?

Indeed, this logic is everywhere in the narration of *Edgar Huntly*, once we know to look for it. Consider for example Edgar’s description of the region of

⁷ As Larry Kutchin has recently argued, for example, the “American picturesque landscape” has its origins firmly rooted in eighteenth-century British aesthetics—a fact which has been distorted by anachronistic narratives of national development (395).

Norwalk, which suggests that the land somehow gives rise to the events which move the plot:

The basis of all this region is limestone; a substance that eminently abounds in rifts and cavities. These, by the gradual decay of their cementing parts, frequently make their appearance in spots where they might have been least expected. My attention has often been excited by the hollow sound which was produced by my casual footsteps, and which shewed me that I trod upon the roof of caverns. A mountain-cave and the rumbling of an unseen torrent, are appendages of this scene, dear to my youthful imagination. (22)

This passage does a remarkable amount of semantic work, if we take its details seriously. In a literal way, we are told that the geological characteristics of the region are productive of precisely those topographical features—cavities, rifts, caves, hollows, and recesses—that enable all of the central actions of the novel. A land of recesses and underground caverns is a land seemingly destined to give rise to secrets, romantic mysteries, and freaks of fancy. And by virtue of its *irregularly* decaying surface, where “cavities ... make their appearance in spots where they might least have been expected,” this land also lends itself to surprise, unexpected occurrences, excitements to the attention, and other spurs to the “youthful imagination.” In short, the landscape provides the material conditions of possibility of aesthetic novelty and the gothic plot elements Brown uses to produce readerly pleasure. In this respect, geography is not merely significant; it is determinative and generative. Thus the preface’s peculiar assertion that the book is “growing out of the conditions of our country” (3) turns out to designate quite perfectly the fantasy of an autochthonous literature in the literal sense of the term: one growing out of the earth itself. The American landscape doesn’t only inspire, it effectively authors an American literature.

Brown’s works with predominantly rural settings—*Wieland*, *Edgar Huntly*, and the first section of the fragmentary *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, all located in the “rude precincts” of Pennsylvania—repeatedly emphasize the same set of natural features. In the most general terms, these are wilderness settings rather than cultivated landscapes. Brown’s America is evidently a place of extremity and verticality, abounding in cliffs and cataracts, which repeatedly subjects inhabitants or visitors to dizzying ascents and precipitous declivities. Just as importantly, it is also a land of negative spaces scooped out of the landscape in a kind of reverse relief: a topography carved with caverns, cavities, recesses, hollows, and chasms, to name just a few of the most frequently repeated ones. These features make up a particularly American type of wilderness supposed to be distinct from typically British uncultivated spaces such as the heath, the moor, or the fen.

Understood in the transatlantic context I am emphasizing here, however, Brown’s insistent use of such settings may constitute his most profound debt to the European culture of the aesthetic, for these natural spaces are in turn drawn from the features of the sublime as British aesthetics had defined it. Though the roots of this conception are typically traced back to Longinus’s third-century

treatise, it was during the long eighteenth century that theorists supplemented the poetic or rhetorical sublime with an account of "the sublime of natural objects" (Ashfield and de Bolla 90). The symbolic geography of the sublime abounded with many of the same kinds of natural spaces I have just detailed in Brown's fiction: high cliffs and deep chasms, cataracts, rough and uneven topography, and obscure recesses. "We are moved ... by the View of dreadful Precipices; great Ruins, subterraneous Caverns, and the Operations of Nature in those dark Recesses," wrote Hildebrand Jacob in his 1735 discussion of "How the Mind is rais'd to the Sublime" (422). Edmund Burke's extensive treatise on the sublime two decades later echoed and greatly expanded this list of natural features; indeed, so extensive are the parallels between the sections of Burke's discussion of the natural sublime and the wilderness setting of *Edgar Huntly* that it is possible to lay them side by side and tick off Brown's use of nearly every feature given importance by Burke.

From a literary perspective, too, it is unclear at first how Brown might hope to use such spaces to generate a supposedly "American" aesthetics. Since the British gothic fictions of the period were also deeply and explicitly engaged with the theory of the sublime and the picturesque, their settings used a comparable cluster of geographical features to generate similar aesthetic effects. The "labyrinth of caverns" in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, for example, would seem to be one particularly obvious precursor to the caves and tunnels in the landscape of *Edgar Huntly* (126). Walpole's Otranto, Radcliffe's Sicily, and other British gothic settings also seem inseparable from the events staged against their backgrounds. Each new novel in the gothic mode managed to represent its locale as uniquely abounding in picturesque or sublime effect. The reason later Romantics so idolized "Mother Radcliff," as Keats called her, was her masterful use of natural setting (Miles 45). In his essay on Radcliffe in *Lives of the Novelists*, Sir Walter Scott (who called her the "first poetess of romantic fiction") quoted Thomas Mathias on the novelist as a female necromancer fostered by "the Florentine muses in their secret solitary caverns" (241). Whether it was held up for admiration or subjected to satirical critique, everyone agreed that Radcliffe's signature effect was a certain use of *mise en scène* to generate aesthetic pleasure.

The natural features of Brown's "American" landscapes can thus be said to draw on the settings of the British Gothic. But there is an important sense in which the comparison makes the difference, because the British novels were, almost without exception, set in foreign locales—that is, in places marked foreign to their authors and intended readership. Julia Kristeva has linked the cultural impulse behind the gothic mode to the psychic process of abjection, the "throwing-off" of unacceptable psychic contents or threatening social contradictions onto ghostly or grotesque figures (17-55). What we find at the level of setting is a spatial, rather than psychological, form of this logic: the abjection of gothic events onto alien spaces. As has often been noted by scholars of British gothic, the genre thus bears a deep connection to eighteenth-century travel-writing such as Tobias Smollett's *Travels through France and Italy* (1766) and, more generally, to the cultural geography of the "grand tour." The predilection of the British romancers for southern European settings in particular—locales

frequently named in the titles, as in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* or Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance*—results in part from the association of ignorance, violence, and transgressive excess with the residual spaces of semi-feudal, Catholic, and outlying Europe. Radcliffe also famously experimented with northern European, and particularly Alpine settings in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). The important point is that, for nearly all British fictions in the genre, "gothic" events take their place, as if by a formal necessity, in foreign settings.⁸ Jane Austen's satire of the form in *Northanger Abbey*—published posthumously in 1818, but written in the late 1790s, when Brown was writing *Edgar Huntly*—indirectly drives this point home by giving us a quixotic heroine credulous enough to imagine that contemporary England might be productive of gothic events. Even the novel's mildly oxymoronic title (given to Austen's manuscript by her brother, Henry) performs this satire in miniature by yoking a British-sounding locale with a stereotypically southern-European structure. In effect, what Catherine Morland ridiculously fails to realize is that the gothic is supposed by definition to reside *elsewhere*, and that "taste" consists in pleasurably observing the foreign and exotic from the vantage point of the domestic and familiar.

We might understand this geographical distancing of the gothic, in part, as a measure of the ambivalence built into the concept of the sublime, at once the highest form of aesthetic experience and a volatile site best kept at a conceptual distance. Because of its connection with intensely negative affects such as terror, the sublime must always be discursively contained even as it is being celebrated. One explicit sign of this ambivalence in eighteenth-century criticism is the association between aesthetic power and political or social instability. Thomas Blackwell ruminated on the contradiction in his *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735): "The *Marvelous* and *Wonderful* is the nerve of the Epic Strain: But what marvelous Things happen in a well-ordered State? We can hardly be surprised; ... Every thing happens in Order, and according to Custom or Law" (26). By contrast, the poet of a barbarous people or an uncultivated time enjoys certain aesthetic advantages:

[I]n a wide Country, not under a regular Government, or split into many, whose Inhabitants live scattered, and ignorant of Laws and Discipline; in such a Country, the Manners are simple, and Accidents will happen every Day: Exposition and loss of Infants, Encounters, Escapes, Rescues, and every other thing that can inflame the human Passions while acting, or awake them when described, and recalled by imitation. These are not to be found in a well-governed State, except it be in a Civil War; which, with all the Disorder and Misery that attends it, is a Fitter Subject for an Epic Poem.... (26-27)

⁸ The two most prominent examples of British gothic novels with an English setting, Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (1777) and Sophia Lee's *The Recess, or, A Tale of Other Times* (1783) substituted, as their titles suggest, distance in time for distance in space in defamiliarizing their fictional worlds.

The catalogue of “accidents” Blackwell offers here—“encounters, escapes, rescues,” and so on—were, of course, the same events that provided British readers of his time with the most reliable and entertaining plot elements of popular prose, from narratives of exploration to captivity narratives and early novels such as Daniel Defoe’s *The Life and Strange Suprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). And yet, in a familiar crossing of the aesthetic and the moral, what is delightful in art is not desirable in life. Blackwell thus concludes his line of reasoning with an ironic wink at his patron and addressee: “Although the Pleasure arising from a Taste of the sublimer kinds of Writing, may make your *Lordship* regret the Silence of the Muses, yet I am persuaded you will join in the Wish, *That we may never be a proper Subject of an Heroic Poem...*” (28). The sentiment is not uncommon in eighteenth-century British criticism, where, by a typical reversal, contemporary Britain’s relative aesthetic poverty corresponds to the happiness and stability of its political and social order: “It is thus that a People’s Felicity clips the Wings of their Verse” (28). In this way, Britons are symbolically positioned, not as producers, but as cultivated *consumers* of a sublime aesthetic that is located elsewhere.⁹ This explains the indispensable cultural function served by the ancient bards. In works like Blackwell’s *Enquiry*, Hugh Blair’s *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), and Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753), the ancient Greeks, Celts, or Hebrews serve as spectacles for modern Britons, who thus get to experience aesthetic delight from within their ordered state. To be British “persons of taste” (Blair 207) was evidently to be spectators of the sublime from a safe distance, whether temporal or spatial.

Brown’s claim, then, that his extraordinary literary adventures “grow out of the condition of our country” is not only a departure from the British literary practice of setting gothic events in an exotic foreign locale, it is also a subtle re-configuration of a similar conceptual geography in British criticism. This reminds us, first, that even as Brown addresses his novels quite explicitly to an American readership, he was simultaneously staging American sublimity for the benefit and pleasure of European spectators and in relation to an imagined European aesthetic subject. If we replace his fiction in the transatlantic critical and theoretical context I am emphasizing here, it is not hard to see how Brown’s extravagantly sublime America could claim to offer just such an “elsewhere” for European readers. We can perhaps regard it as a measure of his success that some of the key figures of British romanticism—including Keats, Shelley, and Hazlitt—numbered among Brown’s admirers (Reid 188).

Even so, we must recognize that setting the gothic “here and now” in relation to his implied American reader interpellates that reader in a particular way. In effect, Brown puts his American readership in the same zone as his fictional

⁹ The exception that proves the rule in eighteenth-century criticism is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the British work most often cited and quoted as an instance of sublime poetry. For, as Blackwell’s reference to Milton makes clear: “it was when unhappy *Britain* was plunged in all the Calamities of *Civil Rage*, that our high-spirited Poem took its Birth” (65-66). It thus fits within Blackwell’s earlier formulation of a “well-governed State ... in a *Civil War*” (27). The example of Milton also suggests how Americans could use their “civil war” with Britain to authorize their own sublime aesthetic in the closing decades of the eighteenth century.

madmen and antiheroes. A curious feature of his earliest novel titles make this point. Both the unpublished *Sky Walk; or, the Man Unknown to Himself* and *Wieland; or, the Transformation* carry the same additional subtitle, *An American Tale*. Taken by itself, the phrase seems like a standard assertion of literary nationalism and the arrival of a “tale” for, by, or about Americans. But appending this phrase to these works in particular raises the question of why Brown would label a story about a man “unknown to himself,” or about one who slaughters his family in a fit of enthusiastic madness, as particularly “American” ones. It makes perfect sense to suggest that the titles thus open up an ironic dimension, and by extension, that Brown used his fiction to issue cautionary political tales to the young nation. But what interests me here is what we might term the aesthetic politics of the gesture. Such a “domestication” of the gothic brings its effects within the readers’ symbolic circle of influence and gives them a front-row seat for the manifold and wondrous “disorders” and “diseases” paraded before them. If on the one hand this implied that American readers were symbolically susceptible to these disorders and subject to their terrors, they also—by virtue of the epistemological alchemy of the sublime—had a unique kind of proximity to its pleasures.¹⁰

The particular manner in which Brown brought the gothic novel across the Atlantic thus results a curious paradox: if from a certain perspective “American gothic” could be nothing but an imitation of the European model, there was nonetheless a powerful illusion that the copy exceeded the originality of the original. This was a bold aesthetic ploy on Brown’s part, but it was also a logical outgrowth of the different relationship the form had to its two cultural contexts. As the “new old place” long fantasized by Europe, America could claim access to the kind of aesthetic novelty and originality available to the primitive poets of antiquity.

Brown’s way of bringing the gothic “home,” and collapsing the distance between the reader and story-world, not only illuminates his choice of themes—his much-vaunted turn to “native” landscapes, characters, and events—but also gives us a purchase on some of his characteristic formal devices and stylistic choices. Brown’s predilection for first- rather than third-person narrators—or, to put it more suggestively, for an immanent rather than transcendent narrative voice—is perhaps the formal feature that corresponds most closely to the “domestication” of the gothic. *Arthur Mervyn, Memoirs of Stephen Calvert*, and *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* are all framed as first-person memoirs in which, by definition, the narrative voice issues from the person who has experienced the bizarre events first hand, rather than a stable narrator who tells the story at an epistemological distance. The loosely epistolary form of *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly*—both of which are long first-person narratives comprising one side of a fictional correspondence—allows Brown to take this further by directly interpellating the reader as the “you” addressed by the narrator. Nor is it coincidental that both Clara Wieland and Edgar Huntly begin their

¹⁰ As Edward Cahill has argued along similar lines: “The imagination in Brown’s fiction is the site of fanatical delusion and deceptive error, to be sure, but also correct judgment, rational speculation, and transformative sublimity” (32).

relations very much *in medias res*, plunging the reader into the swirling aftermath of the catastrophic and mysterious “late events” which motivate the narration. Since both narrators struggle to comprehend and coherently to narrate hallucinatory recent events, they visit this epistemological instability upon the similarly disoriented reader. Even when events are clarified retrospectively in the novels’ resolutions—as per the Radcliffean formula that came to be known as the “explained supernatural”—Brown’s novels neither fully dispel this narrative disorientation nor conclude with stable epistemological resolutions.

In *Edgar Huntly*, Brown was particularly adept at making his mode of narration mirror the themes of the plot. One of his primary strategies for doing so is to invite an analogy between the topographical features of the region and the surface of the narrative itself. Nearly every description of the landscape—an “uncultivated region” that is “in the highest degree, rugged, picturesque and wild” (19), “a maze, oblique, circuitous, upward and downward, ... remarkably irregular in surface” (23), and so on—seems to apply to Brown’s prose style in this work. By extension, Edgar’s pursuit of the inscrutable Irishman through the “desert tract” corresponds in a peculiar way to the reader’s experience in the face of the similarly inscrutable text. Just as Edgar Huntly pursues Clithero, we pursue *Edgar Huntly*, and are subject to as many bewildering twists and turns as its indefatigable narrator.

There is every indication that forging this kind of correspondence between setting and prose style lay at the core of Brown’s aesthetic experiment of “growing” a literature “out of the condition of our country.” But he did so by exploiting the textural language British criticism often employed to describe the sublime. “[B]eauty should be smooth and polished, the great, rugged and negligent,” wrote Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759). Burke frequently invokes such synesthetic formulations in which touch occupies the position of the master sense.¹¹ By extension, it becomes possible to describe language itself as if it had textural features. Thus, when Burke turns to language in the concluding part of the *Philosophical Enquiry*, he can describe “cultivated” and “rude” languages as “polished” and “unpolished,” respectively (25, 134). These designations were commonplace in eighteenth-century criticism, but in Burke’s text they have a particular force because of his constant use of the textual metaphor. Since he everywhere argues that smoothness is more conducive to beauty and roughness to sublimity, the unpolished languages thus have an aesthetic advantage over the polished ones: “It may be observed that the very polished languages, and such as are praised for their superior clearness and perspicuity, are generally deficient in strength. The French language has that perfection, and that defect.” On the other hand, “the oriental tongues, and in general the languages of most unpolished

¹¹ “[W]hen one is hurried over a rough, rocky, broken road, the pain felt by these sudden inequalities shews why similar sights, feelings and sounds, are so contrary to beauty; and with regard to the feeling, it is exactly the same in its effect, or very nearly the same, whether, for instance, I move my hand along the surface of a body of a certain shape, or whether such a body is moved along my hand” (Burke 141).

people, have a great force and energy of expression; and this is but natural" (134).

Adapting this analogy between the linguistic and the tactile for his own purposes, Brown thus gave his own prose bumps and irregularities, as if attempting to endow the surface of the writing with the same textural effects as he gives his regional topography: roughness, unevenness, complexity and irregularity. It is something of a stylistic high-wire act, for what appears intended to enact a certain linguistic naïvete or an authentic roughness of execution, comes off to Brown's detractors as the opposite: overwrought prose, linguistic pyrotechnics, and embarrassing conceptual excesses. For such readers, Brown's narratives are rather like broken-down automata from another time; they can observe and even admire the complexity of design, but cannot switch them on and watch them run. Yet even when Brown's attempts at a sublimely "uncultivated" aesthetic are apprehended instead as clumsy and ill-formed, the point is clear in any case: that its roughness is a studied formal effect and a significant part of his experiments towards an American literary mode. We might say that Walt Whitman's poetics a half-century later constitute the high-water mark of this cultural logic, for Whitman also insistently used textural language as the badge of his American aesthetic: "Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and non-chalance that the soul loves" (617), he announced in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, a work whose very "jaggedness" (xxvii), he claimed, authorized it as the "autochthonic record and expression ... of the soul and evolution of America" (788). What is less often recognized is that this "jagged" American aesthetic has its roots in eighteenth-century British criticism.

Brown used his fiction to produce a theoretical argument for the unique power of American art that would, in fact, inform similar arguments in the coming half-century. The result was a common sense about an intrinsically American aesthetic on which successive generations of American artists—and literary critics—have relied. The problem with the old critical accounts of Brown as the inventor of an "American Gothic" and the progenitor of a "native" literary tradition is not so much that they are false, but that they simply adopt the terms of Brown's canny acts of self-description and self-promotion. By endowing his fictional narratives with a critical and even theoretical function, Brown himself produced an argument for literary autochthony that was not merely thematic, but formal and stylistic as well. But what is most often left out when we repeat this narrative and call it literary history is that even Brown's strongest arguments for literary indigeneity paradoxically relied on European representations of the New World and its aesthetic possibilities.

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