

# 2450 Lecture 7&8:

The Republic of Imagination:  
Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*

# Charles Brockden Brown



- after a brief career as a lawyer in his native Philadelphia, moved to New York to become the first professional author of the U.S. Under the influence of William Godwin, he wrote *Alcuin: A Dialogue* (1798), a treatise on the rights of women. Further stimulated by Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and his own critical ideas of fiction, Brown in two frenetic years composed his four best novels, *Wieland* (1798); *Arthur Mervyn* (1799–1800), a complex tale of intrigue, terror, and romance set in plague-stricken Philadelphia; *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (1799), a similarly melodramatic romance, also set in Philadelphia; and *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799), an epistolary romance about the fantastic adventures of a somnambulist. These were quickly followed by *Clara Howard* (1801), which was published in England as *Philip Stanley*, and *Jane Talbot* (1801).

# Brockden Brown cont.

- These Gothic romances were carefully documented in fact and pseudo-science, and influenced by the moral purpose of Godwin, the sentimentalism and psychology of Richardson, and above all the horrors of the school of Mrs. Radcliffe. After this brief burst of fiction, Brown entered business, although he also edited *The Monthly Magazine* and *American Review* and *The Literary Magazine and American Register* and did such hackwork as the *Memoirs of Carwin, the Biloquist*. He held high critical standards concerning American literature and believed in using distinctively American materials and in writing novels whose ideas would stir thinkers while their plots would attract ordinary readers. Although Brown was appreciated by Keats, Shelley, and Scott, and even influenced his own master, Godwin, he failed to achieve his aims because of his haste, immaturity, stilted language, fascination by the pathological, and inability to master completely the Godwinian plot structure. Despite his failings, his Gothic romances transferred to an American setting have a dark emotional intensity that gives his work more than historical significance.
- *Concise Oxford Companion to American Literature*

# The Sublime and the Dangers of Inspiration

- On March 17, 1798, a few months before *Wieland's* publication, and while working on the manuscript called *Sky-walk*, some of which would eventually become *Edgar Huntly*, Brockden Brown published a letter in the *Weekly Magazine* signed "Speratus." This epistle contained Brown's earliest public statement of his ideals as an author of fiction. In this statement, intended as a preface to his abortive first novel, he wrote of the need for native American romances, explaining that "to the story-telling moralist, the United States is a new and untrodden field." In an apologetic gesture, Brown defended the importance of novels and romances due to "their moral tendency". Couching his statement in the language of the sublime, he claimed that only by presenting characters "of soaring passions and intellectual energy" could an author hope "to enchain the attention and ravish the souls" of his readers.

# *Edgar Huntly: The Hunt is On*

- “[The Understanding’s] searches after truth, are a sort of hawking and hunting, wherein the very pursuit makes a great part of the pleasure.”  
John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
- “There cannot be two passions more nearly resembling each other, than those of hunting and philosophy, whatever disproportion may at first sight appear betwixt them.”  
David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*
- “If you tell me that you are one of those who would rather travel into the mind of a ploughman than the interior of Africa, I confess myself of your way of thinking”  
Charles Brockden Brown, letter

# Sympathy and Contagion

- It was common in the 18th century to compare the spread of sympathy to the spread of disease.
- Similarly, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), Hume claimed that “[t]he passions are so contagious, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts.”
- Following a similar line of reasoning In the *Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) , Burke described the effects of sublime language by writing that “by the contagion of our passions, we catch a fire already kindled in another.”

# *From the report of “les Commissaires chargés par le roi de l'examen du magnétisme animal.” (1784)*

- By little and little the impressions are communicated from one to another and reinforced by the same manner as the impressions which are made by theatrical representation, where the impressions are greater in proportion to the number of the spectators and the liberty they enjoy of expressing their sensations. The applause by which the emotions of individuals are announced occasions a general emotion everyone partakes in to the degree in which he is susceptible. The same observation has been made upon armies on the day of battle, where the enthusiasms of courage, as well as the impressions of terror, are propagated with so amazing rapidity. The drum, the sound of the military musical instruments, the noise of the cannon, the musquetry, the shouts of the army and the general disorder impress the organs, have a uniform effect upon the understanding, and exalt the imagination in the same degree. In this equilibrium of inebriation, the external manifestation of a single sensation immediately becomes universal, it hurries the soldiery to the charge, or it determines them to fly. The same cause is deeply concerned in rebellions, the multitude are governed by the imagination; the individuals in a numerous assembly are more subjected to their senses and less capable of submitting to the dictates of reason"

# Suspicious Sympathies

- “[a]s a political force and cultural ideal, sympathy was vital to the United States as it emerged [...] The relationship that seemed to sustain sympathy best was friendship, and friendship in America became charged with new meaning. The colonies’ bond to England had been imagined as that of a child to a parent, or a wife to a husband. But as the metaphor and model for citizenly love, romantic friendship was more congenial to republican ideology than either filial or marital relationships”  
Caleb Crain, *American Sympathy*
- “[t]oward the turn of the century, new notions of ‘romantic friendship’ – disinterested emotional relationships based on elective affinity – took the Enlightenment’s idealization of friendship and added a crucial dimension: an emotional economy in which true friendship was nearly as scarce as discussion of it was abundant” [...] An emphasis on sympathy, affinity, and likeness made this form of romantic friendship predominantly (though not exclusively) a same-sex affair. To one male correspondent early in the decade, Charles Brockden Brown wrote ‘Friendship is, perhaps, more pure but certainly not less violent than love. Between friends there must exist a perfect and entire similarity of disposition... Soul must be knit unto Soul’  
Bryan Waterman, *The Republic of Intellect*

# Alien and Sedition Acts

- Edny's status as a "foreigner" evokes the political context in which CBB wrote the novel:
- In 1798, the Federalists (Hamilton and his supporters who favoured stronger central governmental control) passed four bills in the 5th U.S. Congress which became known as the Alien and Sedition Acts. They responded to national anxieties elicited by the "Reign of Terror" of the French Revolution (which starkly divided American allegiances; Jefferson and his Democratic-Republicans believed the U.S. should support the revolutionaries, while Hamilton and others maintained they should remain totally neutral). The Acts were signed into law by second president, John Adams.

# The Pennsylvanian *Genius Loci*

- The novel fuses Huntly's "distempered imagination" with the landscape of Solebury



# The Birth of American Gothic

- “[i]n the American gothic [...] the heathen, unredeemed wilderness and not the decaying monuments of a dying class, nature and not society becomes the symbol of evil. Similarly, not the aristocrat but the Indian, not the dandified courtier but the savage coloured man is postulated as the embodiment of villainy. Our novel of terror, that is to say (even before its founder has consciously shifted his political allegiances), is well on the way to becoming a Calvinist expose of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition”
- Leslie Fiedler
- The British Gothic novel (the first to be called such was *The Castle of Otranto* by Walpole, 1764, but the most popular would be those of Anne Radcliffe from 1789 on) became the most popular form of literary entertainment by the 1790’s.
- In particular, Brown was influenced by William Godwin’s Gothic novel, *Caleb Williams* (1793).
- Caleb informs Huntly’s characterization, just as he informs his readers, in that “[t]he *spring of action* which, perhaps more than any other, characterized the whole train of my life, was curiosity. It was this that gave me my mechanical turn; I was desirous of tracing the variety of effects which might be produced from given causes.” Godwin’s phrasing here, with its self-conscious echoes of Hume’s *Treatise*, provides a link between Caleb and the ideals of Enlightenment philosophy that will be played upon throughout the novel.

## Influence of the Indian Captivity Narrative

John Vanderlyn's "The Death of Jane McRae" (1804) is the most famous visual representation of the purported murder of a white woman by Native Americans (Huron?) allied to British forces during the Revolutionary War. The popular account of this event would influence Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, as well as Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* a generation later.

-Brockden Brown was also partially inspired by captivity narratives including the autobiographical *Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson, Containing an Account of Her Sufferings During Four Years With the Indians and French* (1796) and the fictional *Maria Kittle* (1797) by Ann Eliza Bleecker.



*The Abduction of Daniel Boone's Daughter by the Indians* (1853)  
by Charles Ferdinand Wimar (1828-1863)



# “Queen Mab”

- Old Deb/Queen Mab nominally reinforces the association *Edgar Huntly* makes between the dangers of excessive sympathy, literary inspiration, and popular enthusiasm, as her name evokes both the mob or masses, and the notional power of folk superstitions as contagious delusions.
- Sometime she driveth o’er a soldier's neck,  
And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,  
Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades,  
Of healths five-fathom deep; and then anon  
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,  
And being thus frighted swears a prayer or two  
And sleeps again. This is that very Mab  
That plaits the manes of horses in the night,  
And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs,  
Which once untangled, much misfortune  
bodes:  
This is the hag, when maids lie on their  
backs,  
That presses them and learns them first to  
bear,  
Making them women of good carriage:  
This is she—”
- *Romeo and Juliet* (I, IV) (Mercutio)

# Somnambulism

- “The spiritual force of Locke’s forensic concept of the person takes us at least as far back as the High Middle Ages, the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The French historian Alain Bourreau has recently argued that ‘sleepers’ were a significant phenomenon during that period. These appear to be individuals who went into some sort of trance state, analogous to what was later called somnambulism. The sleepers were significant not because they were plentiful (we do not know) but because they created an intellectual, metaphysical, and virtually theological problem.”
- Ian Hacking
- “[t]he study and practice of magnetism and hypnotism had led to reflections about the constitution of the human mind. Two models evolved: First, a concept of the duality of the human mind (**dipsychism**) and later, a notion of the human mind as a cluster of subpersonalities (**polypsychism**)”
- - Henri Ellenberger
- What particular resonance might have for Americans from 1787 on?

# Treatise of Human Nature (1741)

- "a self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never exist all at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv'd; and consequently there is no such idea," and therefore we "are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."

David Hume

# Containing Multitudes

- When I am sufficiently excited to write, all my ideas flow naturally and irresistibly through the medium of sympathies which steep them in shade'
- Brockden Brown, letter
- As would R. L. Stevenson nearly a century later, Brown experienced writing as an "immersion," through sympathy, with personalities not his own.

# Capricious Constitutions

- In his essay “On the Origin of American Specie(s),” Sean X. Goudie explains that “for Jefferson and Anglo-Americans who believed blacks to be naturally inferior, the Haitian revolution [1791-1804] was a trauma of seismic proportions [...] the rash of rebellions, and the attendant flow of West Indian creoles, their slaves and commodities into the United States, caused many US citizens to become anxious about possible slave rebellions in the United States, and about the cohesion of their national culture and character.”
- The racialized revolutionary anxiety given expression by Huntly’s “savages” is informed by the fact that, “by the time Jefferson became president in 1800, many of the nation’s citizens had come to perceive themselves, their culture, their government, and their identities through and against the democratic upheavals and proliferating identities in the West Indies.” The “capricious constitution” of the human mind is thus suggestively compared to the fragile Constitution that binds together American identity, constantly at risk, like Huntly’s tenuous personality, from the irruption of barely repressed forces.