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**Rituals of Diagnosis: Insanity, Medicine, and Violence in the American  
Novel, 1799-1861**

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**Rituals of Diagnosis: Insanity, Medicine, and Violence in the American  
Novel, 1799-1861**

**by**

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# **Rituals of Diagnosis: Insanity, Medicine, and Violence in the American Novel, 1799-1861**

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*Rituals of Diagnosis* argues that nineteenth-century America's literary representations of madness and its diagnosis respond to interdisciplinary efforts at cultivating a national psychology. Uniting theological and philosophical traditions with medical speculation, mental health reformers from Benjamin Rush to Dorothea Dix linked the expansion of democracy with new vulnerabilities for madness. Theories about insanity thus hypothesized relationships between freedom and responsibility. I examine how America's first psychological fictions contributed to this rich field of discussion.

Taking up novels by Charles Brockden Brown, Robert Montgomery Bird, and Oliver Wendell Holmes that pivot around the investigation of madness, I examine how literary works from the Revolutionary Era to the Civil War dramatize interpretive processes that classify transgressive behavior. I argue that the grotesque subjects at the center of these investigations—Anglo-Americans who are likened to demons, animals, and “savage” racial others—indicate the provisionality of the period's theories of mental illness and register anxieties about affiliation and responsibility that accompanied their

development.

This inquiry contributes to contemporary conversations about authority, desire, and the role of violence in the American imaginary, and argues that scientific speculation and literary experimentation collaborated in constructing this imaginary. While many have acknowledged that discourses of mental health participated in codifying social and political norms, I draw explicit attention to literary form as a site for examining the motivations that fuel these discourses by showing how their narrative trajectories put medical knowledge into conversation with sentimental ideologies. Examining how these novels conjoin problems of interpretive confusion with affective confusion, I explore how these mysteries destabilize the disembodied rationality central to the perch of objectivity that sustained white supremacist interrogations of racial and gendered others. The struggle to situate the locus of social unrest into psychological and ethnic others betrays an archive of fears and fantasies contained by diagnostic procedures.

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## Introduction: Diagnostic Dilemmas

Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference in the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other? So with insanity and sanity. In pronounced cases there is no question about them. But in some supposed cases, in various degrees supposedly less pronounced, to draw the exact line of demarcation few will undertake, though for a fee becoming considerate some professional experts will. There is nothing nameable but that some men will, or undertake to, do it for pay.

—Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*<sup>1</sup>

Melville's narrator raises the question: how do we distinguish sanity from madness? And who is authorized to do it? We may also consider whether the "who" he invokes refers to someone observing sanity's gradient from outside or within the spectrum. In revolving these thoughts, Melville's narrator raises a problematic that underwrites this dissertation's inquiry: while his line of questioning presupposes the possibility that such distinctions may be real in an objective sense, they are drawn imperfectly by human beings with limited insight and steeped in worldly affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*. Edited by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 102.

*Rituals of Diagnosis* examines how American novels from the Revolutionary Era to the Civil War chart out political, theological, and authoritative investments in drawing these lines. By doing so, I put antebellum literature into conversation with the period's interdisciplinary efforts at cultivating a national psychology and rhetorical strategies deployed by reformers, politicians, and literary writers to forge communal bonds, test the legitimacy of social hierarchies, and interrogate policies of social exclusion and territorial aggression. Moreover, I examine literary conventions that frame, critique, and refract these efforts.

Focusing on novels by Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), Robert Montgomery Bird (1806-1854), and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1809-1894), I examine America's first psychiatric mysteries. Set against the backdrop of frontier violence and the cloistered villages of antebellum New England, these novels put insanity at the center of conflicts that pit Anglo-Americans against racial others. The figures represented at the heart of these investigations—white and Anglo-Irish Americans who are likened to demons, animals, and “savages”—are what I call psychological grotesques. These violent men and women blur boundaries between savagery and civilization even as they mediate contradictory feelings of affection and repulsion, sympathy and disgust. Looking at how these bizarre figures become diagnosed as insane with medical and quasi-medical terms, I examine how these narratives read large-scale conflicts through etiologies of moral dysfunction. Moreover, I examine how these diagnostic procedures link the

identification of moral and social boundaries with the maintenance of American providence.

Priscilla Wald argues that medical discourses participate in cultivating national imaginaries by projecting “a narrative logic” onto illnesses and producing stories of “detection with predictive value.”<sup>2</sup> In charting out sources of maladies and articulating methods of containment and cure, such narratives identify vectors of disease and reinforce social and territorial boundaries. Moreover, by identifying existential threats, they foster a sense of an imagined community that needs defending and “worthy representatives” of national protection. Through their literariness, and their significance for public safety, they construct a communal mythos and participate in a “national theology.”<sup>3</sup>

Though Wald’s argument reflects specifically upon the workings of modern medicine in the age of globalization, perhaps no species of medical theorization more aptly fits her claims about medicine’s role in national mythmaking than nineteenth-century America’s discourse of mental illness. While the study of diseases of the mind was a transatlantic endeavor, religious and civic reformers elevated the significance of mental health sciences in America at a time when the medical profession was a long way from

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<sup>2</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 33-58.

attaining the “professional sovereignty” it would achieve in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

For many of the most prominent advocates of mental health reform, such as Benjamin Rush (in the eighteenth century) and Dorothea Dix (in the nineteenth), the project of identifying and treating insanity was instrumental to refining America’s sacred mission. Hypothesizing that expanded freedoms exposed Americans to new pressures and responsibilities, reformers and asylum directors linked the expansion of freedom to increased vulnerabilities to insanity.<sup>5</sup> For these reasons, discourses on insanity were dialectically connected to concepts of American exceptionalism, liberty and providence; they fueled the jeremiads of reformers who advocated an array of tactics for identifying, removing, and alleviating sources for madness and, along with pamphlets and sermons on public morality, these discourses catalyzed institutional reform. Moreover, hosts of politicians and reformers promoted the development of state and private asylums as a means of unifying communities, states, and the nation through public benevolence. Thus, the project of identifying causes for madness cultivated a “sanative culture” devoted to the joint effort of restoring the reason of individuals and ensuring the “purification and rationalization of culture.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 24-25.

<sup>5</sup> David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (New York: Adine de Gruyter, 2002), Xxiv. Brown, Thomas J. *Dorothea Dix: New England Reformer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Reiss, *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums and Nineteenth-Century American Culture*

But as the insane became recognized as important objects of compassion and containment in the new republic, physicians, theologians, and the public debated the criteria that distinguished whether a subject should be held responsible for lawless deeds or alienated from the rights and privileges of citizenship and exempted from culpability. This crisis of distinction arose particularly with cases of controversial forms of madness such as moral insanity—a mercurial and controversial category of madness that entailed dysfunction of the affective or moral capacities of individuals without delimiting intellectual capacities.<sup>7</sup>

The diagnosis of moral competence was especially problematic because medical science's access to knowledge of the mind faced epistemological limits. While theorists of mental disease widely hypothesized that the brain was a crucial organ involved in madness,<sup>8</sup> the capacity to determine causes for insanity satisfactorily was deeply muddled.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Gerald Grob has likened the (ongoing) search for such principles to the

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(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth B. Caplan, *Psychiatry and the Community in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 119-124.

<sup>8</sup> Writing of the period in question, historian of psychiatry Gerald Grob argues that “Virtually all psychiatrists agreed that insanity was a disease of the brain, which in turn was the organ of the mind.” Gerald Grob, *Mental Illness and American Society, 1875-1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Pliny Earle, a founding member of the American Association of Asylum superintendents, explained the impasse thus: “In the present state of our knowledge...no classification of insanity can be erected upon a pathological basis, for the simple reason that, with but slight exceptions, the pathology of the disease is unknown.” Thus “we are forced to fall back upon the symptomatology of the disease—the apparent mental condition, as judged from the outward manifestation.” Quoted by Gerald Grob in *Ibid*, 35. Offering his own Melvillean sigh, Earle, who, had submitted poetry of his own once to Edgar Allan Poe, expounded: “The longer I live, the more I am impressed with a belief in the all-controlling supremacy of mind over matter, of the far-reaching, mysterious power of the divine intelligence within, and of the limited bounds

quest for “psychology’s holy grail.”<sup>10</sup> The challenges of pinning down mental properties that determined freedom of the will, such as intention and moral capability, were thus inaccessible to medicine even as medicine was being brought to bear upon principles of adjudication based on notions of free will and moral responsibility.

Michel Foucault argues that the juridical and discursive mechanisms that traversed these limits, in fact, were important for producing modern concepts of authority and discipline. He argues that medico-legal discourses displaced the question of whether a subject was responsible for an act or not by producing case history narratives that allowed subjects to be typed as guilty or innocent and judged accordingly. This “grotesque discourse,” as Foucault calls it, became politically powerful because it paved over the gaps between medicine and law through forms of storytelling.<sup>11</sup> By these means, “political power” Foucault continues, “has actually given

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of the present knowledge, compared with that is to be known when mind shall have thrown off its fetters of clay. Science is proud, even presumptuous; but how much cause for humility in the fact that it cannot trace one particle of its knowledge upward, through effects, to the original cause and centre of all things! Science is lost at once in the mazes of uncertainty and ignorance, whenever it attempts to fathom mind itself.” Quoted in Franklin Benjamin Sanborne, ed. *Memoirs of Pliny Earle, M.D.* (Boston: Damrell & Upham, 1898), 151.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Grob, “Psychiatry’s Holy Grail: The Search for the Mechanisms of Mental Diseases.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 72.2 (1998) 189-219.

<sup>11</sup> “Where the institution appointed to govern justice and the institutions qualified to express the truth encounter each other, or more concisely, where the court and the expert encounter each other, where judicial institutions and medical knowledge, or scientific knowledge in general, intersect, statements are formulated having the status of true discourses with considerable judicial effects. However, these statements also have the curious property of being foreign to all, even the most elementary, rules for the formation of scientific discourse, as well as being foreign to the rules of law and of being, in the strict sense, grotesque.” Michel Foucault, *Abnormal*. Translated by Graham Burchell. (New York: Picador, 2003), 11.

itself...the possibility of conveying its effects and, even more, of finding their source, in a place that is manifestly, explicitly, and readily discredited as odious, despicable, or ridiculous."<sup>12</sup>

Responding to criticism of the ahistorical dimensions of literary critiques rooted in psychoanalytic and mythic reading,<sup>13</sup> Joel Pfister has called for literary criticism to "rethink historically in the framework of the social construction of psychological codes."<sup>14</sup> Justine S. Murison, in particular, has argued for historically situating psychological terms and exploring how novels extend antebellum America's scientific speculation.<sup>15</sup> One of the challenges such projects face, however, rests in the provisionality of the period's diagnostic terminologies and symptomatology. By examining the novel as a site for iterating and refiguring the process Foucault describes and the civic mandate that warrants it, I suggest we can get a glimpse into literature's role in producing concepts of the psychological and their political significance. Moreover, by examining how these narratives reach their readers through direct and indirect address and find sources of aggression incubating within foundational narratives of moral instruction, I argue that they ask readers to participate in such acts

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (first published in 1966) and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973).

<sup>14</sup> Joel Pfister, *The Production of Personal Life: Class, Gender, and the Psychological in Hawthorne's Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Justine S. Murison, *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6.

of divination and political refiguration.

One of the unifying features that drives these diagnostic tales is their destabilization of the objective gaze that Dana Nelson calls instrumental to the “disembodied, objective, and universalized standpoint offered by Enlightenment science.” This perch of objectivity, Nelson argues, facilitated white supremacist discourses by measuring the conspicuous corporeality of racial and gendered others, whom she calls “democracy’s others,” from a default frame of reference. As Nelson argues, this obfuscation of self-interest is imaginary, susceptible to failure, and productive of much anxiety.<sup>16</sup> These novels’ psychological grotesques<sup>17</sup> radically overthrow this objectivity by telegraphing uncanny qualities that compel empathy and aversion and lead their diagnostic avatars—all white men, with either claims to having arrived at a position of authority, or aspirations attaining one—to panic.

Because the tidal forces of attraction and repulsion that these figures elicit bring to the surface whole constellations of violent desires, and trace abject elements within

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<sup>16</sup> Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> The grotesque is a transhistorical aesthetic mode that is commonly characterized by the juxtaposition or melding together of incongruent images--frequently humans and animals, forms of animate life with the inanimate objects. Expanding upon the manner in which M.M. Bakhtin finds political critique in carnivalesque motifs of François Rabelais, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that the grotesque facilitates cultural critique by drawing upon culturally situated distinctions between the "high" and "low," and thus unsettles social positions and interrogates “the rules of inclusion, exclusion, and domination which structure the social ensemble.” (43) By doing so, the grotesque can force an "audience to acknowledge what it has repressed in order to become what it is" (58). Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).



American society, I examine how they play upon and subvert discourses of sympathy and provide a perverse supplement to discourses of sentimental consolidation, which Elizabeth Barnes calls one of the “principal modes by which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers are taught to see themselves as part of a unified political body.”<sup>18</sup> However, whereas “sympathy converts otherness into sameness,” these interrogations find something disturbing and violent within the field of sameness that needs to be exorcised. In other words, these processes of investigation and diagnosis not only subject the grotesque other to the authority of the all-knowing observer, they raise attention to repulsive elements and forms of madness within the fabric of American civilization that must be recognized, cast out, or otherwise contained.

In the process of examining how these narratives link medical metaphors with concepts of political containment, I suggest that they expand upon Christopher Castiglia’s observations that antebellum reform discourses figuratively cleansed “the agency of partisan negotiation through the supposedly ‘impartial’ operations of the institutionalized state.”<sup>19</sup> These diagnostic tales resolve violence internal to the American community by sequestering it into two spaces: onto the mad subject, who cannot control his or her violence, and onto an authority (professional, institutional, divine) that either controls or justifies violence. In other words, the assignment of

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy* (New York: Columbia University, 1997), 115.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

responsibility for violence goes hand in hand with forms of diffusing responsibility for violence.

While there is a certain consistency to the diagnostic enterprises I examine, I follow a gradually evolving problematic that expands as the problem of social division within the nation continually reasserts itself. By examining how these diagnostic enterprises address emergent political concerns, I explore how these texts' portrayals of the need to contain violence bear witness to persistent instabilities within a public sphere filled with competing interests.

My first chapter, "I Kill Therefore I Am," puts one of America's first novelists into conversation with concepts of madness and state authority that informed Benjamin Rush's attempt to unite mental health and social responsibility under a banner of providence. The Quaker protagonist of Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleepwalker* (1799), excuses his "savage" participation in frontier warfare by combining the insanity defense with assertions of republican duty and divine necessity. Reading this text in conversation with Rush's sanitary prescriptions, I suggest that Huntly's strategies for deflecting responsibility for his actions expose a perverse side to rhetorics of civic abstraction that moralists such as Rush promoted to foster collaboration in a rational public sphere. By exploring how Edgar's rampage intersects with an attempt to play doctor for an incurable Irish madman, I contend that Edgar's efforts at self-absolution and self-edification reveal constitutive tensions that remain in

play during the subsequent chapters.

If *Edgar Huntly* highlights the possibility that self-interest poses a challenge to civic abstraction, my second chapter, “Republic of Disgust,” traces how Robert Montgomery Bird’s portrayal of Nathan Slaughter, the mad Indian-killer of *Nick of the Woods; or, the Jibbenainosay* (1837), positions national government as a prophylaxis and refuge for violent desires. Following Christopher Looby’s appraisal of how the Philadelphia physician’s intensive emphasis upon corporeal determinism defies the kind of civic abstraction discussed in the previous chapter, I turn my focus to Bird’s engagement with popular culture’s fascination with Indian-killing. By making Nathan empathetic and disgusting, I argue, Bird’s novel encourages readers to take solace in federal unity by portraying a national military’s salvative intervention in a postlapsarian frontier. I suggest that Nathan’s pathological ravings, and the frontier community’s blood thirst, speak to Bird’s Whiggish anxieties about “blood and thunder” literature and the unruly desires of Jacksonian “mobocracy.”

Chapter three, “A Grave Scientific Doctrine,” explores how Oliver Wendell Holmes’s *Elsie Venner; a Romance of Destiny* (serialized 1860-1861), a pioneer text in the tradition of American literary realism, serves as a referendum on the theologically-influenced forms of demonization found in the former novels. The ostensible subject of Holmes’s novel is the mesmeric and frightening Elsie Venner—a mysterious specimen of New England womanhood whose unique qualities (we eventually learn) originate in a

prenatal snake bite. The bulk of Holmes's novel, however, focuses on the anxious deliberations of the community of Massachusetts physicians, theologians, and instructors who ponder their visceral reaction to Elsie's existence and revise their opinions on the doctrine of original sin. By making these men's reactions a site of narrative dynamism, Holmes imagines a revised notion of community organized and bounded by biologically inscribed limits, which are linked with sentimental bonds. By exploring how this novel treats Elsie as an object of medically sanctified compassion, I examine how the novel imagines the sanitization of New England's exclusionary measures and fixes communal law and sentiment to local jurisdictions.

This project does not excavate an archive of democratic or radical modes of resistance suppressed by diagnostic politics. Rather, the fictive investigations I study here present an archive of practices and narratives that divest responsibility for violence through acts of rationalization, critical distancing, and the retelling of history. The fact that they constantly do so should give pause to those who would too quickly dismiss these novels. I suggest they are worth engaging, not simply because of the canonical significance of Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* or the popularity and influence of Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* and Oliver Wendell's Holmes's *Elsie Venner*, but because they constantly direct our gaze toward ways in which rhetorics of containing and sequestering violence onto abnormal subjects go hand in hand with its perpetuation in forms that rationalize and methodize violence.

## Chapter One: I Kill Therefore I Am: Diagnosing *Edgar Huntly's* Necessary Madness

Halfway through Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker* (1799), the novel's eponymous narrator takes a moment to prepare his reader for the sudden onset of sleepwalking—a transformation that catalyzes an improbable chain of events which culminate in the professed pacifist's brutal confrontation with a band of Delaware Indians. In doing so, he draws attention to his encounter's novelty and the difficulty of recounting such an occurrence accurately:

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. Fortune, in her most wayward mood, could scarcely be suspected of an influence like this. The scene was pregnant with astonishment and horror. I cannot, even now, recall it without reviving the dismay and confusion which I then experienced.<sup>20</sup>

In these lines, Edgar sets the stage for an unprecedented attempt to narrate the onset of somnambulism, which Charles Brockden Brown calls “one of the most common and most wonderful diseases or affections of the human frame” (*EH*, 3). However, he also raises attention to the difficulty of assigning causality to (and responsibility for) the events he is about to describe. Though he suggests the unparalleled events he is about

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*, Ed. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006), 106. Subsequent in-text references will appear as *EH*.

to relate testify to his tale's authenticity, he also suggests that the act of telling the tale itself undermines narrative coherence. In other words, his attempt to contain madness linguistically is also a vehicle for its perpetuation.<sup>21</sup>

After conveying a loss of consciousness that is marked by a break in the text, Edgar finds himself in a narrative crisis. Awakening in a cave that is far away from home, he recalls that he "endeavored to recall the past; but the past was too much in contradiction to the present, and my intellect was too much shattered by external violence, to allow me accurately to review it" (*EH*, 107). In the episode which follows, however, Edgar's impulse to commit violence becomes associated with a return to the temporal order as "Fate" plays its hand.<sup>22</sup> He reaches in the darkness to find a tomahawk, which he quickly uses to kill and feast upon a "savage" panther, only to stumble on a camp of Native Americans holding a young female captive. In his attempt to save the girl, who is otherwise a token presence in the book, Edgar becomes a brutally efficient killer. Initially, he portrays himself as a reluctant actor in the conflict

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<sup>21</sup> The contradiction between the reliability and coherence of Huntly's story is broached in the first page of Edgar's fictive memoir. Stating that he is only now capable of holding his pen, Huntly wonders: "am I sure that even now my perturbations are sufficiently stilled for an employment like this? That the incidents I am going to relate can be recalled and arranged without indistinctness and confusion? That emotions will not be reawakened by my narrative, incompatible with order and coherence? Yet when I shall be better qualified for this task I know not. Time may take away these headlong energies, and give me back my ancient sobriety; but this change will only be effected by weakening my remembrance of these events. In proportion as I gain power over words, shall I lose dominion over sentiments; in proportion as my tale is deliberate and slow, the incidents and motives which it is designed to exhibit will be imperfectly revived and obscurely portrayed" (*EH*, 5).

<sup>22</sup> Although Edgar states that the events "baffle foresight" and "outstrip belief," he invokes the word "fate" twelve times when recounting the ensuing encounter.

and emphasizes his “religious scruples,” which presumably refer to his Quaker roots. He claims that his “aversion to bloodshed was not to be subdued but by the direst necessity” (*EH*, 119).

But as the “necessity” presents itself, his moral restraint increasingly gives way and he resorts to diverging explanations for this change. First, he likens his deeds to madness and a spiritual unmooring: moving with the “misguided fury of a maniac” (*EH*, 124), he claims that he “was not governed by the soul which usually regulates [his] conduct” (*EH*, 128). As the violence builds to a climax, however, he begins to assert himself as an instrument of divine justice, proclaiming his desire for “bloody retribution” and “atonement” for the Delaware’s victims. Finally, after wounding the last member of the band, he finishes the man off in an exercise in “compassion and duty.” He is “prescribed by pity” (*EH*, 134) to kill him—after all, as he reasons just before wounding the man, “Fate has reserved for him a bloody and violent death” (*EH*, 133).

Owing to *Edgar Huntly*’s sensational portrayal of Indian-settler conflict through the eyes of a European-American victor, Charles Brockden Brown’s third novel has been recognized as a foundational text of American literary nationalism. However, the bizarre manner in which Edgar rationalizes his behavior presents an interpretive conundrum that has produced a wide range of interpretations about Edgar’s behavior and Charles Brockden Brown’s motivations. Moreover, recent critiques of *Edgar Huntly* have also

been a forum for criticizing the interpretive assumptions of readers who continue to pick up Brown's "maddeningly disorganized" book.<sup>23</sup>

Critics working along the lines of what Robert S. Levine calls the "demystifying school" of criticism have read Brown as a writer working within a "coherent and shared national ideology" of American Imperialism—an ideology that is presumably reified by reading practices that overemphasize the significance of Edgar's "internal struggle."<sup>24</sup> In Jared Gardner's words, readers who project the Indians as a "'dark' (uncivilized, savage) nature with which Edgar must do violent battle in order to claim his civilized self" ultimately avoid confronting the politics of exclusion described in Brown's novel by psychologizing it.<sup>25</sup> Taking Gardner's cue, John Carlos Rowe argues that this tendency is encouraged by Brown's practice of framing the frontier encounter through a tortured mindset that blots out the historical and political significance of Huntly's violence. By bringing Huntly's mental state to the fore, Rowe argues, Brown personalizes territorial conflict and thereby shifts "the historical conflicts between the Lenni-Lenape and settlers into the universal conflicts between good and evil, reason and madness, within

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<sup>23</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 157.

<sup>24</sup> Robert S. Levine, *Dislocating Race and Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 18, 20. Jared Gardner, *Master Plots: Race and the Founding of American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 52.

<sup>25</sup> Gardner's argument is that the treatment of "Brown's Indians as representations of an essentially internal personal struggle—whether between father and son or between civilized man and his "dark side"—universalizes a conflict that Brown himself understood as local and psychologizes a project that Brown understood as essentially political." (53). Gardner's argument that *Huntly* depicts an effort to "meet single-handedly the *crisis of identity facing the nation as a whole*," (54, my italics) however, hinges upon a manner of reading the national through the psychological that deserves further scrutiny.



the hearts of men.”<sup>26</sup> Within this context, Rowe views the penumbra of madness that frames *Huntly’s* narrative as an aesthetic device that deflects Brown’s complicity in making a sensational tale about violence—a machination which betrays an “obsessive” attempt by Brown and others to disavow literature’s role as “an institution in the new nation’s colonial imaginary.”<sup>27</sup>

Following Robert S. Levine’s suggestion that we *not* consider Brown working within the tropes of a preexisting “coherent and shared” American ideology, I examine how the tenuousness of Edgar’s mental state reflects upon the goals, challenges, and contradictions that accompanied contemporary attempts to construct such an ideology through the theorization of insanity and diagnostic metaphors. In addition to exploring how the etiology of Huntly’s malady reflects emerging reform-oriented psychiatric theories, I will examine how his maddened narrative brings attention to jarring similarities between the contradictory terms he uses to establish moral distance from his violent acts; for the omnibus of alibis that Edgar uses to explain his behavior—insanity, automatism, divine authorization, and, finally, pity and compassion—blurs distinctions between a rhetoric of communal necessity and an insanity defense.

Brown’s novel further invests diagnostic interpretation with political significance in a dilemma that bookends Edgar’s frontier journey. Edgar’s frontier battle, in fact,

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<sup>26</sup> Rowe, John Carlos. *Literary Culture and US Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 47

<sup>27</sup> Rowe, 28.

interrupts the main plotline of the novel, which involves the Quaker's attempt to investigate the strange case of the Irish sleepwalker, Clithero Edny, who, Huntly believes, may have murdered his best friend, Waldegrave. For Edgar, who is not aware that he himself is a sleepwalker, the fact that Clithero is sleepwalking seems to be sufficient evidence of guilt; moreover, his strange behavior reinforces his otherness.<sup>28</sup> When Huntly takes on Clithero's malady as a problem that is curable, and listens to the Irishman's sad story—he, in fact, has committed no murder—he recognizes their common humanity, but fails disastrously in his mission to restore the man's sanity. Because of the Irishman's resistance to reform, Gardner argues that Brown's novel implicitly illustrates the logic of 1798's Alien and Sedition Acts by making, as Jared Gardner states, "exorcizing the alien," foreigner and "Indian" alike, the "precondition of a national identity."<sup>29</sup>

This reading relies upon the presumption that Edgar's mentor, the soldier-surgeon Sarsefield, has an authorially sanctioned perspective. Sarsefield disparages Edgar's attempt to cure the Irishman in a letter which, notably, is the only part of *Edgar*

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<sup>28</sup> At various points in the narrative, Clithero, resembles the "savages" in the wilderness. And, early on, it is even hinted that he may be a man-animal hybrid when Huntly sees Clithero enter the mouth of a cave and an animal leaps forth afterward (*EH*, 16). As Edgar surmises soon after spotting Clithero, "The incapacity of sound sleep denotes a mind sorely wounded. It is thus that atrocious criminals denote the possession of some dreadful secret. The thoughts, which considerations of safety enable them to suppress or disguise during wakefulness, operate without impediment, and exhibit their genuine effects, when the notices of sense are partly excluded and they are shut out from a knowledge of their entire condition" (*EH*, 11).

<sup>29</sup> Gardner, 53.

*Huntly* that stands outside of the penumbra of Huntly's unreliable narrative. While Huntly recognizes that Clithero is in fact a sick man, Sarsefield, the novel's avatar of "reason," uses labels that are interchangeably spiritual, medical, and legal. Believing that Clithero is "a madman whose liberty is dangerous, and who requires to be fettered and imprisoned as the most atrocious criminal" (193), he labels the Irishman a "maniac," "apostate," and "unnatural; develish; [sic] a thing for which no language has yet provided a name!" (*EH*, 175), Sarsefield's juxtaposition of medical and religious terms anticipate a certain exchangeability among these terminologies for labelling existential threats and providing mandates for authority that we will further explore.

I suggest that these intertwined narratives and conflicting perspectives present different facets of a common ritual that makes the identification and treatment of insanity central to the question of who can be initiated into the league of responsible citizens in the new American republic. But if the novel illustrates "preconditions" for a "national identity," the acts of diagnosis mediated through Huntly's erratic narrative suggest instabilities at the foundation of such conditions. For while Edgar's brutal destruction of the Native American band, and Clithero's eventual capture and suicide, reinforce an exclusionary hierarchy, the rhetoric that authorizes such exclusionary practices is laden with elements of perversion.

Recent literary scholarship concerning literatures of the Post-Revolutionary era has read relationships among discourses of national consolidation through literary

representations of interiority—broadly understood as representations of emotion, spirituality, and mentality. While Charles Brockden Brown’s work has been understood as a productive site for discussing anxieties about authority, masculinity, and national stability,<sup>30</sup> I suggest that the significance of Brown’s depiction of mental anguish can be further illuminated by putting Brown’s work into relation with a contemporary attempt to unify medical, religious, and institutional discourses. In particular, by putting the novel’s diagnostic scenes into close conversation with locally developing theories of mental illness disseminated by Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia physician and reformer, I suggest we can better flesh out the interpretive and civic tensions that Brown’s novel highlights.

Regarded by many as the “father of American psychiatry,” Benjamin Rush was the most famous American physician before the Civil War.<sup>31</sup> He was also a prolific and influential pamphleteer who sought to revise governmental institutions, promote free education and abolish slavery. Like Brown, Rush was concerned with tracing the origins of personal anguish. As Robert Abzug notes, Rush inspired political action in a variety of

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<sup>30</sup> Most notably, Julia Stern’s *The Plight of Feeling* discusses Brown’s thoroughgoing articulation of American anxiety about identity—apprehension over the validity of national origin and the legitimacy of republican political processes unleashed in the aftermath of the post-Revolutionary settlement. Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 154. Julie Ellison’s *Cato’s Tears*, meanwhile, investigates *Huntly* as an illustration of a “paranoid” masculinity produced by anxieties of the Post-Revolutionary Era. Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 152-160.

<sup>31</sup> Half a century later, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. proclaimed that Rush “gave a direction to the medical mind of the country more than any other one man; perhaps he typifies it better than any other.” Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., “Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical Science.” *Medical Essays, 1842-1882* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895), 193.

arenas by rhetorically situating reform efforts within an unfolding “sacred drama” that linked a variety of reform efforts with America’s divine destiny.<sup>32</sup> Looking to the mind and its dysfunctions as a locus for understanding and addressing threats to America’s constitution, Rush argued for the physician’s position as a guardian of republicanism, advocate of sanative reform, and shepherd of providence. Working as a medical practitioner and professor of medicine before the explosion of specialized subfields that would emerge in the following century, Rush approached mental health through lenses that were philosophical, metaphysical and empirical. And by viewing diseases of the mind as disruptions at the confluence of mind, body, brain, and society, he saw an opportunity to suggest causal relationships among personal behaviors, cultural norms, and socio-economic realities.<sup>33</sup>

Accordingly, diseases of the mind provided a basis for considering how the individual could do harm to society and, reciprocally, how society could harm the individual. By considering moral derangement as a condition “When the will becomes the involuntary vehicle of vicious actions, through the instrumentality of the passions,”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>33</sup> As Jason Frank describes the coherent thread which unites Rush’s project: “it was in the divinely secured association between realms that true, scientific meaning was disclosed and the grounds of reformative intervention secured. The mutual derangements of mind, body, and polity demonstrated this truth, and the reform of one realm could never succeed without corresponding reform of one of the others. Consequently, Rush’s diagnosis of pathology in one often pointed to causes arising from another” (Jason Frank. *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Rush. *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia: Grigg and Elliot, 1835), 262.

he positioned the physician as a key agent in restoring moral order through medical and institutional means. These efforts outlined the role of medicine in leading humanity on a path to perpetual peace, but also when violence was necessary for the purpose of national and personal health.

Taken as a whole, Rush's attempt at fusing discourses of mind and nation was as much a narrative endeavor as it was a scientific, or theological one. "The American war is over," Rush declared in 1787, "but this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the drama is closed. It remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government, and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens for these forms of government after they are established and brought to perfection."<sup>35</sup> Likening the fulfillment of the American Revolution to a theatrical performance, Rush implies eventual success, but his emphasis upon the need to "prepare" citizens for the government after its "perfection" suggests a drama of indefinite length.

If the focal point of this unfolding drama's final act lay within the mentalities of the nation's citizens, I will examine how Brown's novel explores the uncertainties accompanying this drama and puts pressure on the question of who, ultimately, can play a role in authoring it. Before exploring how Brown illustrates the etiology of

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Rush. "On the Defects of the Confederation." *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*, Ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 26.

Huntly's somnambulistic wanderings and his failed attempt to cure Clithero, I will examine how Rush—who served as an apothecary, surgeon, and moralist—sought to synthesize a program of virtuous government and citizens by drawing upon religious, political, and medical concepts. As I do so, I will relate how Brown's fiction and Rush's theories drew from a rhetorical tradition that deployed pathological terms to reign in religious and political dissent and theorized medicine as an instrument of providence and national health.

### **From the Worldly Bedlam to the Republican Machine**

Benjamin Rush and Charles Brockden Brown inherited a network of concepts that read erring individuals and illegitimate governments through pathological terminologies. Long before the Age of Revolution, Thomas Hobbes turned to madness as a structuring metaphor for civil unrest, distinguishing the passions and fervor of dissent from the "right reason" which guided people to "true religion" and legitimate government. Broadly stating that madness comprises all unguided passions that produce "strange and unusual behavior," Hobbes argues in *Leviathan* that all deviant feeling should be understood, to some degree, as a form of madness. In a section entitled "Of the Virtues Commonly Called Intellectual, and their Contrary Defects," which discusses the manifold "passions" that cause madness, he pays special attention to subjects who deviated from the state-sponsored religion. Wary that such people

harbor a “private spirit” that threatens the public good, Hobbes describes the “inspirations” of religious upstarts as a clear and present danger to sovereign government. This “folly,” according to Hobbes, raises the specter of a widespread madness he associates with the pre-political state of nature:

What argument of madness can there be greater than to clamour, strike, and throw stones at our best friends? Yet this is somewhat less than such a multitude will do. For they will clamour, fight against, and destroy those by whom all their lifetime before they have been protected and secured from injury. And if this be madness in the multitude, it is the same in every particular man....Though we perceive no great unquietness in one or two men, yet we may be well assured that their singular passions are parts of the seditious roaring of a troubled nation. And if there were nothing else that betrayed their madness, yet that very arrogating such inspiration to themselves is argument enough.<sup>36</sup>

Hobbes’s claim that the “inspirations” of the masses suggested madness *prima facie* reflects a view that the state was in place to diagnose beliefs that deviated from sovereign logic. These private beliefs might seem relatively harmless on an individual level, yet, since potentially contagious, they posed a seditious challenge to governmental sovereignty and, with it, the protection and security of law.

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 42.



Though the religious dissenters who left England to establish new settlements in America had been subjected to the kind of pathologizing rhetoric voiced in *Leviathan*, New England Calvinists frequently turned to madness to exemplify existential threats to their communities; in many cases, it served as evidence of demonic interference. In his *Remarkable Providences* (1684), a text that influenced the Salem Witch Trials,<sup>37</sup> Increase Mather interpreted madness as a sign of Satan's interest in the new colonies, and implicitly, God's interest in their settlement as well. Reflecting the Puritan tendency to typology, Mather argued that madness in the colonies recapitulated conflicts found in the Bible: "the daemoniacks whom we read so frequently in the New Testament," Mather argues, "were the same with epilepticks, lunaticks and mad men" of the present day.<sup>38</sup>

Increase's typological reading of madness had a particular use for directing the Calvinists' "errand" into the wilderness. Given the tenuousness of the colonists' authority in the Massachusetts settlements and their support of the Glorious Revolution against the king, Increase's claims about the presence of demonic entities and their maddening propensities proved to be a powerful warrant for identifying and labeling threats to communal coherence. In particular, it justified describing contact with

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<sup>37</sup> Increase Mather, *Remarkable Providences Illustrative of the Earlier Days of American Colonisation* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1890). This work not to be confused with Cotton Mather's similarly-titled *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions* (1689), a work which even more directly tied to the witch trials.

<sup>38</sup> Mather, 171.

competing sects as a source of madness.<sup>39</sup> His warnings about members of the Society of Friends illustrate this succinctly.

In the eleventh chapter of the *Providences*, Increase warns that many Quakers are “undoubtedly possessed with evil and infernal spirits.” In light of this affliction, he carefully outlines limits for engagement with the sect: “they are indeed to be pitied, in that they themselves know not that an evil spirit doth possess and act them; yet others should, from that consideration, dread to come among such creatures, lest haply the righteous God suffer Satan to take possession of them also.” These stark warnings about commingling were justified by an account of a wayward parishioner named Mr. Churchman, who conversed with some Quakers, only to be driven mad by voices. After hearing a voice of delusion, Increase relates, Churchman was confronted with a second voice that reminded him of the doctrine of the Trinity and that “God had an elect people.” But unable to tell which voice was trustworthy, Churchman fell into paroxysms of madness. The competing voices in Churchman’s head imply that deviating from the Calvinist flock promotes dissent within the mind that cannot be resolved without God as mediated by the ministry of his elected community. And thus, as Mather states, the Lord

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<sup>39</sup> As George Offor’s introduction to a mid-nineteenth century reprinting of *Remarkable Providences* puts it, Increase’s writings “faithfully delineate... an implicit faith in the power of the visible world to hold intercourse with man,” an important tool for organization given that much of the community that Mather wanted to help construct was meant to set obey God’s commands, “however contrary to human laws, which are void of obligation when they infringe the rights of conscience.” George Offor, “Introduction,” *Remarkable Providences Illustrative of the Earlier Days of American Colonisation* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1890), x.

decided to “release him of all his trouble” after the local minister, Dr. Templar, visited him for several days. The cured Churchman and his family thus gained a “perfect dislike” of the Quaker way.<sup>40</sup>

Though the Calvinists of New England were somewhat isolated from English and continental developments in the secular sciences,<sup>41</sup> they did, to some extent, distinguish spiritual possession from medical and legal insanity.<sup>42</sup> Increase Mather granted that disease could make someone behave unwillfully without necessarily pointing to satanic influence, but such cases deserved special scrutiny. “Sometimes indeed it is very hard to discern between natural disease and satanical possessions; so as that persons really possessed have been thought to be only molested with some natural disease, without any special finger of the spirit therein.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mather, 246-251. Drawing a moral from this account, Increase adds, “We may by this judge whose servants the singing Quakers are, and what spirit doth powerfully breath in and act those miserable and deluded enthusiasts” (251). It stands to be mentioned that even the word “Quaker,” while frequently commonplace in labeling the Society of Friends, was a pejorative term used to label their comparative “enthusiasm.”

<sup>41</sup> As Walter Woodward notes, only three medical doctors practiced in New England during the seventeenth century, and none of them appeared before 1671. Walter Woodward, *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 163.

<sup>42</sup> Although the insanity defense has existed in legal literature since Roman times, so has the concept that madness is a form of divine visitation. H.C. Erik Midelfort notes that while Roman jurists frequently turned to the term “*furor*” to define insanity as intellectual and mental alienation, and more specifically, a state of mind wherein understanding and intentionality were disrupted, there were some doubts about whether it could be regarded as “merely a state of mental infancy or a purely physical condition. Cicero, for example, distinguished *furor* from other forms of madness, stating that “we call madness [*furor*] when the soul, pulled out of the body by divine impulse, is excited”. H.C. Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 187-88.

<sup>43</sup> Mather, 169-70.

Increase's distinction between medical and spiritual sources of insanity reflects a bifurcated view of madness that has been in play since antiquity, but it had particular consequences for the New England colonists: organic insanity was a personal affliction that deserved treatment, sympathy, and prayer, but it was not an existential threat to the community; demonic possession, on the other hand, reflected a threat that required the community's unambiguous response.<sup>44</sup> As Increase implies in the lines above, it was more important to determine when a demonic entity might be malingering under the guise of disease than the other way around, and such a possibility required specialized interpretation that was beyond the reach of the standard physician. Giving an account of a man who appeared to have "ordinary epilepsy," but was in fact possessed by a demon, Increase recounts how the demon made a mockery of the physicians after three months of treatment. The demon disclosed many of the physicians' secrets and derided them "for their vain attempts to cure a man whom he had possession of."<sup>45</sup> This demon conveniently offered Increase and others plenty of evidence that the clergyman—standard-bearer of community and expert of the soul—ought to serve as the primary interpreter.

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<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the association between the legally or medically insane and damnation was pervasive. In 1676, four years before the publication of Mather's *Remarkable Providences*, the General Court of Massachusetts appointed town representatives to take care of such persons so that "they do not Damnify others," empowering these appointees to manage the estates of people deemed insane. Gerald Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 8-10.

<sup>45</sup> Mather, 120-21.

Amidst incipient tensions which led to the American Revolution, some influential religious leaders increasingly used this rhetoric to implicate the state along with humanity. For Benjamin Rush's first mentor, Samuel Finley, the Irish-born Presbyterian preacher who would soon succeed Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Davies as president of the College of New Jersey, madness was a structuring metaphor for the evils of the sensual world. In 1754, the New Side minister outlined this pervasive threat in an oration that was printed at least twice in Philadelphia in the coming four years: "The Madness of Mankind."<sup>46</sup> In his lecture, he argues that "The World and its evil Customs are infectious,"<sup>47</sup> and man's madness was echoed through popular opinions and inconsistent principles.<sup>48</sup>

While Hobbes viewed the citizen independent of the state as a mad man, Finley, who had previously been exiled from Connecticut for his teachings, pointed to divine truth as an alternative to state-sanctioned madness and emphasized the virtues of non-conformity: "How much Reason there is in that divine Exhortation, *Be not conformed to this World*. Rom. Xii. 2. Do not act upon its Principles, nor accommodate yourselves to its evil Customs and Modes. For this World is at Variance with God, and *no Man can*

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<sup>46</sup> Samuel Finley, *The Madness of Mankind* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1754).

<sup>47</sup> Finley, 17.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

*serve two masters.*"<sup>49</sup> At the culmination of his oration, Finley likens the entirety of the world to an asylum:

Will it seem an Abuse of Mankind, if I compare this World to a great *Bedlam*, filled with Persons strangely and variously distracted? Some are so desperate, as to refuse all salutary Medicines; and the Habit so inveterate, as to non-plus the physician's Skill, and make him almost despair of their Cure: Some appear hopeful for a while, but relapse, and their Case is more dangerous than before: And some are actually recovered in a less, some in a greater Degree; but not so much as one perfectly well.<sup>50</sup>

Here, Finley implies that no human is totally sane; however, he invests the gospel and, implicitly, his own oration with a medicinal response to a populace "distracted" by sensuality and false masters. He thus considers narrating the travails of the mad to be salvative and treats accounts of "mad" breaches of faith as object lessons: "Let the Follies of others be a Motive to engage your more earnest Pursuit of saving Wisdom,"<sup>51</sup> for, Finley argues, those who "become profane, or are taken in the Snare of some delusive Opinion, or Heresy... *turn away their Ears from the Truth, and are turned into Fables....* And thus ends their religion."<sup>52</sup> Yet, undoubtedly reflecting upon the fact that

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 29 (Finley's italics).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 28 (Finley's italics).

<sup>51</sup> Finley, 30.

<sup>52</sup> Finley, 11 (Finley's italics).

his own religious beliefs made him an exile from Connecticut, he also encouraged his readers to be conscientious when facing the state's propensity to pathologize dissent, pointing to the gospel—and not the diagnoses of others—as the only standard for sanity: “let it ever be a small Matter with you, to be judged weak and foolish by a mad World, provided always that you are *wise to Salvation*.”<sup>53</sup>

It is possible that a young Benjamin Rush, Finley's nephew, was in the audience during this oration. Though initially raised to follow the traditions of his father, John, an Episcopalian with Quaker roots, Rush's family converted to Presbyterianism soon after John's death, and young Benjamin, born in 1746, was sent to live at Finley's West Nottingham Academy by the time he was eight, the year of Finley's oration.<sup>54</sup> In any case, he was a privileged student under the minister's teachings and Finley had an instrumental role in encouraging Rush to choose the medical profession over a career in law.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Finley, 30 (Finley's italics).

<sup>54</sup> Rush's religious zeal and propensity for associating with a variety of faiths seems hardwired into his lineage. As several histories recount, the Rush family's celebrated patriarch, Benjamin's great-grandfather John Rush, was a prominent member of Cromwell's Puritan army who converted to the Quaker faith during the Protectorate period. After the Restoration, the Rush's joined Penn's new colony in the early waves of Quaker settlement. Rush's grandfather, John, however, converted to the Church of England due to the Quaker's policy against interfaith marriage—a policy that would later lead to Charles Brockden Brown's excommunication from the Quaker faith a century later. After the death of Benjamin Rush's father, John, his mother, Susanna, converted to the Presbyterianism of that giant of the Great Awakening, Gilbert Tennent. Finley, one of Tennent's most prominent collaborators, was Susanna's brother-in-law.

<sup>55</sup> While Rush had originally prepared to become a lawyer, an interest that he would entertain once again at the tail-end of the Revolutionary War, Finley argued that Rush should avoid the legal profession, which was full of unhealthy temptations, and pursue medicine—a career path he frequently recommended to his students Nathan Goodman, *Physician and Citizen, 1746-1813* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934), 7-8. In fact, before he left to finish his medical education in Edinburgh, Rush studied

While Finley saw the medical profession as a refuge from the law's insidious influences, and frequently posed the state as antagonistic to divine truth, Rush would ultimately become the most famous American physician of the era by virtue of his ability to fuse religious rhetoric and medical knowledge to project a vision that reconciled humankind, republican government, and God. Writing to Jeremy Belknap in 1791, Rush propounds this affinity: "Republicanism is a part of the truth of Christianity. It derives power from its true source. It teaches us to view our rulers in their true light. It abolishes the false glare which surrounds kingly government, and tends to promote the *true* happiness of all its members as well as of the whole world, for peace with everybody is the true interest of all republics."<sup>56</sup> Rush's claim that the Revolution abolished the "glare" of royal government foretells the eradication of false consciousness, and, in turn, the discovery of truths instrumental to national and global happiness. And if Finley vehemently emphasized that no sane man could "serve two masters," Rush would argue that knowledge of the mind and body, coupled with religious principles, could enable the republican government to realize and perform God's will and build God-like subjects even within a nation that had no established

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medicine under two of Finley's pupils, John Morgan and William Shippen, Jr. Carl Binger, *Revolutionary Doctor Benjamin Rush, 1746-1813* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1966), 26.

<sup>56</sup>Benjamin Rush, *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), V.1 584 (Rush's italics). Similarly, Rush argues in his "On the Mode of Education Proper to a Republic": "A Christian cannot fail of being a republican. The history of the creation of man and of the relation of our species to each other by birth, which is recorded in the Old Testament, is the best refutation that can be given to the divine right of kings and the strongest argument that can be used in favor of the original and natural equality of all mankind" Benjamin Rush, "Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic" *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*, Ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 88.



religion. In what has become Rush's most famous frequently cited essay, "Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper to a Republic," Rush offers an alternative to Finley's "great Bedlam":

I consider it as possible to convert men into republican machines. This must be done if we expect them to perform their parts properly in the great machine of the government of the state. That republic is sophisticated with monarchy or aristocracy that does not revolve upon the wills of the people, and these must be fitted to each other by means of education before they can be made to produce regularity and unison in government.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast with Finley's bedlam, Rush imagines a time when rational subjects take their necessary place within a rational state—a nation that is entirely sane from the top down and the ground up and free from sophistry. Viewed in the context of other contemporary metaphors of nation-building, Rush's mechanical metaphor reflects some of the evolving ways in which advocates of Federalism championed a notion of the "the state as a work of art,"—as a mechanism that provided structures which enabled freedom.<sup>58</sup>

Rush's interpellation of the people as machines working in a greater machinery may invite some totalitarian comparisons; readers of the twentieth-century novelist,

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<sup>57</sup> Rush, "Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," 92.

<sup>58</sup> Eric Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Ralph Ellison, may recall a dystopian analogue in the lines of the servile and malicious African-American character who takes a perverse pride in making the ultra-white “Optic White” coat of “Liberty Paint:” “They got all this machinery, but that ain’t everything; We the machines inside the machine.”<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, two things must be noted about Rush’s metaphor; first, that it was preconditioned on a belief that this machine’s motions revolved upon the “will” of the people; second, that this metaphor, laying in the domain of possibility rather than fact, stood in contrast with the America as he saw it, and until people were mentally and spiritually prepared for republicanism, he would turn to mental weakness as an explanation for this gap. The new government, Rush explained, resembled “the first efforts of a child to move its body or limbs. These efforts are strong, but irregular, and often in a contrary direction to that which is intended.”<sup>60</sup>

For Rush, transforming this irregular “child” into a “republican machine” required nurture, and by medicalizing the “will,” the fundamental basis of a politics based on popular assent and a central topic of religious contention, he emphasized the doctor’s providential role in uniting the work of the politician, reformer, and theologian. And until this prophecy was fulfilled, the physician would be on the front lines of a protracted battle against the madness of mankind. Rush would take his master’s oration

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<sup>59</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 217.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to Ellanan Winchester, Nov. 12, 1791. Rush, *Letters*, V.2 612.

on the pervasiveness of madness to heart even as he sought to overcome it through improvements in government, medicine, and education.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Empire of the Physician**

Just as Rush argued that America's derivation of Christian principles would clear away the false glare of "kingly" authority, he believed that medicine would evolve along with the revolutionary spirit:

We live, gentlemen, in a revolutionary age. Our science has caught the spirit of the times, and more improvements have been made in all its branches, within the last twenty years, than had been made in a century before. From these events, so auspicious to medicine, may we not cherish a hope, that our globe is about to undergo these happy changes, which shall render it a more safe and agreeable abode to man, and thereby prepare it to receive the blessing of universal health and longevity.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Years after Rush treated Finley at his death bed, and eight months before he would be lying his own, Rush recollected Finley's influence to John Adams: referring to the country's mounting debt crisis, party enmity and the onset of the war of 1812, Rush invoked the memory of the Finley's oration, stating that "the present times have added many facts in support of this position" (8 August, 1812, *Letters*, V.2, 1159).

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Rush, "On the necessary Connexion Between Observation, and Reasoning in Medicine." *Sixteen Introductory Lectures, to Courses of Lectures upon the Institutes and Practice of Medicine* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Innskeep, 1811), 13-14.

Referring to a biblical parable, Rush forecasts a future of human perfectibility: “from the perfection of our science, men shall be so well acquainted with the method of destroying poisons, that they ‘shall tread upon scorpions and serpents’ without being injured by them.”<sup>63</sup> Following up on this likening of the physician to Christ, Rush further predicts that the innovations of the republican physician will transform disease and prevent its emergence: “Pestilential diseases shall then cease to spread terror and death over half the globe” and health institutions of all kinds would also become obsolete. “Hospitals shall be unknown” and so, too, would madness for the “groans of pain, the ravings of madness, and the sighs of melancholy shall be heard no more.”<sup>64</sup> Rush’s goals for the advancement of medicine could not be more bold: if the physician exerted his empire effectively enough, widely enough, God and man would be more unified and the institutional need for the doctor would wither away.

But in the infinite meantime, the physician would be a guide for regulating the passions of the republic. And the exploration of mental pathologies would be central to this effort. As he would tell his students: “The empire of a physician who is acquainted with the texture and functions of the human mind, may be extended beyond the diseases which are induced in it by derangement. It may be employed to compose and

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<sup>63</sup> Benjamin Rush, “On the causes which have retarded the progress of medicine,” *Sixteen Introductory Lectures, to Courses of Lectures upon the Institutes and Practice of Medicine* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Innskeep, 1811), 162

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

regulate the passions, when they act with excess or irregularity in the common affairs of life.”<sup>65</sup> In charting out the nature of this empire, Rush commonly found potential for derangement in the “excessive or irregular” passions attendant on the nascent liberties he cherished most. Along these lines, I will read Rush’s medical reform paradigm as a basis for jeremiads which could restate the goals and shortcomings of the new nation.

While Rush’s most lasting contributions to the field of mental health would rest in his *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon Diseases of the Mind* (1812),<sup>66</sup> he laid the groundwork for this magnum opus with more than twenty years of treating the mentally ill and writing about disorders of the mind. Indeed, the notes of Elihu Hubbard Smith—Charles Brockden Brown’s close friend, and the inspiration for *Edgar Huntly’s* departed friend, Waldegrave—indicate that he had discussed the issue of nervous disorders with his students in the years of 1790-91.<sup>67</sup>

In 1787, Rush delivered his “Enquiry into the Physical effects upon the Moral Faculty,” a work widely recognized as an inaugural text in American psychiatry. Following theories of morality postulated by Adam Smith and David Hartley, Rush

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<sup>65</sup> “On the utility of a knowledge of the faculties and operations of the human mind, to a physician,” *Sixteen Introductory Lectures, to Courses of Lectures upon the Institutes and Practice of Medicine* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Innskeep, 1811), 265.

<sup>66</sup> Rush’s *Medical Inquiries* was the most significant American textbook on insanity until Isaac Ray’s *Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity* was published in 1838.

<sup>67</sup> Elihu Hubbard Smith, *The Diary of Elihu Hubbard Smith (1771-1798)*, ed. James E. Cronin (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973), 6. Smith also visited and corresponded with Brown and Rush throughout the 1790’s. Rush petitioned the Pennsylvania State Legislature in 1792 for money to convert the West Wing of the Pennsylvania Hospital into an insane ward, which was completed in November 1796 (patients were previously detained in the basement). Goodman, 256.

argues that the “moral faculty” is a component of the brain that acts as a feedback mechanism with other aspects of the body and, as he would expand upon in later essays, the body’s circulatory system and organs. Drawing a parallel between people with disorders of memory, imagination, and judgment, who are recognized as the proper subjects of medicine, and those with “disorders of the moral faculty,” he states that the latter are often overlooked by medical professionals because they have “not been traced to a connection with physical causes,” including environmental, economic, cultural factors as well as behavioral factors such as intemperance, poor sleep, and the effects of defective education.<sup>68</sup>

Further, he argued that the morally diseased were not to be treated as criminals, but rather as patients who had lost their moral agency: “In those cases where the moral faculty is deprived of its freedom, by involuntary diseases, I conceive that man ceases as much to be a subject of moral government, as he does to be a subject of our civil government, when he is deprived by involuntary diseases, of the use of his reason.”<sup>69</sup> Equating moral agency with civic agency, Rush argued that insanity marked grounds for alienability within the social contract—a condition which needed to be cured to restore one’s rights and responsibilities as a citizen.<sup>70</sup> And Rush’s view on the curability of the

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<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Rush, “An Enquiry into the Influence of Physical Causes upon the Moral Faculty,” *Two Essays on the Mind*. Ed. Eric T. Carlson (New York: Brunner Mazel, 1972), 15.

<sup>69</sup> Rush, “Moral Faculty,” 15.

<sup>70</sup> Lisbeth Haakonssen explains the legal implications of Rush’s views on mental distress: “Rush believed that the absence of reason annulled man’s social compact; it disenfranchised him, suspended his liberty, his ability to make bargains, to keep promises and to give testimony. He was no longer a free agent, the

moral faculty was central for linking individuals, government, and God. As Eric Carlson puts it, “The existence of an innate moral faculty justifies the hortatory component of Rush’s theories; for the moral faculty must then be the physiological link between a transcendent deity and the cosmic rightness of the republican system.” Mankind was thus “physiologically tuned by God” to produce and be shaped by republican systems of government.<sup>71</sup> By such means, the mind’s moral nature could be all but purged of imperfection.<sup>72</sup>

If Rush had noted an analogue between citizen and state as a machine within a machine, he also argued that the mind of the individual was a microcosm of the state.<sup>73</sup>

At the close of his essay on the moral faculty, Rush argues that

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performer or receiver of personal and social duties, and thus no longer a legal or moral person. Rush agreed with [fellow physician Thomas] Percival that physicians were the best judges of sanity and that insanity was often partial or temporary, ‘something which came and went by degree, being subject to fits of intensification and remittance, and which--if caught early enough and well-treated--was as amenable to relief or cure as any disease.’ Lisbeth Haakonssen, *Medicine and Morals in the Enlightenment: John Gregory, Thomas Percival and Benjamin Rush* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 211.

<sup>71</sup> Eric Carlson, et. al, “Introduction,” *Benjamin Rush’s Lectures on the Mind*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1981), 381.

<sup>72</sup> In fact, by recodifying many “vices” as diseases, he suggested that crimes could be cured and that this would lead to humanity’s perpetual progress. “I am not so sanguine as to suppose, that it is possible for man to acquire so much perfection from science, religion, liberty and good government, as to cease to be mortal,” Rush admitted, but with knowledge of the causes “which operate at once upon the reason, the moral faculty, the passions, the senses, the brain, the nerves, the blood and heart,” he felt it was “possible to produce such a change in his moral character, as shall raise him to a resemblance of angels--nay more, to the likeness of God himself” (Rush, “Moral Faculty, 37).

<sup>73</sup> “A House of Representatives, in which facts and business are collected for deliberation and discussion resembles the memory and imagination. A Senate, in which the transactions of the House of Representatives are examined, amended, and arranged, perform the office of the understanding. The execution of the laws formed by these two legislative bodies, may be compared to the will, which by assenting to those laws, becomes a part of the legislature of the nation. The passions are the deputies of the supreme executive, and carry into effect all the good or evil which are fabricated by the legislative powers. The Courts of Justice may be compared to the moral faculty; the sense of Deity, to the acknowledgment of a supreme Being by oaths, or subscription to creeds; while the High Court of Errors

it is absolutely necessary that our government, which unites into one all the minds of the state, should possess, in an eminent degree, not only the understanding, the passions, and the will, but above all, the moral faculty, and the conscience of an individual....nothing can be politically right, that is morally wrong; and no necessity can ever sanctify a law, that is contrary to equity.”<sup>74</sup>

In this sense, Rush’s work literalizes what Christopher Castiglia calls “the federalization of affect: the creation of metaphors of ‘innerness’ to serve as sites of correspondence between individual bodies (character, personality, even biology) and state interest.”<sup>75</sup> Castiglia argues that this “federalization of affect” encouraged reformers to shift their efforts toward the regulation of bodies (encouraging temperance and good manners) instead of economic and political systems. Similarly, as the years following the revolution advanced, and, notably, as Rush became less influential in the sphere of state and national politics, he became more refined in his arguments about regulating the people’s behavior, evidenced by his widely-circulated “moral thermometer,” and his belief that individuals needed to be “cured” to rejoin the social compact. As Rush’s analogies between the individual and government bear out, however, this metaphorical linkage was bidirectional: just as the analogue between the government’s institutional structure and the mind could be used to justify civic obligations, it could also be used to

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and Appeals, or the Court of Chancery, resembles in its acts the conscience” Benjamin Rush. *Benjamin Rush’s Lectures on the Mind* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1981), 479.

<sup>74</sup> Rush, “Moral Faculty,” 40.

<sup>75</sup> Interior States, 18.



propel the government to conform to the needs of the people and respond to disease of various sorts.

Though Rush dreamed of a future state when government and the people would be regenerated by a providential dialectic, he also established that the citizens of the United States would be increasingly vulnerable to destabilizing energies if their growing freedoms were not maintained by religious virtue and governmental hierarchy. Rush argued in *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind* that “Madness has increased since the year 1790” due to the heightened “number and magnitude of the objects of ambition and avarice, and to the greater joy or distress which is produced by gratification or disappointments in the pursuit of each of them.”<sup>76</sup> The relationship Rush outlines between economic opportunity and madness held true to a general line of argument that linked mental vulnerability to increased privileges, opportunities, and responsibilities. Moreover, while he held that women had a higher “natural” predisposition to insanity than men because of menstruation and pregnancy, men were more likely to go mad from “artificial causes” such as “the evils of war, bankruptcy, and habits of drinking.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Rush, *Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia: Grigg and Elliot, 1835), 64.

<sup>77</sup> “Even the profit and losses of regular trade and agricultural labour, now and then pervert the understanding. A respectable merchant died of madness in the Pennsylvania hospital, in the year 1794, induced by a successful East India Voyage. A farmer, near Albany, who refused to take twenty shillings a bushel for a large quantity of wheat, in the year 1798, became insane from the sudden reduction of its price.” (*Diseases of the Mind*, 65)

If “exposure” to the vulnerabilities and opportunities of the marketplace was a potential cause of madness, so were ideas of liberty when they clashed with governmental conditions. In *Diseases of the Mind*, Rush suggests a relationship between dissent and insanity that has some Hobbesian echoes. Rush argues madness is rare in despotic countries “where the public passions are torpid, and where life and property are secured only by the extinction of the domestic affections.” He adds that “Habits of oppression in all those cases expend the excitability of the passions, and prevent their reacting upon the brain.” However, with a growing ferment of discourses on liberty, chaos dramatically increased in such nations. When a “just and exquisite sense of liberty” is “stifled by a military force,” Rush argues that “the conflicting tides of the public passions, by their operation upon the understanding, become in these cases a cause of derangement. The assassination of tyrants and their instruments of oppression, is generally the effect of this disease.”<sup>78</sup>

Rush argues that “Revolutions in governments which are often accompanied with injustice, cruelty, and the loss of property and friends; and where this is not the case, with an inroad upon ancient and deep-seated principles and habits, frequently multiply instances of insanity.” Drawing from an account of the French Revolution by Constantin-François de Chassebœuf Volney, the French aristocrat and statesman, Rush states that “there were three times as many cases of madness in Paris in the year 1795,

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 66-67.

as there were before the commencement of the French Revolution,” a stark contrast to the predictions of the Revolution’s advocates.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast with the French Revolution’s madness, America’s relative sanity, Rush argues, is a consequence of the design of republican government, which allowed for the public passions to be exercised intermittently and routed through delegated channels. Using a thermodynamic metaphor, Rush explains the method by which the republican government defused antisocial passions:

In a government in which all the power of a country is representative and elective, a day of general suffrage, and free presses, serve, like chimnies [sic] in a house, to conduct from the individual and public mind, all the discontent, vexation, and resentment, which have been generated in the passions, by real and supposed evils, and thus to prevent the understanding being injured by them.<sup>80</sup>

Suggesting that the republican structure of government acts as a conductor that diffuses harmful passions generated by “real and imagined evils,” he poses a vision of governmental authority as a kind of protective prosthesis which fused, protected, and directed the individual and public imagination.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 69. The Jacobin revolutionary Bernard Barère, for example, wrote “Put above the door of these asylums inscriptions that announce their imminent demise. For if once the Revolution is over, unfortunate creatures still exist among us, our Revolutionary labours will have been in vain” (Reiss, 143- 44).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 66-67.

In light of this interdependence between political and mental integrity, Rush held that extraordinary measures could be taken to support political causes. Though Rush was a staunch advocate of peace,<sup>81</sup> he nonetheless viewed violence as hygienic when political authority was contested:

In favour of this conduct, I shall mention a single fact. There was a form of this disease, well known, during the revolutionary war, in several of the States, by the names of the tory-rot, and the protection-fever. It was confined exclusively to those friends of Great Britain, and to those timid Americans who took no public part in the war. Many of them died of it, but not a single whig nor royalist, who took an active part in the revolution, was affected with it. This was the more remarkable, as many of them lost their fortunes and former rank in society, by their exertions in support of the principles and measures to which they had devoted their passions or their lives.<sup>82</sup>

At first, Rush's depiction of Tory violence as healthier than abstention seems counterintuitive; however, given his belief that citizens were ultimately responsible for assembling for national purpose, his rationale that those who took part in the conflict

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<sup>81</sup> His rip-roaring rebuke of War, entitled "A Plan for a Peace Office of the United States," published in Benjamin Banneker's *Almanac* for 1793, suggests that the War Department be shamed by elaborate murals, parades of singing ladies, and an ironic retitling of each office to reveal their "true" function: "The office of creating widows;" "The office of creating public debt;" "The office of creating wooden legs," etc. Benjamin Rush, "A Plan for a Peace office for the United States," *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*, Ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947).

<sup>82</sup> Rush, *Diseases of the Mind*, 112-113.

were ultimately healthier than those who remained pacifists suggests that violence in the name of the state (or, for the case of the revolutionaries, a divinely sanctioned purpose) had a sanative function. This opinion was by no means limited to Rush.

Alexander Hamilton, who was one of Rush's arch-enemies, for example, provided a similar basis for waging war against the French in 1797. Because the Americans had maintained a neutral position in evolving hostilities between the French and English governments, the French had begun to seize American ships, leading to what has been known as the "Quasi War." In "The Warning," published on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1797, Hamilton argues that the economic consequences of political neutrality would be disastrous; however, Hamilton adds that the commercial consequences were "minor evils in the dreadful catalogue" compared to the mental effects of inaction: "the humiliation of the American mind would be a lasting and a mortal disease in our social habit. Mental debasement is the greatest misfortune that can befall a people."<sup>83</sup>

Rush also associated political orientations with diagnosable pathologies and dissent that exceeded certain boundaries as madness. On the eve of the Whiskey rebellion, for example, he was able to secure a pardon for one of the rebels on account of insanity, evidenced by his very fast pulse.<sup>84</sup> Rush does not speak of the man's political motivations; however, perhaps they were ultimately irrelevant: while his diagnosis freed

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<sup>83</sup> Alexander Hamilton, "The Warning, III," *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, Ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), V.6, 243-44.

<sup>84</sup> Benjamin Rush, "On the Study of Medical Jurisprudence," *Sixteen Introductory Lectures, to Courses of Lectures upon the Institutes and Practice of Medicine* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Innskeep, 1811), 370.

the man from punishment, it also disqualified him as a legitimate political agent. The physician, on the other hand, spoke from above the plane of the debate. In his essay on the medical “Effects of the American Revolution on the Mind and Body of Man,” Rush argues that

The minds of the citizens of the United States were wholly unprepared for their new situation. The excess of their passion for liberty, inflamed by the successful issue of the war, produced, in many people, opinions and conduct which could not be removed by reason nor constrained by government. For a while, they threatened to render abortive the goodness of heaven to the United States, in delivering them from the evils of slavery and war. The extensive influence which these opinions had upon the understandings, passions and morals of many of the citizens of the United States, constituted a species of insanity, which *I will take the liberty of distinguishing by the name of Anarchia.*<sup>85</sup>

By “taking the liberty” to level this diagnosis of others’ claims to liberty, Rush places himself outside this sphere of debate and emphasizes the manner in which his own path to institutional reform situated claims about liberty within a rubric of mental health. Invoking a stance that I would like to call “diagnostic exceptionalism,” he held that the physician could be protected from the passions which plagued the polity: “he will be an

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<sup>85</sup> Benjamin Rush, “The Effects of the American Revolution on the Mind and Body of Man,” *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*, Ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 322-23.

enemy to slavery and a friend to liberty; and from his frequent opportunities of witnessing the destructive effects of the passions upon the human body, he will be the advocate of those governments only, which filter laws most completely from the passions of legislators, judges, and the people.”<sup>86</sup>

Given the sanctified position of the physician, Rush presented a particularly powerful vantage point for narrating the causes of society’s ills and advocating corrective measures. However, given his concern that individuals became all the more vulnerable as they gained more liberty, it must be emphasized that he could only secure this position by maintaining a fiction that he could be “free” from the circulation of affects. By placing the diagnostic position in the hands of a madman and a physician, however, Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* considers what happens when the impulse to diagnose is placed within—and not apart from—the kinds of corrupting forces Rush found everywhere in society.

### **Identifying Tissues of Error**

The physician may be attentive to the constitution and diseases of man in all ages and nations. Some opinions, on the influence of a certain diet, may make him eager to investigate the physical history of every human

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<sup>86</sup> Rush, “On the utility of a knowledge of the faculties of the mind,” 270.

being. No fact, falling within his observation, is useless or anomalous....I am apt to think, that the moral reasoner may discover principles equally universal in their application, and giving birth to similar coincidence and harmony among characters and events.

– “Walstein’s School of History”<sup>87</sup>

Reflecting on the purpose of fiction in an essay promoting the usefulness of literary work, Charles Brockden Brown compares the historian to an empirical scientist and the romancer to a theoretical one. “The observer and experimentalist,” he argues, “may claim the appellation of historian,” but “he who adorns these appearances with cause and effect, and traces resemblances between the past, distant, and future, with the present, performs a different part. He is a dealer, not in certainties, but probabilities, and is therefore a romancer.”<sup>88</sup> For Brown, a literary romancer—or, as Brown calls himself in the introduction of *Edgar Huntly*, a “moral painter” (*EH*, 3)—is socially useful when he illustrates the complexities that underlie human life, for even the simplest acts are related to a vast network of events.<sup>89</sup> The novelist, then, like a

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<sup>87</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, “Walstein’s School of History. From the German of Krants of Gotha.” *The Monthly Magazine and American Review* 1 no.5 (August-September 1799). Reprinted in Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro, ed. *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006), 226.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, “The Difference Between History and Romance,” *The Monthly Magazine and American Review* 2 no.4 (April 1800). Reprinted in Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro, ed. *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006), 233.

<sup>89</sup> “A voluntary action is not only connected with cause and effect,” Brown writes, “but is itself a series of motives and incidents subordinate and successive to each other.” Brown, “Difference,” 235.



physician-moralist such as Rush, was explicitly interested in exploring the variety of internal motives and social circumstances that produce “voluntary” actions. Echoing Rush’s claims about the imperiousness of providential medicine, Brown argues that the “empire of romance” is “absolute and undivided over the motives and tendencies of human actions.”<sup>90</sup>

Romance, then, for Brown, is a mode of instructively theorizing forms of human motivation—an expressed goal that is parallel to, and not explicitly competitive with, the kind of moral theorizing Rush sought to derive and put into practice. However, Brown described the novel’s capacity for moral instruction to be different from religious education. In a letter to a friend, Joseph Bringhurst, Jr., a close friend and fellow follower of the Quaker faith which Brown would soon be expelled from, Brown writes that it is “incumbent on us, as lovers of virtue...to imitate” the pattern of Christ; however, he argues, the instructional value of the gospels was limited because Christ’s struggles “were peculiar to himself” and “virtuous examples are useful to us in proportion as virtue is exhibited in circumstances similar to our own.”<sup>91</sup> He further suggests that the Bible is a “narrative” “debased” by “ignorant or artful interpolations and omissions.” He then turns to the novels of Samuel Richardson, who he viewed as a

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<sup>90</sup> Brown, “Difference,” 235.

<sup>91</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, “Letter to Joseph Bringhurst, Jr. 21 December, 1792,” *Collected Writings of Charles Brockden Brown: Letters and Early Epistolary Writings*, Ed. Philip Barnard, Elizabeth Hewitt, and Mark Kamrath (Bucknell University Press: Lewisburg, PA, 2013), 205. Brown refers to Christ as the only perfectly “virtuous man [that] has been recorded for the instruction of mankind” (Ibid).

useful moral alternative for present-day readers. “That one is truth and the other fiction is of no importance to one who considers both as moral lessons,” for, Brown asks, “what is the gospel history more than a Romance?”<sup>92</sup> In other words, Brown’s ideal romance would help answer “how men might best promote the happiness of mankind in given situations,” and thus connect with a community of readers by demonstrating the complexities that foreground choices between virtue from vice in a morally complicated world.<sup>93</sup>

In spite of these claims, *Edgar Huntly* does not provide a clear route to the promotion of happiness—it is a text insinuated with manifold levels of distrust, chicanery, failed attempts at benevolence, and dubious, religiously justified violence. While it does not provide a clear solution to any problem, it nonetheless draws attention to rhetorical and institutional problems that have a mind-bending character. While Rush projected a diagnostic authority that was capable of abstraction from the circulation of affects, and able to identify the proper motions of the republican machine, Brown’s novelistic account of a character who attempts to correct personal and public ills while on the brink of madness himself implicates assertions about officiating divine duties with the perpetuation—rather than the solution—of society’s ills.

Simply to describe the story of *Edgar Huntly*, an effort that, in itself, requires the rearrangement of its chaotic plot, is to demonstrate the full force of several destabilizing

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<sup>92</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, “Letter to Joseph Bringhurst, Jr. 21 December, 1792,” 207.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, “Walstein,” 227.

and madness-inducing energies circulating in the new republic—a catalog of vectors for disease.<sup>94</sup> In fact, a brief recounting of the challenges that Edgar faces at the outset of the novel suggests that he is being ushered into a worldly Bedlam even before he begins sleepwalking. Circulating through a maddening wilderness, Edgar attempts to serve as an agent of justice while fully exposed to the destabilizing energies inherent in a life far out of the reach of governmental and civic institutions.

From the beginning of *Edgar Huntly*, Edgar is acquainted with a barrage of anxieties about economic and marital speculation, religious doubt, and the virtues of violence. Moreover, the reliability of the narrator, who speaks of “the wanderings of my reason and my freaks of passion,” is also in question from the start (*EH*, 19). As the story opens, Edgar is on a mission to discover the “author” of a horrible crime— the murder of his best friend, Waldegrave, who is also the brother of his fiancée. Before turning to the matter of Huntly’s attempt to engage the prime suspect for this crime—the sleepwalker Clithero, I will briefly recap some other factors which play into his mental turmoil and draw attention to their relationship to some of Brown’s political perspectives.

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<sup>94</sup> Brown’s introduction to *Edgar Huntly* positions his narrative as an excavation of American habits: “America has opened new views to the naturalist and politician, but has seldome furnished themes to the moral painter. That new springs of action, and new motives to curiosity should operate; that the field of investigation, opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe, may be readily conceived. The sources of amusement to the fancy and instruction to the heart, that are peculiar to ourselves, are equally numerous and inexhaustible” (*EH*, 3).

Waldegrave's death provides Huntly with an opportunity to marry his departed friend's sister, the addressee of his *Memoirs*, by virtue of her inheritance of \$7500. But in an episode immediately preceding Huntly's somnambulistic venture, the legitimacy of this fortune is called into doubt by Weymouth, who unceremoniously arrives and claims that the money is actually his.<sup>95</sup> The consequences of this upheaval hit Huntly especially hard because (as we later learn) he and his sisters are in a "precarious" economic position. Orphaned by a marauding band of Native Americans, Edgar and his sisters have depended on his elderly uncle for subsistence, and Edgar is in imminent danger of losing the security he has been provided: "My uncle's death will transfer this property to his son, who is a stranger and enemy to us, and the first act of whose authority will unquestionably be to turn us forth from these doors" (*EH*, 105). Weymouth also insinuates that Huntly may have impregnated Waldegrave's sister and that she may be in hiding.<sup>96</sup>

In addition to being frustrated in his attempts at marital and economic speculation, Huntly's vulnerability is compounded by a religious crisis. Waldegrave, as

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<sup>95</sup> Weymouth, a trader, states that Waldegrave, who very earned little money teaching at a free school for African Americans, held the money for safekeeping while Weymouth did business abroad and became shipwrecked (*EH*, 96).

<sup>96</sup> "They told me that Waldegrave's sister had gone to live in the country, but whither or for how long, she had not condescended to inform them, and they did not care to ask. She was a topping dame whose notions were much too high for her station. Who was more nice than wise, and yet was one who could stoop, when it most became her to stand upright. It was no business of theirs, but they could not but mention their suspicions that she had good reasons for leaving the city, and for concealing the place of her retreat. Some things were hard to be disguised. They spoke for themselves, and the only way to hinder disagreeable discoveries, was to keep out of sight" (*EH*, 100). We are given no follow-up evidence on the legitimacy of Weymouth's claims to Waldegrave's money or the rumors about his sister.

Huntly relates, entrusted Huntly with a set of letters that outline a Deistic philosophy: beliefs that “deify necessity and universalize matter,” “destroy the popular distinctions between soul and body,” and “dissolve” the “supposed connection between the moral condition of man anterior and subsequent to death” (*EH*, 89). However, unbeknownst to Huntly, he has a tendency to sleepwalk, and he has hidden these letters in a place where he cannot find them. Huntly goes on to say that Waldegrave relinquished these beliefs and desired for his letters to be destroyed.<sup>97</sup> Huntly’s immediate concern is that these documents could unleash spiritual havoc. Huntly, however, “did not entirely abjure” his friend’s beliefs. His use of the words “popular” and “supposed” to refer to the immortality of the “moral” soul suggests that he is still considering many of Waldegrave’s theories. Furthermore, his inability to fulfill Waldegrave’s request to consign the documents “to oblivion”— even as he acknowledges their “pollution and depravity”—shows that he is morally divided about their content (*EH* 88-89).

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<sup>97</sup> Considerable evidence suggests that this scene has a special autobiographical significance for Brown’s relationship with Elihu Hubbard Smith. After Smith studied medicine under Rush, Brown and Smith had been partners in literary endeavors, and Smith had helped Brown publish his work on women’s rights, *Alcuin*, and sent Brown anecdotes about cases of somnambulism. Like Waldegrave, Elihu had taught in the free school for African-Americans. Aside from editing *American Poems*, the first major anthology of American poetry, Smith co-created the *American Repository*, the first American medical Journal. Brown nursed Smith on his deathbed during the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1798. Following his death, the Smith family asked his friends about whether he had converted from his Deist beliefs. By mentioning that Waldegrave gave up Deistic tenets, Brown is likely responding to the Smith family’s concerns. Bryan Waterman, *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 89.

Huntly, to some extent, reflects Brown's own ambivalence about religious matters.<sup>98</sup> Four years after writing Joseph Bringhurst, Jr. about the limited value of the gospels as tools of moral instruction, Brown wrote approvingly of the controversial views of Elihu Hubbard Smith and William Dunlap, the American playwright. In a letter written in 1796, he demurs from sharing Smith's "controversial" statements about religion, only to segue into a protracted quotation from Dunlap's correspondence. In this letter, which Brown felt had "pretty wisdom," Dunlap disparages religion's role in promoting public virtue. Dunlap acknowledges that the legal system provides a powerful mechanism for restraining vice: Law, he argues, "threatens the vicious man with an immediate punishment, to prevent his doing an act which tempted him by the lure of the present gratification," and thus "may prevent the evil action."<sup>99</sup>

"Religion on the other hand," Dunlap continues, "holds out a reward in a future and precarious state, by way of tempting men to do that which they know they ought to do, if right, without the inducement of such offers." He then asserts that a man would have "an undoubting confidence in the rectitude of his own dispositions, if religion had not stepped in and told him, he was a Villain and could not have a wish to do good, of

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<sup>98</sup> Brown's own religious beliefs have been considered mercurial; while he was heavily interested in Deism during the 1790s, there is evidence to suggest that Brown turned away from this philosophy. Indeed, he married into a stalwart Presbyterian family a couple years after the publication of *Edgar Huntly*, and the patriarch of this family, William Linn, issued searing attacks against Thomas Jefferson's Deistic beliefs, aiming to disqualify him from the presidency. Brown was expelled from the Society of Friends for marrying Linn.

<sup>99</sup> *Charles Brockden Brown, Letters*, "Letter to Joseph Bringhurst," 20th of July, 1796," 357-359.

himself.” The deferral to a religious sense of duty is especially unhelpful, Dunlap reasons, because it bonds moral agency to an imaginary realm that perverts reason’s ability to discern right from wrong. Religion, he argues, discourages man’s belief that virtue is a valuable end in itself and “in its place he has the promise of an hirelings wages in a certain country, of which his reason can never give him intelligence, & which has not the least appearance of reality, except in the dreams of his sick and feverish imagination.” By thus associating religiously sanctioned action with madness, Dunlap forecasts a form of moral derangement: “His ideas of Justice become confused, confounded, while the eternal barriers which exist between Virtue and Vice, are hidden by the mysteries of Superstition, and their deeply determined shades blended together.” Dunlap continues:

What are the punishments held out by religion to scare the evil-intender?  
Eternal torments—hereafter. This...tends to destroy his natural sence [sic] of justice. The present gratification is not balanced by the fear of immediate pain, but additional future ills are promised, which from their distance and uncertainty are rendered nearly nothing in the Competition, and are quite done away by the promise, in the same code, of pardon, or repentance.<sup>100</sup>

In other words, Dunlap suggests, the belief in divine judgment aids and abets crimes because, on the one hand, punishment is delayed to a future state, and, on the other

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 359.

hand, there is no limit to the crimes that can be pardoned through expressions of pious guilt and repentance. Stating similar beliefs in another letter, Brown tells Bringhurst that “the belief of the divinity of Christ and a belief of future retribution,” and not merely the mistaken “ignorance or passions of its followers” have “created war & engendered hatred, & entailed inexpressible calamities on mankind.” Heading off criticism of his treatment of Christianity, Brown writes: “You say I have mistaken the christian tenets. It is of little moment: I denye [sic] that religious sanctions are friendly to morality. I denye [sic] the superhuman authority of any teacher: and a future retribution.”<sup>101</sup>

Dunlap and Brown’s critiques of religion were fueled by the writings of the philosopher and novelist, William Godwin.<sup>102</sup> In the introduction to the first book of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Godwin argues that man’s “individual character,” affiliations, and desires are not “independent from political systems and establishments.”<sup>103</sup> Accordingly, Godwin argues that discourses of virtue and vice merely focus on how people should behave within a system that is taken for granted. Working from these premises, Godwin suggests: “Perhaps government is not merely in some cases the defender, and in other the treacherous foe of the domestic virtues. Perhaps it insinuates itself into our personal dispositions, and insensibly communicates

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<sup>101</sup> Brown, *Letters*, “Letter to Joseph Bringurst,” October 24, 1795,” 300.

<sup>102</sup> Brown had, in fact recommended Godwin’s *Enquiry* to Bringhurst six days after his own diatribe against religion. *Letters*, “Letter to Joseph Bringurst,” October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1795, 316.

<sup>103</sup> William Godwin, “Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Morals and Happiness” (London: G.G and J. Robinson, 1798), 2-3.



its own spirit to our private transactions.” Because of this, Godwin argues that “the attempt to alter the morals of mankind singly and in detail is an injudicious and futile undertaking; and that the change of their political institutions must keep pace with their advancement in knowledge.”<sup>104</sup> For Godwin, who subscribed to arguments made by Constantin-François de Chassebœuf Volney, that religion enslaved subjects to political systems, taking God’s will for granted was a dangerous starting point for theorizing political conduct. In fact, while Benjamin Rush and Godwin had similar opinions about the relationship between morality and government,<sup>105</sup> Rush despised Godwin’s ideas about religion: “Godwin has some great and original ideas upon morals and government,” Rush wrote, “but upon the subject of religion he writes like a madman.”<sup>106</sup>

Godwin’s view of the insidious effects of governmental institutions also raises a question that potentially challenges the long-term goal he expresses at the end of his introduction: “if government thus insinuate[s] itself in effects into our most secret retirements, who shall define the extent of its operation?”<sup>107</sup> If, as Godwin theorizes, the individual cannot transcend the social, and, at least at this point in his career, won’t allow religion to authorize reform, it remains difficult to discern how a subject who is

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>105</sup> Rush also shared several mutual friendships with Godwin, including Joseph Priestley and the Universalist Reverend Richard Price.

<sup>106</sup> Letter to John Seward, December 28, 1796. Benjamin Rush, *Letters*, V.2, 783.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

shaped by this political condition might find stable epistemological ground from which to authorize social change.<sup>108</sup>

If these uncertainties inform our understanding of Huntly's moral predicament, it is perhaps no surprise that he has trouble deciding upon a morally responsible action to take when he sees the suspicious Irishman, Clithero Edny, sleepwalking near the site of Waldegrave's death.<sup>109</sup> As it turns out, the etiology of Clithero's mental turmoil originates in problems even more blatantly rooted in economic repression and a perverse form of worship.

From his childhood onward, Clithero tells Edgar, he has lived a life of self-abasement as the officious servant of a politically forward-looking Anglo-Irish aristocrat, Mrs. Lorimer. This relationship fundamentally shapes Clithero's being: after years of being a functionary for Lorimer, he claims that no one could have known her better, and he deems that his life would be "a cheap sacrifice in her cause" (*EH*, 30). For a moment, it becomes conceivable that Clithero will be united in marriage with Mrs. Lorimer's daughter, Clarice, and thus elevated to a position that would otherwise be unimaginable

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<sup>108</sup> As Peter H. Marshall argues, Godwin "was left with the apparent dilemma of believing that human beings cannot become wholly rational as long as government exists, and yet government must continue to exist while they remain irrational. His problem was that he failed to tackle reform on the level of institutions." Peter H. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 219.

<sup>109</sup> When first deciding whether or not to follow the Irishman, Edgar asks himself: "'Is it wise to undertake experiments by which nothing can be gained, and much may be lost? Curiosity is vicious, if undisciplined by reason, and inconducive to benefit.'" In the next line, however, he justifies pursuit by answering his own question: "Curiosity, like virtue, is its own reward. Knowledge is of value for its own sake, and pleasure is annexed to the acquisition, without regard to anything beyond" (*EH*, 13).

for him. That such an opportunity is even possible reflects her advanced beliefs and her rejection of aristocratic norms.

As we learn, Mrs. Lorimer's progressiveness about marriage comes from her own thwarted attempt at marriage with Sarsefield, the surgeon and soldier who serves as Clithero and Huntly's mentor. This marriage had been stopped by the machinations of her evil twin brother, Wiatte. Though Clithero despises him from the beginning, Sarsefield, who wishes to "obviate" the man's presence, tells the Irishman of Wiatte's past misdeeds with an eloquence that "amplifies" his understanding of Wiatte's "incurable" depravity.<sup>110</sup> As it turns out, Clithero obviates this danger by shooting Wiatte in self-defense.<sup>111</sup>

What would seem to be a solution to the problem, however, quickly changes to tragedy because Mrs. Lorimer has written, in a purportedly incontrovertible textual "monument," that her soul is inseparable from Wiatte's and that one will die if the other passes. The presence of this ridiculous document—which is of parallel import to Huntly's collection of Waldegrave's letters—speaks to the persistence of a structure of belief that Mrs. Lorimer has retained in spite of her active opposition to many of the

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<sup>110</sup> As Sarsefield tells Clithero, "You know his character. No time was likely to change the principles of such a man, but his appearance sufficiently betrayed the incurableness of his habits. The same sullen and atrocious passions were written in his visage. You recollect the vengeance which Wiatte denounced against his sister. There is everything to dread from his malignity. How to obviate the danger, I know not" (*EH*, 47).

<sup>111</sup> Of the killing, Clithero states, "The attack was so abrupt that my thoughts could not be suddenly recalled from the confusion into which they are thrown. My exertions were mechanical. My will might be said to be passive, and it was only by retrospect and a contemplation of consequences, that I became fully informed of the nature of the scene" (*EH*, 51).

visible injustices of the aristocratic scheme. Because of an almost religious ascription to Mrs. Lorimer's authority, Clithero is perversely compelled to fulfill her prophecy.

Similar to the way in which Huntly describes the act of killing presented at the beginning of this chapter, Clithero states that his "limbs were guided to the bloody office by a power foreign and superior" (59). Thus, while Clithero's attempt to kill Mrs. Lorimer can be taken as a fit of lunacy from one perspective, his actions also reflect the position of servitude he has grown accustomed to throughout his service to Mrs. Lorimer; moreover, they seem to be spiritual injunctions, even if demonic ones. Once Clithero believes that he has killed Mrs. Lorimer, he is in a position where he can no longer serve his mistress, nor can he exorcise "the dæmon" that continues to control him. Accordingly, Clithero has little to live for but the perpetual guilt involved with his role in culminating Mrs. Lorimer's prophecy.

Reflecting a similar fugue of competing allegiances and senses of duty, Edgar Huntly perversely hems and haws from one sense of moral justification to another about whether to cure or kill Clithero. He begins the narrative relating his divine imperative to commit revenge: "Methought that to ascertain the hand who killed my friend, was not impossible, and to punish the crime was just. That to forbear inquiry or withhold punishment was to violate my duty to my God and mankind" (*EH*, 7). Such a sense of duty, of course, flies in the face of Dunlap's argument. However, upon seeing Clithero weeping, he has a revolution in benevolent sympathy: "Every sentiment, at

length, yielded to my sympathy. Every new accent of the mourner struck upon my heart with additional force, and tears found their way spontaneously to my eyes" (*EH*, 9).

From a political standpoint, Huntly's attempt to cure the wayward Irishman Clithero has a two-fold nature; it is a gesture of inclusion, but also an assertion of hierarchy. Moved by tears of pity to assume the role of healer, Huntly swears off the idea of killing the man, and instead takes on the tone of a paternal authority or religious advisor: "it shall be my province to emulate a father's clemency, and restore this unhappy man to purity and to peace" (*EH*, 24).<sup>112</sup> Upon hearing Clithero's story, he poses the question: "Shall we impute guilt where there is no design?" (*EH*, 64). When Edgar asks this, he is pondering whether Clithero is ultimately responsible for his actions in light of the suddenness and ferocity of the attack against him, but he also implies that Clithero's education rendered him unequipped to get past his violation of Mrs. Lorimer's key tenet. In other words, Edgar's defense of Clithero rests on the assumption that Lorimer's reform efforts could not dismantle the aristocratic structures to which she and Clithero remained spiritually adhered. The chain of responsibility goes further and further back, implicitly pointing to the persistence of aristocratic structures of feeling in spite of a perception of progress.

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<sup>112</sup> Andy Doolen usefully refers to this contradiction thus: Edgar and Clithero's "midnight wanderings display how the revolutionary virtues of benevolence and sympathy could also mask an irrational need to police the alien." Andy Doolen, *Fugitive Empire: Locating Early American Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 49.

Huntly's question about design, abstractly expressed as it is, more broadly refers to the question of how we assign cause and responsibility for actions that appear irrational. And it directly relates to an accompanying question he asks a moment later: "Shall we deem ourselves criminal because we do not enjoy the attributes of Deity?" (*EH*, 64). If Rush could argue that his belief in moral responsibility comes from his belief in the deity's infallibility, Huntly brings up the question of what happens when the motivations of such a deity are inscrutable, and in turn raises the question of whose designs, ultimately, Huntly is fulfilling when he invokes his "duty to god and mankind." Clithero's response to Huntly's inquiry calls into question Huntly's own motives for attempting to cure him:

the inferences which you have drawn, with regard to my designs, and my conduct, are a tissue of destructive errors. You, like others, are blind to the most momentous consequences of your own actions. You talk of imparting consolation. You boast the beneficence of your intentions. You set yourself to do me benefit. What are the effects of your misguided zeal, and random efforts? They have brought my life to a miserable close. (*EH*, 25)

This response points to the contradictions inherent in the attempt to cure insanity: if a diagnosis of insanity *prima facie* exempts someone from civic responsibility, restoring sanity means reinstating a capacity for political engagement and a potential for asserting control.

Huntly's explanation suggests that the ease and arbitrariness with which one can attribute design and larger purpose to actions—virtue, sympathy, benevolence, violence—erects an excuse-machine that can place interested action under the banner of universal interest. In this way, Huntly's argument brings to mind Benjamin Franklin's famous point: "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable* creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do."<sup>113</sup> Brown's novel suggests that the diagnosis of unreason provides a similar convenience.

### **The Pleasures of Foundational Violence**

Focusing on the millennial aspects of Rush's post-Revolutionary theories of mental health, I have followed an attempt to redirect the violent energies of the American Revolution into a pacific, reformative program. The freedom provided by the Revolution, and the multiple forms of "madness" it fomented, also entailed that citizens be ready to act mechanically when the greater good demanded it. Running in parallel with this, I have been exploring how the arc of Huntly's self-description projects a subject who describes his behavior in terms that begin with madness and then transitions into an associating his participation in violence with a "fate" that literally forces his hands.

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<sup>113</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin." *Autobiography, Poor Richard, and Later Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 599 (Franklin's italics).

I suggest that *Edgar Huntly* raises attention to something akin to what Slavoj Žižek calls the “obscene stain” of “pre-political” violence. Following the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Hannah Arendt, Žižek discusses how post-Revolutionary states appeal to the idea of transcendent and allegedly “non-political” discourses to justify politically interested decisions and establish governmental apparatuses. For Žižek, the “political space is never ‘pure’ but always involves some kind of reliance on ‘pre-political’ violence,” an “obscene stain” that is only apparently “pre-political,” but which enables political power to consolidate systemically. “The relationship between political power and pre-political violence,” Žižek continues, “is one of mutual implication: “not only is violence the necessary supplement of power, (political) power itself is always-already at the roots of every apparently ‘non-political’ relationship of violence..... In human society, the political is the encompassing structuring principle, so that every neutralization of some partial content as ‘non-political’ is a political gesture par excellence.”<sup>114</sup> Žižek’s use of scare quotes around the terms “non” and “pre-political” emphasize that concepts which appear to be outside of the domain of the political have an important role in organizing the conceptualization of the political; namely, that the transition from a revolutionary condition to a bona fide state depends upon a fantasy of monumental change that justifies the institutionalization of new modes of order, including “apparently ‘non-political’” institutions. Important elements of the political

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<sup>114</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Against Human Rights” *Wronging Rights?: Philosophical Challenges to Human Rights*, ed. Aakash Sing Rathore and Alex Cistelecan, (New Dehli: Routledge, 2011), 160-61. (149-167)



domain, are thus shaped by elements that seem to be outside of the realm of politics, as well as imaginings of conditions that precede the arrival of the state. Taking a similar line of argument in his argument that governmental institutions become insinuated into the traditionally recognized “private” life, Godwin’s *Political Justice* argues that the role of the state in shaping private life only seems visible during “peculiar emergencies,” such as criminal offenses, legal challenges, or foreign hostilities.<sup>115</sup>

Certainly, Edgar Huntly’s confrontation with the band of Delaware and his pursuit of the Irish murder suspect Clithero resemble the kind of “peculiar emergency” that Godwin sees as the most visible point of intersection between the subject and the state. On the frontier, however, there is no state in sight—in fact, the only state-like presence in the novel intercedes after Edgar has destroyed the Delaware band, in the form of a posse comitatus led by Sarsefield.

If Edgar’s violence in some way precedes the establishment of the state,<sup>116</sup> it is significant that his three major explanations for violence—insanity, biological necessity, and divine sanction—constitute a reservoir of “apolitical” justifications for violence—a

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<sup>115</sup> Godwin, 3. Godwin writes that individuals are usually supposed “to be in ordinary cases independent of all political systems and establishments. It is only in peculiar emergencies and matters that depart from the accustomed routine of affairs, that they conceive a private individual to have any occasion to remember, or to be in the least affected by the government of his country. If he commit or is supposed to commit any offence against the general welfare, if he find himself called upon to repress the offense of another, or if any danger from foreign hostility threaten the community in which he resides, in these cases and these cases only is he obliged to recollect that he has a country. Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Norman Grabo has noted that the novel takes place in 1787—the year of the U.S. Constitution’s ratification. Norman Grabo, “Introduction,” *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*, ed. Norman Grabo (New York: Penguin Classics, 1988), xvii.

departure from the pacifism he professes. In this sense, the compulsive aspects of Edgar's violence, related at the opening of this chapter, can be viewed as a servomechanism of the kind of abstraction that Dana Nelson sees operating in Rush's educational plan—one that emphasizes the priority of eternal principles, as well as national and public interests over temporal, local, and private ones.<sup>117</sup>

When Rush pushed for his most radical political goals, he aimed to unite the public in a sense of emergency that required participation in ways that he, along with other political reformers of the coming generations, believed to offer unprecedented possibilities for civic engagement because the state itself revolved around the “will” of the people. At the “apolitical” margins of this vision of an *e pluribus unum* of wills are the subject who is insane—the subject excluded from the political system—and the subject who calls him mad, who is above the plane of politics, and a mediator of divine purpose. Nevertheless, his descriptions of political forms of madness in the post-revolutionary moment—“Anarchia,” “tory-rot,” and “protection fever”— suggested there were definite limits to the sane expression of the political will. Though Rush rhetorically situated himself in an exceptional position that was above the plane of political dispute,

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<sup>117</sup> In “On the Modes of Education Proper to the Republic,” Rush advises that instructors “Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time that he must forsake and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it.” Nelson argues that “Rush’s plan works structurally to reroute anxieties about national unity and sameness into the psychological interior of the American boy/man, who must equalize the contradictory demands of self, family, market, and national interests *in his own person*. National concerns for the reassuring experiences of unity and sameness are educationally recodified as the territory of national manhood, the white man’s self-management of the ‘differences’ loaded into him.” Nelson, *National Manhood*, 12.

his diagnoses of wayward political beliefs demonstrate how arbitrary political decisions can be couched within a rhetoric of objectivity. I suggest that Edgar's frontier rampage explores private impulses and desires becoming enabled through his disavowals of moral complicity.

Huntly suggests that he must kill the natives no matter how he *feels* about it, and the gradual accretion of a divine imperative displaces his madness with only vague hints at his complicity in the act: "In an extremity like this, my muscles would have acted almost in defiance of my will" (*EH*, 120). If Huntly's narrative strategies separate his private morality (his religious scruples and his capacity to express sympathy for the fallen natives) from the violence he calls a "direst necessity," Brown suggests that such a separation, much like Dunlap's argument about justice, allows for violence to be endlessly permitted provided that it can be converted into sanctioned means.

Edgar, of course, has a personal investment in fighting the band of Delaware. Soon after Huntly recounts emerging from the cave and seeing them, he states: "Let the fate of my parents be...remembered. I was not certain but that these very men were the assassins of my family, and were those who had reduced me and my sisters to the condition of orphans and dependents." Edgar's claim that the Delaware band might be the "very men" responsible for his dispossession, of course, resets a complex history of Native-settler conflict around his childhood trauma and makes him the primary agent for resolving a personally inflicted wrong. Additionally, his tentative "not certain but"

reminds us that this connection lies in his selective imagination. Thus, although Edgar does acknowledge political conditions which generated the conflict, “a long course of injuries and encroachments had lately exasperated the Indian tribes,” his memory and imagination direct his action: the loss of his parents, “and the sight of the body of one of this savage band, who...was overtaken and killed,” produced “lasting and terrific images” in Edgar’s “fancy” (*EH*, 119). Consequently, just thinking about the Lenni Lenape produces a visceral response (“I never looked upon or called up the image of a savage without shuddering”) that obviates the Delaware people’s legitimate grievances and informs the actions that immediately follow.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Brown was well aware that Edgar Huntly’s somnambulistic journey takes place in the same location as a monumental act of territorial fraud against the Delaware people, which was known as the “Walking Purchase.” In September of 1737, as Peter Kafer recounts, a group of land speculators working in the interest of William Penn’s sons set out from a township just southwest of Solebury, a town mentioned in *Huntly*, in order to purchase a portion of the fringes of Penn’s property that had been historically inhabited by the Delaware Indians. (Peter Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown’s Revolution and the Birth of the American Gothic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 173). Through a convoluted series of machinations, these speculators tricked the Delawares into thinking that they were agreeing upon a way to establish the accepted boundaries between already-purchased property and Delaware territory; in reality, however, the Delawares were technically placing their own territories within the acceptable boundaries of the purchase (*ibid*). Compounding insult with injury was the fact that the extent of the land to be taken up, which was supposed to be limited by a border that could be “leisurely” walked in a day and a half (about twenty miles) was grossly extended. Instead of following the expected protocol, the speculators hired fast-moving men who were paced by horses. By the end of this day-and-a-half “walk,” the speculators’ men had traveled sixty-four miles, forty-seven of which were stolen directly from the Delawares (*ibid*). This “Walking Purchase,” as it was later called, fomented intermittent outbreaks of hostilities during the mid-1750s: Pennsylvania settlements were attacked and the local militias responded in kind. In his ramble through the wilderness of Norwalk, Edgar Huntly is thus wandering through a land cursed by a legacy of deceit, aggression, and counter-aggression—and Edgar seems unable or unwilling to look backward far enough to attempt to set the wayward chain of events aright. In effect, then, Edgar Huntly’s “sleepwalk” through this land is a ghastly restaging of the “Walking Purchase” venture that is challenged by, and ultimately reconfirms, the Indians’ ancestral dispossession.

Throughout the episode when Huntly engages the natives and frees the child they have held captive,<sup>119</sup> Huntly is like an efficient killing-machine who dispatches his enemies: an “instrument of their destruction.” As he does so, he constantly draws attention to his lack of self-control and the fact that these “necessary” acts violate his “religious scruples.”<sup>120</sup> These scruples, he states, “could not withhold my hand, when urged by a necessity like this,” but “they were sufficient to make me look back upon the deed with remorse and dismay” (*EH*, 120). “Sufficient” here draws attention to the utility of Edgar’s guilt—not as a means of correcting future action, but of suggesting that moralizing upon the deed—which amounts to narrating it just the right way—can excuse it.

And yet, as his violence builds to a climax, Huntly’s narrative control becomes all the more tenuous as he explains the interior dimensions of his most “virtuous” act of

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<sup>119</sup> Dieter Schulz notes how this girl’s captivity is underplayed in this story. Although the captivity narrative had been so steeped in the American tradition by 1799 that Brown’s contemporaries would have likely filled in the details on their own, the fact that this girl is so scarcely mentioned leads Schulz to believe that Brown “consciously or unconsciously” minimized the moral component that foregrounds this violence. Dieter Schulz, “Edgar Huntly as Quest Romance,” *American Literature* 43 no. 3 (November 1971), 330.

<sup>120</sup> Edgar’s first kill is typical of this. After remarking upon his reluctance to “imbrue my hands in the blood of my fellow men,” he recalls himself crouching in the path of his first victim’s movement, concealed by a shadow of a rock and fearful of detection. Though acknowledging that the man was unarmed and unaware of his presence, he elevates the threat of the Delaware by turning his unsuspecting actions into portents of violence: the path between them “engaged all his vigilance,” and the Lenni Lenape’s motions constituted an impending danger that “aimed at nothing less than my life.” Turning the man’s unsuspecting motions into a clear and present danger, he emphasizes that he had no choice but to kill the man: “How else could I act?” In the moment which follows, he throws his tomahawk, stating simply that “The means were in my hand, and they were used.” Rhetorically submerging his agency in the act, he displaces violent agency upon the weapon itself: “the hatchet *buried itself* in his breast, and *rolled* with him to the bottom of the precipice,” before the man could “descry the author of his fate.” Indeed, Huntly’s major narrative tendency is to make the authorship of his action illegible.

violence. Upon spying the final member of the band who has not seen him yet, Edgar claims that his “abhorrence of bloodshed was not abated” (*EH*, 191), but, nonetheless, he plots the man’s death. In this moment of deliberation, Huntly asks himself whether or not the Delaware should be “suffered to live,” as he “will live only to pursue the same sanguinary trade; to drink the blood and exult in the laments of his unhappy foes, and of my own brethren.” Thus, Huntly surmises, “Fate has reserved him for a bloody and violent death” (*EH*, 191-192). A moment later, Huntly shoots the native out of “indispensable necessity” (*EH*, 192).

Although Huntly claims that his “heart sunk” (*EH*, 192) as he did this, his reason for this “necessary” action is that the Delaware heard the sound of Huntly’s own gun being cocked. Not only is this rationalization unconvincing in light of the preceding conviction, it also allows Huntly to reinforce his assertion that that he has merely been “led” to become the “instrument” of the band’s destruction (*EH*, 186). By his own logic, he is simply following the dictates of “fate,” and this transcendental justification enables him to recodify himself from a killing machine to an agent of medical compassion when he realizes that he has merely wounded the man with his gun. Deciding to bayonet the wounded man in an act of “cruel lenity,” “prescribed by pity,” (*EH*, 193) Huntly reflects upon the act thus:

Such are the deeds which perverse nature compels thousands of rational beings to perform and to witness! Such is the spectacle, endlessly prolonged and

diversified which is exhibited in every field of battle; of which, habit and example, the temptations of gain, and the illusions of honour, will make us, not reluctant or indifferent, but zealous and delighted actors and beholders!

Thus, by a series of events impossible to be computed and foreseen, was the destruction of a band, selected from their fellows for an arduous enterprise, distinguished by prowess and skill, and equally armed against surprize [sic] and force, completed by a boy, uninsured to hostility, unprovided with arms, precipitate and timerous...[sic]

...I left the savage where he lay, but made prize of his tom-hawk....Prompted by some freak of fancy, I stuck his musquet in the ground, and left it standing in the middle of the road. (*EH*, 193-194)

As the passage suggests, Huntly depicts himself as a rational man who was compelled to kill the natives by “perverse nature,” but his reaction is also perverse. Describing himself as an “actor” and “beholder” of the deed, he cloaks his actions in moral ambiguity. Even as he describes himself as forced into committing these acts, he describes a delight in participating in this violence that belies his attempts to assert moral distance; moreover, the delight he has in beholding himself committing the act from a safe distance potentially implicates his reader-witness in such delights. His lauding of the Delawares’ “arduous enterprise,” and “prowess,” conspicuously absent a moment before, now serves as a yardstick for his own maturation--elevating him from a mere “boy” to a man capable of

shoving his phallic musket into the ground. And the joy that accompanies this “freak of fancy” shows that he has found a sublime, if perverse, pleasure in the “cruel lenity” of following the “prescriptions of pity”.

If all of Huntly’s attempts to present himself as an innocent “beholder” of the action cannot obviate the pleasure he partakes in being an “actor” in frontier violence, the arrival of the physician Sarsefield provides a stable corrective to Edgar’s bizarre story. Notably, the stability he provides has little to do with his skill as a medical practitioner. As a surgeon and veteran of wars fought on behalf of the British Empire’s East India Company, he is a more seasoned beholder and agent of violence who is particularly effective at warfare against indigenous peoples—a truly imperious physician.<sup>121</sup> And by arriving in time to lead the community’s response to the Native American threat, he serves as a kind of institution-builder who follows up on Huntly’s frenzied killing with a comparatively rational and organized plan of action—resembling a state response. Furthermore, he provides a corrective explanation for Huntly’s narrative and alleviates a source of his suffering: confirming to Huntly that he did, in fact, sleepwalk into the wilderness, he also explains that he has found Waldegrave’s manuscript. Finally, as the husband of the wealthy Mrs. Lorimer and mentor of Huntly, he presents avenues of mobility that had been blocked off to Edgar before. Now that

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<sup>121</sup> Huntly, in fact, kills most of the Delaware band with a gun that Sarsefield had used in East Indian warfare.



Mrs. Lorimer, has moved to America with her daughter, Sarsefield hints that Edgar may be a potential suitor for Clarice—the girl whom Clithero once hoped to marry.

But if Sarsefield seems to promise stability with the martial, marital and narrative resources he provides, Edgar's continued attempt to cure the Irishman has disastrous consequences. Soon after the skirmish with the Native Americans at the center of the novel, Sarsefield informs Huntly that Mrs. Lorimer is alive. Huntly provides Clithero the good news that he is not in fact a murderer. Immediately afterward, however, the Irishman sets off like a "maniac," bent on fulfilling the crime that plagued his conscience. In spite of Huntly's efforts, Clithero is still compelled by the same mad drive which had compelled him to fulfill the dictates of Mrs. Lorimer's text. When Edgar tries to prevent the madman from fulfilling his quest by sending letters of warning, Mrs. Lorimer, who is pregnant with Sarsefield's child opens the letter. The ensuing panic causes her to miscarry.

In a series of letters that follow the main narrative, Sarsefield chides Huntly's attempt to cure the madman. He emphasizes that he, rather than Huntly, is the one with the authority to decide who should be given treatment. Sarsefield recounts how he apprehended the Irishman and attempted to turn him into an asylum—an attempt which provokes Clithero's suicide. Thus, Edgar's quest to cure the Irishman ends in broken dreams and death. Speaking from the perspective of medical experience, and textually unbound from Huntly's narration, Sarsefield has the final word on Clithero:

I will not torture your sensibility by recounting the incidents of his arrest and detention. You will imagine that his strong but perverted reason exclaimed loudly against the injustice of his treatment. It was easy for him to out-reason his antagonist, and nothing but force could subdue his opposition. On me devolved the province of his jailer and his tyrant,--a province which required a heart more steeled by spectacles of suffering and the exercise of cruelty than mine had been. (*EH*, 194)

Sarsefield's tone here is, of course, extremely different from the intense emotionalism that Edgar Huntly displays throughout the novel. However, in his matter of fact way, he describes his actions in a manner that is strikingly similar to the madmen who have spoken for much of the rest of the novel. Describing the act of taking on the role of "jailor and tyrant," as a "province" that has "devolved" on him while using the passive voice, he presents his duty as a task that has been bequeathed to him from an undefined agency, rendering the act into the performance of an abstract principle. In this way, the sympathy he claims to have becomes obviated by the antipathetic injunctions of communal preservation.

Ironically, however, his deferral to this province appears structurally similar to Clithero's own explanation of his actions: "It was the demon that possessed me. My limbs were guided to the bloody office by a power foreign and superior to mine. I had been defrauded, for a moment, of the empire of my muscles." Perhaps even more

significantly, his description of his deeds bear a resemblance to Huntly's portrayal of his actions overcoming his moral volition. Whereas Edgar refers to the final shot he fires as "*a loathsome obligation, ... performed with unconquerable reluctance*"—a reluctance he nonetheless manages to "conquer"—Sarsefield arrests the Irishman in spite of the fact that his heart is insufficiently "steeled" to do so.

While Sarsefield claims he does not have a heart "steeled" enough to restrain Clithero, we are given some reason to doubt this: amidst the explosion of frontier warfare that occurs in the middle of the novel, Sarsefield violates the basic premise of medical ethics by refusing to heal wounds Clithero receives at the hands of the Delaware. Perhaps the measure of his unimpeachable authority has less to do with his stoicism than the narrative precautions which he takes in describing his "cruel" deeds. By deciding not to "torture" Edgar's sensibility with the details of Clithero's apprehension he evades the possible self-incrimination that accompanies the madmen's emotionally laden tales.

## Chapter Two: Republic of Disgust: Robert Montgomery Bird's Desirable Repulsions

Thirty years after the publication of *Edgar Huntly*, Robert Montgomery Bird, the physician, playwright, and novelist, revisited confluences of madness and frontier conflict from the hindsight of decades of national consolidation. Set in the wake of the Revolutionary Army's last major defeat at the hands of Native American and British forces in the Kentucky territories, *Nick of the Woods, or the Jibbenainosay. A Tale of Kentucky* (1837) portrays frontier sojourners caught in the final hostilities of the American Revolution.<sup>122</sup> And by concluding with the arrival of General George Rogers Clark's retaliatory expedition, which went beyond the borders of the Kentucky to expel the Shawnee from the region in November of 1782, Bird portrays a liminal moment that conjoins a story of state and national liberation with the first acts of Indian Removal.<sup>123</sup>

Within this moment, *Nick of the Woods* illustrates a fantasy of national union that aligns a conglomeration of subjects from different classes and sections of America—soldiers, frontiersmen, horse thieves, a “Yankee” from Boston, Virginia

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<sup>122</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, *Nick of the Woods, or the Jibbenainosay. A Tale of Kentucky*, Ed. Curtis Dahl (New Haven, Conn: College & University Press, 1967). Subsequent citations will appear in-text as *Nick*. The Battle of Blue Licks (August 19, 1782) took place in the months between the American Continental Army's decisive victory at the Battle of Yorktown (October, 1781) and the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which formally ended the Revolution on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1783. The battle pitted Kentuckians against the native Shawnee, a small cohort of British holdouts, and Simon Girty, the notorious white renegade. George Rogers Clark's successful retaliatory expedition, which crossed the Ohio River to expel the Shawnee from the region, began in November of 1782. Cecil B. Williams, “Introduction.” *Nick of the Woods: Or, the Jibbenainosay: A Tale of Kentucky* (New York: American Book Co, 1939). xi-xiii.

<sup>123</sup> Rather speciously, Bird labels this victory the “first” instance of aggression to take place in Native territories: “Clark, the great protector, and almost founder of the West, struck a blow which was destined long to be remembered by the Indians, thus for the first time assailed in their own territory” (*Nick*, 339).

aristocrats and their slaves—against a confederation of crypto-Loyalists and Native American tribes led by the repulsive, blood-drinking Shawnee Chief, Wenonga, or “Black Vulture.” By the end of the novel, these forces of attraction and aversion are so strong that even the white renegade, Abel Doe, aligns with the Anglos.<sup>124</sup> In this spirit, as Cecil Williams puts it, Bird portrays a glimpse of a moment when “Americans were first beginning to realize and to reveal their intrinsic Americanism.”<sup>125</sup>

At the heart of Bird’s bestselling novel,<sup>126</sup> however, is the story of a devilish figure who hunts and murders Shawnee tribesmen at the outskirts of Kentucky’s white settlements. By picking off his victims one by one and carving crosses into their chests, the Jibbenainosay (meaning, per Bird’s translation: “dead man who walks”) produces grisly spectacles of gore that strike horror and fascination in the minds of the natives and frontiersmen alike. Halfway through the narrative, this roaming spirit of bloodletting is revealed to be the lowly Nathan Slaughter—a meek Pennsylvania Quaker who has endured years of mockery for refusing to take up arms against the Shawnee. Nathan’s family, we learn, in a tearful confession, was murdered with weapons he

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<sup>124</sup> The Native threat is so strong that even the threat of slave rebellion takes second fiddle to the “red” threat: as one of the frontiersmen proclaims “the red abregynes war the rule children of Sattan, and niggers only the grand-boys, he should now hold the matter to be as settled as if booked down in an almanac,—he would, ‘tarnal death to him.” (*Nick* 265, dialect here and hereafter unchanged).

<sup>125</sup> Williams, lxiii.

<sup>126</sup> Christine Bold, “Popular Forms I.” *Columbian History of the American Novel*. Edited by Emory Elliot and Cathy Davidson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 294. Arthur Hobson Quinn notes that Louisa Honor de Medina’s 1838 theatrical adaptation of *Nick of the Woods* was performing well into the Civil War Era. Arthur Hobson Quinn, *A History of the American Drama from the Beginning to the Civil War* (New York: Appleton, 1927), 4.

handed over in a gesture of peace to Wenonga, who scalped Nathan and left him for dead. These wounds produced a tortured heart and a fractured brain prone to episodes of epileptic fury: a “dreadful infliction whose convulsions seem ever to have been proposed as the favorite exemplars for the prophetic fury and the demoniacal orgasm” (*Nick*, 316).

Nathan’s spectral place in the minds of the frontiersmen and the natives is thus fleshed out to reveal an agent of vengeance who is both a victim and a madman. As a victimized “man of peace,” Nathan’s trauma eclipses the history of white encroachment upon Native American territories and serves as an example of the Native American’s depravity “whenever not softened by cultivation” (*Nick*, 32). Along these lines, Bird’s novel depicts the Native American as the deserving outlet of white rage and validates U.S. policies of Indian Removal undertaken during the decade of the novel’s publication.<sup>127</sup> But as a madman, Nathan exercises this communal rage in revolting ways that transgress norms of propriety and moral restraint. Likened to a “hyena” “wolf,” and, finally, appearing like a native himself as he gleefully converts to the settlers’ unifying creed of vengeance, Nathan serves as a grotesque nexus of contradictions. He blurs boundaries between the sacred and the demonic, the human and the animal, the sympathetic and the disgusting. By virtue of these contradictory traits, Nathan

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<sup>127</sup> For example, The Indian Removal Act of 1830, The Second Seminole War, which began in 1835, the Black Hawk War of 1832, and Georgia’s controversial policies of Cherokee removal.

underscores the tenuousness of boundaries between the Shawnee's wanton cruelty and the ecstasies of public vengeance.

While the bizarre aspects of Nathan's character make him a prototype for the fantastic superheroes and serial killers of twentieth-century fiction,<sup>128</sup> many of Bird's contemporaries praised *Nick* for depicting frontier violence with a realism that was "more graphic, more distinct, more true to life than anything of the sort that we remember to have seen."<sup>129</sup> In an 1854 introduction, Bird framed this realism as an

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<sup>128</sup> Peter Coogan hypothesizes that Nathan may have even set the prototype for the modern superhero—characters like Batman, Spiderman, and the Incredible Hulk who lead dual lives as non-violent citizens and extralegal arbiters of justice. Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret History of a Genre* (Austin, TX: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), 150. Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), which references the novel with a familiarity that implies his readership's wide recognition of the novel, paints the Jibbenainosay as a precursor to the serial killer. Twain's reference to "The Jibbenainosay" is spurred on by his memory of his "chiefest hero"; a local carpenter and "romantic, sentimental, melodramatic fraud" who captivated the young Twain's imagination by claiming to have committed a multitude of crimes that were clearly inspired by the novel. Mark Twain. *Life on the Mississippi* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883), 486-490. Gary Hoppenstand argues that Nathan Slaughter was one of the first American narratives to depict a noble vigilante. Gary Hoppenstand, "Justified Bloodshed: Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* and the Origins of the Vigilante Hero in American Literature and Culture." *Journal of American Culture* 15, no.2 (1992), 51.

<sup>129</sup> "Nick of the Woods, or the Jibbenainosay. A Tale of Kentucky." *Southern Literary Messenger* 3, no.4 (April 1837), 254. In subsequent generations, Francis Parkman praised the novel's "spirited" explanation of the period: "It is not easy for those living in the tranquility of polished life fully to conceive the depth and force of that unquenchable, indiscriminate hate, which Indian outrages can awaken in those who have suffered them. The chronicles of the American borders are filled with the deeds of men, who, having lost all by the merciless tomahawk, have lived for vengeance alone; and such men will never cease to exist so long as a hostile tribe remains within striking distance of an American settlement." Describing sentiments of the Pennsylvania frontier, Parkman adds, "Never was this hatred more deep or more general than on the Pennsylvania frontier at this period; and never, perhaps, did so many collateral causes unite to inflame it to madness." Francis Parkman, *History of the Conspiracy of Pontiac, and the War of the North American Tribes against the English Colonies* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 411. A *New York Mirror* reviewer, who praised Bird's "singular fidelity" of Bird's descriptions of "horrors and extravagancies," anticipates that an ignorant critic would look upon the novel in "disgust" and dismiss it as "prurient catering for the morbid taste of the day." However, he praised the novel for commemorating disgusting realities with the "very spirit of historical truth." Anon., "American Romance-Nick of the Woods," *New-York Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Literature and the fine Arts* 14, no 41 (Apr 8, 1837); 327.

effort to provide a realistic antidote to a trend of sentimental depiction of the vanishing Indian: a “poetic illusion” of “the Indian character” that James Fennimore Cooper and Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand “stereotyped into the popular mind.” In contrast with these authors, Bird claimed that he chose to paint “real Indians” with “Indian ink, rejecting the brighter pigments which might have yielded more brilliant effects, and add an Indian hater to the group” and bring “not the appearance of truth, but truth itself, to the picture” of frontier warfare (*Nick*, 31). Within this context, the Indian-killer was a subject of otherwise “good repute,” who was “infected” with a passion to kill. Such killers, he argued, were “careful to conceal” their vengefulness “from the public eye” (*Nick*, 34).

But if Bird describes the Indian hater’s violence as a somewhat shameful symptom of the brazen violence of “real Indians,” *Nick’s* most dramatic scenes expose Nathan and his fellow frontiersmen crushing, pounding, and scalping the heads of their sworn enemies.<sup>130</sup> Because of the novel’s unflinching portrayal of the settlers as perpetrators of violence, strains of criticism have considered *Nick of the Woods* a revelatory, and perhaps unconsciously self-incriminating, portrayal of atrocities

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<sup>130</sup> Demonstrating his capacity for gross-outs, Nathan shocks the chief Wenonga by giving him a “a look more hideous than his own, and indeed so strangely unnatural and revolting, with lips so retracted, features so distorted by some nameless passion, and eyes gleaming with fires so wild and unearthly, that even Wenonga, chief as he was, and then in no condition to be daunted by anything, drew slowly back, removing his hands from the prisoner’s shoulder, who immediately fell down in horrible convulsions, the foam flying from his lips, and his fingers clenching like spikes of iron into the flesh of two Indians that had hold of him.” (*Nick*, 299).



committed by whites in the name of Manifest Destiny. Putting it bluntly, James Herbert Morse called *Nick* “a book which, intended to show the savageness of the savage, succeeds mainly displaying the intense cruelty possible in the white man.”<sup>131</sup> Michael Drinnon, who calls Nathan “the most grotesque Indian hater of them all” in a long tradition of anti-native literatures, argues that Bird’s “violent pornography...verged on explicit acknowledgment that white Americans were the real devils in the woods, proud of it, and rightly so.”<sup>132</sup> For Eric Sundquist, Nathan’s resemblance to the native even betrays an “undercurrent of white guilt” driven by “a paradoxical imbalance of emotions brought on by an ideology of conquest that harbored a powerful identification with that which is being destroyed.”<sup>133</sup>

Richard Slotkin argues that the potentially incriminating implications of Nathan’s violence are effectively submerged by the narrative’s attention to the storyline of the more blandly heroic Roland Forrester—the disinherited Virginia aristocrat and war veteran who unravels the mystery of Nathan’s secret identity and commands the gaze

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<sup>131</sup> James Herbert Morse, “The Native Element in American Fiction: Before the War,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 26 no.2 (Jun 1883), 292.

<sup>132</sup> Michael Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 158.

<sup>133</sup> Eric Sundquist, *Empire and Slavery in American Literature, 1820-1865* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 135. Following up in this vein, Michael T. Wilson argues that “Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* seems thus at once the most openly honest...about the nature of white violence against the Indians, but also the most determined to obscure, rationalize, and evade white culpability for that violence. If Bird’s desire was to de-romanticize Cooper’s Indians, he substantially de-romanticized the settlers as well.” Michael T. Wilson, “‘Saturnalia of Blood’: Masculine Self-Control and American Indians in the Frontier Novel” *Studies in American Fiction* 33, no.2 (2005), 143.

of much of the novel.<sup>134</sup> Because Roland's narrative occludes the "psychological insights" that drive Nathan's madness, Slotkin sees Bird "defending the premises of the artificial arrangements of southern society, rather than examining the psychological grounds of those premises," and thus sees Bird's "promising work" become a "tragic failure."<sup>135</sup>

Rather than focusing upon aesthetic and psychological truths that Bird fails to deliver, I argue that Bird's shocking disclosures, and Roland's role as spectator, provide nuanced political critique about democracy and violence. Expanding upon Dana Nelson's argument that Roland serves as a mediator of readerly identification who solicits complicity in the project of Indian Removal,<sup>136</sup> I argue that Roland's engagement with Nathan's story takes readers on a dialectical journey that puts the hyperbolic violence of *Nick of the Woods* in dialogue with a suite of political instabilities emerging in the 1830's, which were marked with aggressive sectionalism, lynching, and riots. Along these lines, I follow how Bird's narrative portrays the emergence of a democratic imaginary infused with social discord. By tracing how Nathan's compulsive rage disturbs

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<sup>134</sup>Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 515. Slotkin argues that Nathan's identity is more "complex than any of Cooper's heroes, more intensely divided within himself, and hence more dramatically interesting." But whereas Cooper gives more attention to his less complex hero, Natty Bumppo, "Bird's analysis of *Nick of the Woods* [i.e.:Nathan] remains a subordinate, tangential theme in the Romantic story of Roland Forrester" (Ibid, 511).

<sup>135</sup>Ibid, 510. Slotkin adds that whereas Cooper presents the "wilderness experience as a search for values and identity," Bird's portrayal of Roland's side of the story shifts the narrative's emphasis to exhibit "cultural assumptions and class types" (Ibid, 515).

<sup>136</sup>Dana Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading "Race" in American Literature, 1638-1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

boundaries between the settlers' limitless desire for violence and the Shawnee's brutality, I argue that the novel's (dis)identificatory strategies encourage assent to the intervention of national government as a prophylaxis that protects the masses by waging violence in their place.

Pondering his literary ambitions in 1831, Bird argued that the ideal dramatist would be "almost a god"; along with imagination and common sense, he ought to be "capable of feeling, in the extremes, all the passions which elevate and debase, which subdue and torture the mind; and at the same time should mingle with them a cold-blooded and restraining philosophy."<sup>137</sup> This tempering of extreme passion with a philosophy of restraint informs the manner in which Bird draws from the deepest reservoirs of the "blood and thunder" tradition to invoke the appeal of violence while bringing readers to recognize the revolting excesses of these desires when unmediated by the sanative structures of republican law. Nathan Slaughter thus sits at center stage in a theater of examination that dramatizes the frontier's transition from a postlapsarian barbaric state to a sacralized space with all the "benefits of civil government and laws" (*Nick*, 27).

By exploring how Bird portrays stoic principle emerging from visceral emotion, I follow up on recent scholarship that has frequently placed *Nick* in contrast with his

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<sup>137</sup> Richard Harris, "A Young Dramatist's Diary: The Secret Records of R.M. Bird." *The Library Chronicle of the Friends of the University of Pennsylvania Library* 25 (1959), 17-18.

more overtly political novel, *Sheppard Lee* (1836). Scholars interested in *Lee*, a picaresque send-up of antebellum sentimental culture, have drawn attention to how Bird's medically informed treatment of character explores an embodied subjectivity driven by bodily urges. This metempsychotic journey, in which a lazy farmer dies and experiences (or hallucinates) his spirit moving from body to body, presents a self that radically changes as it inhabits the bodies of a brewer, a dandy, a miser, a Quaker philanthropist, a slave, and finally a wealthy slaveowner. In each case, the identity Sheppard experiences is radically constrained and shaped by the dictates of the body. In the longest episode of the novel, Bird makes a mockery of the narcissism of the Quaker philanthropist whose desire to act benevolently "takes up the entire frame of imaginative space; he can see only himself in the transaction, which is why his philanthropy fails."<sup>138</sup> Because of reason's inability to transcend embodiment in these tales, Christopher Looby points out that Bird undermines the discourses of civic abstraction that I explored in my discussion of Benjamin Rush.<sup>139</sup>

Drawing upon the strengths and limits of embodied citizenship, *Nick of the Woods's* meditations on what James Cox calls a collective "biological imperative" for the annihilation of the native<sup>140</sup> reflect an understanding of the political utility of

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<sup>138</sup> Justine S. Murison, *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24.

<sup>139</sup> Christopher Looby, "Introduction." *Sheppard Lee*. New York: New York Review of Books. 2008.

<sup>140</sup> James Cox, *Muting White Noise: Native American and European American Novel Traditions* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 209.

empathetic imagining that could convert “insensible men into men of feeling through acts of violence in which they are compelled to participate, acts that then become a vehicle for their empathetic identification with others.”<sup>141</sup> But the novel’s portrayal of Nathan and the settler’s adoption of the natives’ brutality raises the specter of what Michael Meranze calls “mimetic corruption”: the possibility that observation of vice leads to participation in vice;<sup>142</sup> as such, the novel also channels anxieties Bird expressed about his contemporary political moment: a Whig-situated fear of mobs who were “enslaved by sovereign passions” and rallying around demagogues in the Age of Jackson.

As I will argue, Bird leads toward this restraining philosophy by heightening Nathan’s disgusting qualities when he becomes most empathetic. In posing disgust as the civilized reaction to the violent desires that structure a lawless frontier democracy, Bird’s novel anticipates William Ian Miller’s assessment about how disgust’s intersubjective nature contributes to concepts of refinement and culture: “The disgust of the refined, their good taste, is a revulsion at other people’s lack of disgust.”<sup>143</sup> For in the process of documenting an abject element to the pleasures of a democratic society unified against an Indian presence that is demonized for their violent pleasures, Bird’s

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<sup>141</sup> Elizabeth Barnes, *Love’s Whipping Boy: Violence and Sentimentality in the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 119-20.

<sup>142</sup> Michael Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760-1835* (University of North Carolina Press Books, 1996), 46.

<sup>143</sup> William Ian Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 169.

novel works to fashion national government as a corrective to an irresistible, and all-encompassing, covenant forged through violent desires.

### **Sovereign passions and Imperial Whims.**

The world likes romance better than truth, as the booksellers can testify.

—*Calavar; Or the Knight of the Conquest*<sup>144</sup>

Robert Montgomery Bird's literary aspirations developed alongside a multifaceted professional career. After shuttering his short-lived medical practice on account of financial difficulties,<sup>145</sup> he produced a prodigious volume of poems, short-stories, plays, novels and essays, and served a brief stint as an editor for the *American Monthly Magazine*. Though Vernon Parrington would recognize Bird as "probably the

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<sup>144</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, *Calavar; Or the Knight of the Conquest: a Romance of Mexico* (New York: Redfield, 1854), 28.

<sup>145</sup> Bird also explained his frustration with the medical profession in the opening episode of "My Friends in a Madhouse." A wise asylum inmate claims that the physicians' madness is self-evident by their choice of profession, principally because it violates an all-encompassing code of self-interest that pervades American society; "had you chosen the law, you might have gabbled and cheated your way to fortune, and to Congress with the bargain; with you might have married rich wives...whereas, as doctors, supposing you don't prove, from sheer incompetency, public murderers, you will waste your days in works of humanity, for which you are only half paid, and not thanked at all." Doctors are also functionally perverse, according to the logic of this character, because the populace prefers the easy consumption-driven offerings of charlatans to medical expertise "the world, and the American world in particular, would have liked you just as well, and indeed, a great deal better, if you had begun to slash and physic, without any study or preparation whatever. Men must be mad, indeed, who will stand physic, when they can make a fortune three times as fast by quackery!" Robert Montgomery Bird, "My Friends in the Madhouse," *Peter Pilgrim: Or A Rambler's Recollections* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1838), V1. 104. Subsequent in-text references will refer to this text as "Madhouse."

ablest man of letters that Philadelphia produced” during the 30’s and 40’s,<sup>146</sup> and his smash-hit play, *The Gladiator* (1831), was one the most popular American plays of the nineteenth century, he did not profit from this venture.<sup>147</sup> Bird speculated that authoring novels would provide more concrete opportunities for becoming “immortalized” in finance and fame.<sup>148</sup>

Bird also realized that he was all but exclusively dependent upon the tastes of American readers for success.<sup>149</sup> While several of Bird’s novels, such as *Calavar* (1834), *The Infidel* (1835), and *Nick of the Woods* were quickly translated into several languages and sold well abroad,<sup>150</sup> he was unable to secure the kind of publishing contract that would allow Washington Irving and James Fennimore Cooper to cater to the English market.<sup>151</sup> In reaction to these challenges, Bird joined twenty-nine authors, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Neal, in cosigning a petition to Congress that

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<sup>146</sup> Vernon Parrington, *Main Current of American Thought* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1927), V.2. 191.

<sup>147</sup> As Bird understood it, Edwin Forrest, the eminent actor who commissioned *The Gladiator*, violated an oral contract which would have provided Bird a share of the play’s considerable profits. Clement E. Foust, *The Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1919), 71. Forrest, who performed in *The Gladiator* over 1,000 times in Bird’s lifetime, paid the author half of what he originally expected (Williams, xv). As his wife put it, *The Gladiator* “must surely have made a princely fortune, but it, surely, was not Dr. Bird’s.” Mary Mayer Bird, *The Life of Robert Montgomery Bird*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Library, 1945), 34.

<sup>148</sup> Foust, 77.

<sup>149</sup> Williams, xxix.

<sup>150</sup> Foust, 84-85.

<sup>151</sup> Though he spent from May to July of 1834 in England lobbying publishers and authors for a publication of *Calavar*, his efforts were met with double embarrassment: he was rebuffed by a dismissive letter from Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who had avoided him for weeks, only to find upon returning that Bentley, the English publisher, was selling his novel in “four handsomely printed volumes.” (Williams, xix).

linked the development of national literature with state defense: “Native writers [are] as indispensable as a native militia; ...our people must look, for the defense of their habits, their opinions, and their peculiar institutions, to those who belong to them—to their own authors, as to their own soldiers.”<sup>152</sup> Echoing this martial tone, Bird explained to his editorial counterparts at the *American Monthly Magazine*, a trans-regional magazine that published early works by Poe and Hawthorne simultaneously in New York and Philadelphia, that he aimed to fight the “slavery of the sovereign American people to trans-Atlantic literature and literary influences” by turning to American manners, morals, and subjects.<sup>153</sup>

Bird’s focus on frontier combat found a receptive audience in an environment where Indian Fighters were celebrated as civic heroes. In the decade when *Nick of the Woods* achieved its bestselling status, Andrew Jackson capitalized upon his fame as an Indian fighter to reach the presidency; Bird’s favored candidate, William Henry Harrison, or “Old Tippecanoe,” would soon follow;<sup>154</sup> and the Vice President at the time of *Nick’s*

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<sup>152</sup> Thorvald Solberg, *International Copyright in the Congress of the United States, 1837-1886*. (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1886), 5. Bird’s “Community of Copyright Between the United States and Great Britain,” which appeared on the front page of the October 1835 issue of *The Knickerbocker*, was cited in copyright legislation and deliberations throughout the century. Catherine Seville, *The Internationalisation of Copyright Law: Books, Buccaneers and the Black Flag in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 158.

<sup>153</sup> Bird added “Novelty and interest—as well as the national character you wish to impress on the work—can be looked for only at home. Indigenous subjects...then, are those I would drive at—the peculiarities of our own character and country—our vices and virtues—our tendencies social and political...all that can excite public feeling, interest, or curiosity” (Williams xxix).

<sup>154</sup> Such sentiment was not universal, however; the defeated Chief Black Hawk, likely the inspiration for Bird’s villainous “Black Vulture,” toured the U.S. upon his defeat and received celebratory greetings in states like New York.



publication, Richard Mentor Johnson, a Kentucky Congressman who survived the Shawnee attacks of 1782 that inspired the setting of Bird's novel, achieved his claim to fame by (purportedly) personally killing Tecumseh and allowing his riflemen to "cut razor strops out of the dead chief's skin."<sup>155</sup> Though *Nick of the Woods* evokes this sanguinary point of consensus in the popular imaginary, I shall argue that its depiction of the European settlers must be viewed in the context of Bird's grievances with a nation maddened by sectional conflict, economic uncertainty, and riots—ripe indicators of what Daniel Walker Howe calls an "atmosphere of violence."<sup>156</sup>

While several critics of *Nick of the Woods* have argued that Bird's focus on the slave owner, Roland Forrester, emphasize Bird's southernist anxieties,<sup>157</sup> Bird's political and literary efforts reflect more nuanced concerns about the stability of the United States as a national entity. Amidst the political and popular tumults of the period, Bird developed affiliations with the nascent American Whig Party, which he would become

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<sup>155</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of American Whigs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 42. In spite of the fact that he had maintained a common law marriage with one of his slaves, Johnson successfully campaigned for Vice Presidency under the slogan "Rumpsey Dumpsey, Rumpsey Dumpsey, Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh."

<sup>156</sup> Howe, 14.

<sup>157</sup> Richard Slotkin, 515; Patricia Roberts-Miller, "Robert Montgomery Bird and the Rhetoric of the Improbable Cause." *RSA* 35 no.1 (Winter 2005). Bird's depiction of a slave uprising in *Sheppard Lee*, which resembles the Nat Turner rebellion, was lauded by Southern and Northern critics of abolition, most notably Edgar Allan Poe, "Sheppard Lee," *Southern Literary Messenger* 2, no.10 (1836). The fact that the slave rebellion in *Sheppard Lee* is spawned by the slaves' discovery of anti-slavery pamphlets puts him in the league of pro-slavery critics of the abolitionist mail campaigns of 1835. These positions were by no means limited to Southerners, however; *The Boston Pearl's* praisefull review of *Sheppard Lee* highlights the import of the scene above all else in their review of the novel, entitled "Abolition Tracts—How they Work." *The Boston Pearl, a Gazette of Polite Literature* 6 no.16 (September 14, 1836).

formally aligned with in later years as a Congressional candidate in 1842.<sup>158</sup> When Bird was writing *Nick of the Woods*, the Whig party was a slowly accreting coalition with grievances over the economic policies of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren. Though somewhat diffuse in character, Whigs generally prioritized internal improvements, economic controls, and grand reform schemes—Dorothea Dix’s petitions to develop state-supported asylums and Horace Mann’s education reforms, for example—over territorial expansionism and deregulated markets.<sup>159</sup> By 1837, the Whig party was too regionally divided to put forth a national candidate at the time of *Nick of the Woods’s* publication;<sup>160</sup> however, Bird was concerned with seeds of discord being sewn by the Nullification Crisis, which helped to facilitate the party’s formation.<sup>161</sup> In

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<sup>158</sup> In the 1830’s, Bird developed especially close alliances with Mid-Atlantic Whigs such as Delaware Senator Robert Middleton Clayton, who silently loaned Bird \$20,000 for co-ownership of Philadelphia’s most influential Whig newspaper, the *North American and United States Gazette*, in 1847. Robert L. Bloom, “Robert Montgomery Bird, Editor.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 76 no.2 (April 1952).

<sup>159</sup> Rowland Hughes offers the most recent, and trenchant, discussion of Bird’s Whig affiliation. He links the horrors of Bird’s novel with an argument against expansionism. In what follows, I take a closer look at how Bird depicted the political disruption which coincided with the territorial goals of the Whig party. Rowland Hughes, “Whiggery in the Wilderness : The Politics of Indian-hating in Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods*” *Literature in the Early American Republic: Annual Studies on Cooper and His Contemporaries* 3 (2011).

<sup>160</sup> In the 1836 election, three Whig-aligned candidates unsuccessfully contended against Andrew Jackson’s Vice President, Martin Van Buren; Daniel Webster was on the Northern ballots, William Henry Harrison of Ohio had support in the west and Mid-Atlantic region, while Hugh White was the southern candidate. As a resident of Philadelphia, it is very likely that Bird voted for Harrison.

<sup>161</sup> The Nullification Crisis was a major political confrontation which pitted advocates of the federal government’s primacy on economic matters against politicians from Southern states, such as John C. Calhoun. Southern advocates of nullification attempted to abolish federal tariff laws that were geared to promote internal improvements and Northern industry, which were most prominently put forth by Henry Clay, a Kentucky Senator allied with Bird’s political circle.

light of these conflicts, Bird felt that the Congress of his contemporaries, and the newly augmented electorate who elected them, had turned America into a madhouse.<sup>162</sup>

Bird's diagnosis of the manners and morals of the American populace were most pointedly expressed through tales told from the vantage point of mad characters in a satirical short story, "My Friends in the Madhouse," which was published shortly after *Nick of the Woods*. "Madhouse" tells of a series of men who, in attempting to act upon principles of consensus and deference of to the greater national good, are ridiculed and eventually confined by a mad populace that "out votes" them.<sup>163</sup> Voicing transgressive desires through a veil of disavowal, these "madmen" portray a political system corrupted by narrow self-interest and the factionalism instilled by Jackson and Van Buren's "spoils system." In doing so, they offer trenchant critiques of a debased political mentality and a capricious political theology.

At the center of Bird's asylum story is a former Southern Congressman who was condemned by his peers and his rabbling constituents for prioritizing national interests

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<sup>162</sup> In "Merry the Miner," an allegory about greed, Bird describes a hall of legislation, where "fools were destroying a nation, and knaves pilfering it, and both parties quarreling upon the question which best deserved the name of patriots." Such conditions make the hall of legislation a "madhouse and prison in one" "Merry the Miner," *Peter Pilgrim: Or A Rambler's Recollections*. (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1838), V1. 57.

<sup>163</sup> "The virtues best rewarded in the world are its vices....a man can practice no virtue safely: he may write about it, he may talk about it, and gain credit thereby; but the acting of it will assuredly bring him into trouble....all of us around you are examples of the world's injustice—the martyrs of principle, the victims of our several virtues. We were too good for the world, sir, and therefore the world has clapped us into a madhouse....we are a living monument of the world's injustice" ("Madhouse,"111).

over the provincial interests of the South.<sup>164</sup> Amongst his heresies: sponsoring a bill that would fund a standing army on the frontier to defend western interests instead of local militias, which were supposedly inclined to corruption and freebooting;<sup>165</sup> committing the two-fold “sin” of crossing party lines to vote with the Democrats and refusing to accept the administration’s spoils when he did so; and refusing to accept that states had a right to nullify national law. For doing these things, he is condemned for “Blasphemy” (“Madhouse,” 140). And upon agreeing with the president on a single issue, he is viewed by his fellow partymen as an “apostate,” “fool,” and “madman” (“Madhouse,” 134).

His counterparts in congress, meanwhile, project “a strong example of the effect of sectional and party feeling in warping the minds of honourable men from the path of duty” (“Madhouse,” 132). So when the unfortunate southern congressman resolves “to tear all sectional feelings from my bosom, to forget that Virginia lay on one side of Mason and Dixon’s line and Massachusetts on the other, and remember, only, as Washington had done before me, that I was an American,” and votes for a “northern measure,” he is immediately branded a “madman.” The most unpardonable sin the congressman commits involves his linkage of democracy with lawlessness:

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<sup>164</sup> “When I can serve the people of my district, without infringing the interests of the nation, the commonwealth will be served; when I can serve my country, I must do so, and without asking whether the interests of my state or district suffer or not.” (“Madhouse,” 130).

<sup>165</sup> This promotion of a standing army is contrasted with state-based military forces: “with all my respect for the militia, I thought they were a very uncertain set of personages (126-128).”

being somewhat tired of the eternal croaking honourable members made against the aristocracy—that is, the foolish ladies and gentlemen of the land—as being the foes of democracy and liberty, [the congressman] ventured to express a belief, founded on the house-burnings, riots, lynchings, &c., at the time somewhat prevalent in the democratic circle, that liberty was less in danger from the aristocracy, or foolish ladies and gentlemen as aforesaid, than from democracy itself.

Violating what Bird considered to be the sacred cow of American political discourse, he is quickly sent to the madhouse for this “astonishing piece of atheism” (“Madhouse,” 140). Reflecting on this tainted political theology, Bird roots the destruction of common sense and deference to the collective national welfare in the whims of tyrannical mobs: Bird’s “mad” Congressman shouts that the public demanded

not men of integrity and talent—upright and experienced sages—to watch over the interests of the nation; but truckling parasites, the slaves of their sovereign passions, the tools of their imperial whims to “play their hand”...in the gambling contest of interest against interest, section against section, party against party, which they have chosen to dignify with the title of legislation (“Madhouse,” 143).<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Bird’s criticism of abolitionist groups in “My friends in the madhouse,” for example, is as much about their self-interest as a constituency as it is about slavery. Relating the testimony of a fictive internee at an asylum who sought to collaborate with abolitionists to end slavery by replacing slaves with machines, he is met with stern rebuke: “instead of the rapture and triumph which I looked for among the members,

In portraying an “imperial” populace enslaved by “sovereign” passions, Bird finds the “whims” of the public further susceptible to demagoguery. Bird was especially concerned about how these “sovereign passions” could be manipulated through gestures of patriotic imaginings. While Bird held that “Patriotism—as a sentiment, or poetic fiction, or historical remembrance—is dear to the imaginations of all men,” actual patriots “have a scurvy time of it” (“Madhouse,” 144).

In fact, Bird found that patriotic demagoguery provided a more pressing threat to white Americans than did the Native American. Comparing the power of American demagogues who channel these sovereign passions to the mesmeric abilities of snakes, Bird disparages Indian Philanthropists,<sup>167</sup> but finds the false patriot to be a more dangerous manipulator: “a lank, homely, insignificant-looking creature, yet a reptile more powerful to charm, more strong to destroy, than all of those who proceeded him.” This man-snake enslaves and embattles the masses with the rhetoric of liberty. He crawls through the multitude, hissing a song of liberty, a collar around his throat with the name of *Patriot* engraved thereon, and at his tail a cluster of penny-

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rage and jealousy took possession of their souls. They could not bear that they should lose the honour, and glory, and profit of completing the great work of emancipation—that I, who was not actually a professed member of their society—or that anybody, save, themselves, should reap the splendid reward;” accordingly, the abolitionists charge him with madness and send him to the asylum. “It must be remembered, they belong to the majority—that is, to the madmen; and were hence incapable of seeing that, in persecuting me, they were destroying the negro’s best friend” (“Madhouse,” 106-108).

<sup>167</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, “The Fascinating Power of Reptiles,” *Peter Pilgrim: Or A Rambler’s Recollections* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1838), V.1 244. V1. The serpent-philanthropist carries “a bundle of lucifer-matches and tomahawks, wherewith, as he charms the virtuous multitude, he supplies the means ...of knocking one another’s brains out, and setting a community in flames” (Ibid, 244).

trumpets and popguns, with which he makes a music that sets all to dancing with joy, and to knocking one another upon the head; while he crawls upon their necks, wreathing them together in hideous chains, and, as he wreathes, sucking away their blood and substance.

In the diverse snake-pit of civil society, “thousands of reptiles such as these, and thousands of others of different hues and species, creep round about us, plying their basilisk arts every hour and every moment, making victims alike of high and low, of old and young, of rich and poor.”<sup>168</sup>

A republican lynching that concludes the life of *Sheppard Lee's* bumbling Quaker philanthropist also provides a stark warning about southern demagoguery and lynch-law. After helping an ungrateful slave escape to the North, Bird's Quaker is kidnapped by a party and taken through Virginia, where he is surrounded by a mob of “good republicans” on their way to cast their ballot on election day. Their determination to lynch him at the election booth is interrupted by one of the candidates, “a man destined to shake the walls of the Capitol,” who proposes to execute “the wretch” in “an orderly and dignified way...and so adjudge him to death with a regularity and decorum which shall excite the admiration and approbation of the whole world.” Responding to the candidate's eloquent weaving of the desire to lynch the Quaker through a veneer of law

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 244-247.

and shibboleth about America's neo-classical grandeur, the "sovereigns" (i.e. the mob) chant his name.<sup>169</sup>

Bird was also concerned with print culture's manipulation of these passions and their mediation through popular entertainment.<sup>170</sup> Though Bird experienced his greatest successes telling violent tales that tapped into the passions of the masses, his reflections on manufacturing such stories evince anxieties about their reception. On the cusp of *The Gladiator's* phenomenal success, Bird anticipated the adulation of his blood and thunder play with disgust. Describing his misgivings about theatrical productions in a diary entry dated August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1831, he found it a cheap distinction "to write for and be admired by the groundlings! Villains that will clap when you are most nonsensical and applaud you most heartily when you are most vulgar; that will call you 'a genius, by G...' when you can make the judicious grieve and a 'witty devil' when you force a woman to blush."<sup>171</sup>

Moreover, because the drama portrays the slave rebellion sympathetically enough for Walt Whitman to proclaim that *The Gladiator* was "as full of 'Abolitionism' as an egg is of meat,"<sup>172</sup> Bird was fearful that it would anger Southern audiences.

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<sup>169</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird. *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), V.2 150-153.

<sup>170</sup> One of his "madmen," a repentant editor who laments a career of political manipulation through print demagoguery, explains that "we knew how to inflame the rage, and disturb the fears...we knew how to awaken their self-love, their vanity, their pride, and thus lead them to deeds of glory" ("Madhouse," 147).

<sup>171</sup> Harris, "Secret Records," 16.

<sup>172</sup> From Whitman's review of a December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1846 Park Theatre, New York, production. Reprinted in Walt Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1920). V.2, 330-31.



“Consider the freedom of an American author,” Bird wrote, “If *The Gladiator* were produced in a slave state, the managers, players, and perhaps myself into the bargain, would be rewarded with the Penitentiary! Happy States!”<sup>173</sup>

Bird’s apprehension about the audience’s response to *The Gladiator* seizes upon an irony internal to the play itself. Retelling the story of Spartacus’s rebellion, the play valorizes its noble slave-hero, who has been coerced into taking part in spectacles geared to control a Roman population cowed by spectacles of bloodshed.<sup>174</sup> After building an alliance of slaves from many nations, he seeks to build a proper multinational alliance out of the affair, but he is sold out by a more radical member of the group who seeks to gain the glory of sacking and pillaging Rome for himself; Spartacus’s failure to achieve freedom, in other words, is essentially a consequence of

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<sup>173</sup> Harris, “Secret Records,” 16. Bird was by no means an abolitionist. His diary entry, which coincided with breaking news on the Nat Turner rebellion, relates his fear of the African American and anxieties about the apocalyptic implications of slavery. “If they had but a Spartacus among them — to organize the half million of Virginia, the hundreds of thousands of the states, and lead them on in the Crusade of Massacre, what a blessed example might they not give to the world of the excellence of slavery! what a field of interest to the playwrights of posterity! Some day we shall have it, and future generations will perhaps remember the horrors of Haiti as a farce compared with the tragedies of our own happy land! The vis et amor sceleratus habendi will be repaid, violence with violence, and avarice with blood. I had sooner live among bedbugs than negroes” (Harris, “Secret Records,” 17)

<sup>174</sup> In *The Gladiator*, the Roman masses purportedly lend their allegiance to the best showmen: the central villain of the play, a cynical consul, tells his confidante that the “proper” leader “can give us shows and feasts; and therefore is the proper man.” Speaking of managing the masses, he argues that “They forgot their fury,/ When once they had looked upon his fighting lions.” Robert Montgomery Bird, “The Gladiator.” Edited by Clement E Foust. *The Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1919), 328.

the fractiousness of his coalition and the unquenchable desires that fail to make Spartacus's union cohere.<sup>175</sup>

Whereas Bird reflected that "It is only in the theatre, that genius is at the mercy of the mob,"<sup>176</sup> Bird's first attempt at novel-writing evinces an attempt to cultivate a readership that could observe and learn from the circulation of violent affects which he envisioned as circulating uncontrollably in the theater. Along these lines, the introduction to Bird's first novel, *Calavar*, a tale about the Spanish conquest of Mexico, sketches out the significance of cultivating a literature capable of mirroring and improving American habits and mentalities. The frame story that introduces the narrative puts the "editor" of the text in conversation with an eccentric priest, who hands him a jumbled and arcane manuscript which tells a silenced history of the Conquest of Mexico. Thought to be a madman by the Mexican populace, the wise man hands his manuscript to the editor and suggests that understanding the fall of the ancient Mexican republic is an important lesson for American readers.

Contrasting the Mexican readership with the American one, the cura states that the Mexicans cannot be trusted with their history because the "barbaric romance" that

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<sup>175</sup> Bird's anxieties about the reception of the *Gladiator*, and the success of *The Gladiator* itself, attest to a fine line between rhetoric of national liberty and rhetorics of class struggle and rebellion. The phenomenal success of the *Gladiator* in the Southern as well as Northern venues was perhaps owing to the fact that it valorizes concepts about freedom and liberty and anti-imperialism that spoke to America's post-colonial liberation as well as its intra-national conflicts; moreover, its historical dislocation of these concepts enabled audiences to view them in terms of their making.

<sup>176</sup> Harris, "Secret Records," 10.

“loiters about the brains” of European nations is “the pith and medulla of a Mexican head. The poetry of bloodshed, the sentiment of renown, the first and last passion, and the true test, of the savage state, are not yet removed from us,” the curandero avers; “We are not yet civilized up to the point of seeing that reason reprobates, human happiness denounces, and God abhors, the splendor of contention.” In contrast with the Mexican populace which, with the help of conventions of the European Romance, would become captivated by the violent affects of the text, the curandero suggests that Americans, “the happiest and most favored of modern days,” can reflect upon the violent affects of the narrative and correct them with the help of the American editor, who can “shave,” “amputate” and “compress” the manuscript and “open the eyes of men to some of the specks of barbarism which yet sully their own foreheads.”<sup>177</sup>

Bird’s suggestion that American readers can recognize their own barbarity through observing the barbarism of the other positions authorship as a technology for cultivating and correcting reading practices entwined with institutional mentalities. Mexico, as Bird’s narrator describes it, is a “Pandemonium” wherein the possibilities of grandeur have been mixed with “the causes of decline and perdition”; namely by “the folly and madness of its inhabitants” and demagogues. While Bird contrasts a Mexican

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<sup>177</sup> *Calavar*, 19-27. This mediation is also protective, for inhabiting the mad state of Mexico is contagious: “gusts of anarchy, rising from a distempered republic, disease thy imagination, until thou comest to be disgusted with the yet untainted excellence of thine own institutions, because thou perceives the evils of their perversion” (Ibid, 13).

populace he describes as “enslaved” by “Revolution after revolution, frenzy after frenzy!” with America,<sup>178</sup> these distinctions also telegraph what Jesse Alemán calls “an uncanny figure for the United States.”<sup>179</sup>

In the following sections, I will examine how Bird invests his portraiture of the Native American with an uncanniness that hints at a latent potential for declension within American democracy. I will then explore how the narrative cultivates a commingling of sympathy and disgust that poses an avenue for recognizing and disavowing the potential for barbarism that Bird found in his fractious antebellum culture.

### **“Obstreperous Enjoyments” in the Barbaric State**

It is on the frontiers, indeed, where adventurers from every corner of the world, and from every circle of society are thrown together, that we behold the strongest contrasts, and the strangest varieties, of human character.

—*Nick of the Woods*, 71

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>179</sup> Jesse Alemán, “The Other Country: Mexico, the United States and the Gothic History of Conquest,” *Hemispheric American Studies*. Ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 77. “Even as the United States turned away from Europe and the mother country, it turned to... Mexico, to stage its romantic primitivism and in the process generated an alternate literary and national narrative that placed the legacy of the Spanish conquest of Mexico strangely at the heart of the historical emergence of the United States” (Ibid).

Responding to a British critic's claims that his literary portraits of the native were "coloured by national antipathy, and by a desire to justify the encroachments of his countrymen upon the persecuted natives," Bird denied he was promoting the extermination of Native Americans, which he preferred to call "the humane design of influencing the passions of his countrymen against the remnant of an unfortunate race." His main quibble with this argument was that the "final destruction" of the natives was "against all probability, if not against all possibility, to predict as a certain future event" (*Nick*, 33). Bird's insidious claims about the ineradicability of Native Americans—much like Ishmael of *Moby-Dick's* claim that the whales will never go extinct—speaks to the manner in which Bird, along with generations of writers and scientists, turned to the Native American as an inexhaustible resource for self-definition. By posing the Native American as an enemy that transcends America's pre-national past, contentious present, and the horizon of its future, Bird imagines a civic identity united through complicity in Indian-settler warfare and makes the expression of this compulsion the test of American civilization.

In *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1817), Washington Irving predicted that realities of European encroachment on Native American territories would be obscured by fantasy: "If, perchance, some dubious memorial of them should survive, it may be in the romantic dreams of the poet, to people in imagination his glades and grove, like the fauns and satyrs and sylvan deities of antiquity." Though these representations would

be “dubious” in their reality, he anticipated that the true story would evoke self-incriminatory horrors that would defy belief:

should he venture upon the dark story of their wrongs and wretchedness; should he tell how they were invaded, corrupted, and despoiled, driven from their native abodes and sepulchers of their fathers, hunted like wild beasts about the earth, and sent down with violence and butchery to the grave, posterity will either turn with horror or incredulity from the tale, or blush with indignation at the inhumanity of their forefathers.<sup>180</sup>

Invoking aspects of this trend while making the case for the Indian Removal Act of 1830, Andrew Jackson emphasized the need to mentally displace guilt about the literal displacement of Native Americans: “To follow to the tomb the last of his race and to tread on the graves of extinct nations excites melancholy reflections.” However,

true philanthropy reconciles the mind to these vicissitudes as it does to the extinction of one generation to make room for another....Philanthropy could not wish to see this continent restored to the condition in which it was found by our forefathers. What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art

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<sup>180</sup> Quoted by Sundquist, 73.

can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion?<sup>181</sup>

Jackson's abstract temporal metaphors, which liken the extirpation of Native Americans with any generational shift, encourage a transition in sentiment from the melancholy and personal to a concept of broader, and more stoic, principle, implying that a mind attuned to "true philanthropy" will ultimately put sadness into context with the forward march of "civilization."

Charting out his preliminary notes on *Nick of the Woods*, Bird translates Jackson's concepts into aesthetic and formal vocabularies: "It has ever delighted the imaginations of romantic men, to find, in the poor barbarians, who roamed the forest and now are fading away from the prairies, of America, the relics of a once powerful and civilized community." And he acknowledges that "It is the fashion of poetry to lament the change--to weep over the rapacity of the settler and [the] wrong of the red king of the forest." While "It is right that poetry should do so; for there is something deeply melancholy and humbling in the fate of the Indian," Bird emphasizes a need for a more objective and "philosophical" approach to expansionism. Though romantic and poetic literatures may stir emotions, "philosophy has no sigh for the change, for the earth is the dwelling of man, not the brute, and its fair fields are intended for those who will cultivate them and multiply, not for those who harvest it for wild beasts." It is

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<sup>181</sup> Annual Message to Congress in 1830. Quoted by Sundquist, 68.

ultimately “nobler and more profitable” to set aside such speculations and “investigate the origin of a people, whose ancestors fought them hand to hand for the possession of the wilderness, and purchasing it with blood and tears, gave it, now blossoming like a rose, to be an inheritance to their children.”<sup>182</sup>

Bird’s call for a “philosophical” and Anglo-centric approach to native-settler conflict informs his departure from sentimental portrayals of white and native subjects. In *Nick of the Woods*, he exposes and vindicates the violence suppressed by the aesthetic tradition that Irving anticipated. Critics of nineteenth-century fictive representations of the Native American have remarked how sentimental and humorous portrayals of frontier characters enabled audiences to entertain “self-justifying fantasies that conceal the violence marking European America’s origins” from a distance.<sup>183</sup> In *Moving Encounters*, Laura Mielke points out that sentimental portrayals of the noble savage and vanishing Indian connected mourning the Indian with acceptance of Removal’s purported inevitability.<sup>184</sup> Indeed, Cooper’s portrayal of virtuous Uncas, who dies fighting alongside whites against the cruel Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans*, abetted the demonization of living Native Americans. When Bird openly rejects the romantic and sentimental portrait of the Native American, he thus brings white

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<sup>182</sup>Williams, xxx-xxxi.

<sup>183</sup> Shari Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 5. Robert Morgan. *Lions of the West: Heroes and Villains of Westward Expansion* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2011), 2.

<sup>184</sup> Laura Mielke, *Moving Encounters: Sympathy and the Indian Question in Antebellum Literature* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 2-3.



complicity in Native American removal to the fore for philosophical inspection.

However, as we shall soon see, Bird's portrayal of the "real" Indians and the realities of the frontiersmen's experiences soon become uncanny reflections of one another in ways that reflect the political critiques I discussed in the previous section.

Bird suggests that he's offering us a portrait of the Native that escapes the appropriation of the white gaze.<sup>185</sup> While the Native American might be able to hide his barbaric "inferiority" in front of the white man, he states that the native behaves differently when outside of the white man's scrutiny. Outside of the civilized eye, "the native can give himself up to wild indulgence, the sport of whim and frolic." As, in their grotesque bacchanalian festivals, they partake in grotesque reveries, their "loss of friends and country, was mingled in the joy of the debauch:

now fierce and startling, now plaintive and mourning,... the halloo of revenge...  
the whoop of lamentation...chiming strangely with unmeaning shrieks and  
roaring laughter, the squeaking of women and the gibbering of children, with the  
barking of curs, the utterance of obstreperous enjoyment, in which the whole  
village, brute and human, seemed to equally share.

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<sup>185</sup> In a reversal of these terms, Bird portrays the terror of whites who not only deal with the terror of seeing the native American, but also the terror of being seen by them: "as if that spectacle was not enough to chill the heart's blood of the spectators, there were seen, over his shoulders, the gleaming eyes, and heard, behind his back, the malign laughter of three or four equally wild and ferocious companions" (*Nick*, 157).

This blending of animal and human sounds, male, female, young and old, makes the village seem like an “an outer burgh of Pandemonium itself.” Later, he compares their “wildest and maddest revelry, to the sway of unchained demons, or of men abandoned to all the horrible impulses of lycanthropy” (*Nick*, 303). In spite of these demonic features, Bird also regards the Native American as a fundamentally reformable being, “perfectly capable” of civilization; but “real Indians,” are fundamentally shaped by structures of feeling produced within the barbaric state.<sup>186</sup> Employing aspersions similar to those he directed toward the contemporary Mexican culture maligned in *Calavar*, Bird most emphatically paints the abjection of the Native American through their enjoyments as spectators of violence. Wenonga, the standard-bearer of the Shawnee, gleefully shouts about his love of white blood and his rejection of sentiment: “me have no heart.” He also is a demagogue whose passion for killing overwhelms more sensitive Native voices.<sup>187</sup>

This cruelty isn’t merely a matter of innate disposition, but also stems from the native’s chosen pleasures: “His mind is then voluntarily given up to the drunkenness of

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<sup>186</sup> The writer differed from his critical friends, and from many philanthropists, in believing the Indian to be capable—perfectly capable, where restraint assists the work of friendly instruction—of civilization: the Choctaws and Cherokees, and the ancient Mexicans and Peruvians, prove it; but, in his natural barbaric state, he is a barbarian—and it is not possible he could be anything else. The purposes of the author, in his book, confined him to real Indians. He drew them as, in his judgment, they existed—and as, according to all observation, they still exist wherever not softened by cultivation,—ignorant, violent, debased, brutal; he drew them, too, as they appeared, and still appear, in war—or the scalp-hunt—when all the worst deformities of the savage temperament receive their strongest and fiercest development (*Nick*, 32).

<sup>187</sup> “The squaws and the children curse me...they say / am the killer of their husbands and fathers; they tell me it was the deed of Wenonga that brought the white-man’s devil to kill them” (*Nick*, 321).

passion; and cruelty, in its most atrocious and fiendish character, reigns predominant.” When a wicked squaw prepares to burn her captives alive, the narrator interjects that an Indian has a capacity to feel pity as “deeply, and perhaps as benignly as a white man”; however, their participation in violence foments a change so stark that it seems as if such sentiment “had never entered into his nature.” When Edith, the young woman of the party, is captured, this sadistic spectatorship is further emphasized: “The shriek of the wretched maiden, as she beheld the deplorable, the maddening sight, might have melted hearts of stone, had there been even such among the Indians. But Indians, engaged in the delights of torturing a prisoner, are, as the dead chief has boasted himself, without heart” (Nick, 328). In these circumstances, the native’s passionate cruelty seems to exceed the sadism of Old World boogeymen.<sup>188</sup>

But even as Bird emphasizes the exceptional nature of Native American depravity, he suggests tentative similarities between whites and “savages” which indicate that the shadow of this phenomenon falls upon the white men of *Nick of the Woods*, too. In their intemperate reveries, “The savage can drink and dance through the night with as lusty a zeal as his white neighbor,” and “the song the jest, the merry tale,

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<sup>188</sup> “The familiar of a Spanish Inquisition has sometimes moistened the lips of a heretic stretched upon the rack,—the Buccaneer of the tropics has relented over the contumacious prisoner gasping to death under his lashes and heated pincers; but we know of no instance where an Indian, torturing a prisoner at the stake, the torture once begun, has ever been moved to compassionate, to regard with any feelings but those of exultation and joy, the agonies of the thrice-wretched victim. (*Nick*, 328-29 my italics). In addition to exceeding the European in this cruelty, the native assimilates and perverts European influences. At times, they appear like postcolonial zombies who, debauched with alcohol, spout out corrupted French phrases like “Bo-zhoo, brudders,—Injun good friend!” as they raise their tomahawks to kill (*Nick*, 157).

are as dear to his imagination.” Even more significantly, as Edith and Roland—both Virginia aristocrats—are encircled by the mob of Shawnee, Bird paints Native American fury as the dystopian extension of mob rule: “the whole population of the village, old and young, the strong and the feeble, all agitated alike by those passions, which, *when let loose in a mob, whether civilized or savage, almost enforce the conviction that there is something essentially demoniac in the human character and composition*; as if, indeed, the earth of which man is framed had been gathered only after it had been trodden by the foot of the Prince of Darkness” (*Nick*, 327, my italics).

In recapitulating the development of white modes of affiliation forged through Indian killing, Bird portrays a proto-American psychology inscribed within a holistic system of violence. The *New York Mirror* reviewer who lauded *Nick of the Woods* described the Kentucky frontier as a site of “continual” and “ceaseless” warfare long before the settlers arrived. When European pioneers entered the territory for settlement, the *Mirror* author writes that they redirected these cycles of “inextinguishable hostility, blood-shed, and devastation” and insinuated whites and Natives in “reciprocal outrages.” Growing up amidst this cyclical hostility, “the first children of what is now a great state were cradled in fire—doing, daring, and suffering more than did ever band of colonists on any shore.”<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> “American Romance-Nick of the Woods.” Anticipating the novel’s depiction of national sovereignty’s role in ending this period of cyclical terror, the reviewer adds that “no act of the colonial government

Within this hellscape, Bird portrays identities being jointly polarized and conflated. Invoking the instability of identity on the frontier while acknowledging the whites' adoptions of the Natives' methods, Bird almost grammatically conflates the distinction when describing the "*dramatis personae*" of his frontier tale: "The savage and the man who fought and subdued the savage—the bold spirits who met him with his own weapons and his own hunting-grounds and villages, and, with natural vengeance, retaliated in the shadow of his own wigwam some few of the cruel acts of butchery with which he so often stained the hearth of the settler" (*Nick*, 31). As Bird suggests here, the "bold [white] spirits" wreak this "natural" vengeance while appropriating the Native American's "own" tools, spaces, and methods – demonstrating the tenuousness of the boundaries that Nathan thoroughly blurs.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, discussions of Bird's novel frequently invoke his 1854 critique of representations of Native Americans as "embodiments of grand and tender sentiment—a new style of the beau-ideal—brave, gentle, loving, refined honorable, romantic personages—nature's nobles, the chivalry of the forest." Such qualities, he submits, "are not the lineaments of the race—that they never were the lineaments of any race existing in an uncivilized state—indeed, could not be" (*Nick*, 32). Bird's original introduction, however, puts more emphasis upon dispelling romantic illusions about the settler. Anticipating his later statements about Cooper's

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could ever put a stop to the burnings and the slaughterings continually occurring along that frontier" (*Ibid*).

pastoralization of the Native in the state of nature, Bird explains that Kentucky's history had hitherto been inflected with a poetics that emphasized the white man's freedom from the constraints of civilization: the popular "ramblings of solitary [Daniel] Boone," he states, evince the "influence of a wild passion" to "'roam for food, and be a naked man, / And wander up and down at liberty.'"<sup>190</sup> While such fantasies, Bird continues, are "productive of all the effects of poetry on the minds of the dreamy and the imaginative," he explains that *Nick's* "grave and reflecting" tone is "derived from" the character of the men who laid the "foundations of a great and powerful State" amidst "numerous and urgent" dangers (*Nick*, 27).

Bird's attention to the historical moment as part of the larger narrative of the construction of the state of Kentucky dramatizes white subjectivity's development in the absence of the cultural and legal frameworks supplied by later institutions. Bird states that while it is easy to look down upon men from the "humbler spheres of life" from the "vanity" the present, they laid the foundations for the great state of Kentucky "as if" it were "planned by the subtlest and wisest spirits of the age." These "true fathers of the state...[were] ignorant but ardent, unpolished and unpretending, yet brave, sagacious

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<sup>190</sup> The source of Bird's poetic citation, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Foster-Mother's Tale: A Dramatic Fragment," captures the zeitgeist of a romantic rejection of civilization that supplements the Rousseauian ideal of the "noble savage." It tells the story of a rural Spanish boy whose education leads him to dejection with the life and faith of civilized men. This "mad boy" joins and abandons an exploratory expedition to live with the "savages." William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge "The Foster-Mother's Tale." *Lyrical Ballads: 1798-1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25-27.

and energetic...the very men, in fact for the time and occasion.” He praises how “without influence of any great and experienced mind to impel, direct, or counsel, [they] succeeded in their vast enterprise, wrested from the savage the garden-land of his domain, and secured to their conquest all the benefits of civil government and laws” (*Nick*, 27-28).

Though Bird valorizes “the very men for the occasion,” he historicizes these men’s behavior as reflective of an psycho-institutional absence that ought to be viewed with detachment: While “Their success may be considered a phenomenon in history,” Bird continues, “the philosophic examiner will perhaps find in it an illustration of the republican principle in enlarging the mind and awakening the energies, of men whom the influence another code of political faith would have kept in the darkness and insignificance to which they were born” (*Nick*, 28). In the absence of psycho-institutional scaffolding, they are marked with an umbraic otherness which is intimately connected to the darkness of the Indian. Thus, though they provide an example of a proto-American mentality that does the work necessary for the foundation of the state, they are nonetheless constituted within and shaped by this barbaric state.

Within the zone of democratic possibility Bird sketches out, the war-forged barbarism of the frontiersmen joined by a communal creed of Indian-fighting suggests a latent possibility for the erosion of social and racial hierarchy. Though “typical” for people in the “sanguinary struggle by which alone the desert was to be won from the

wandering barbarian,” the “wild, singular, and striking,” group resembles a barbaric tribe, giving “the appearance of an army or moving village, of Vandals in quest of some new home to be avenged with the sword.” In this condition, roles traditionally determined by age and rank break down. Slaves stand at the ready with rifles, guarding the women “and other chattels.” Children as young as eleven balance their rifles on their shoulders. Colonel Bruce, a product of this environment likened to the Biblical Nimrod, leads the community with a militarism “instilled into the American frontiersman in the earliest infancy” and serves as a central node in the community’s network (*Nick*,41). Though an imposing figure described by the narrator as reminiscent of Nimrod, he is uncouth and awkward, rough in dialect, and prone to cursing and bragging about his violent spawn: Bruce’s son had taken a scalp of “of a full-grown Shawnee before he was fourteen y’ar old”. And he “blubbered all night, to think he had not killed them both” (*Nick*, 50).

Along these lines, the white men in the barbaric state of the novel share the Native Americans’ “obstreperous enjoyment” of violence. When word first reaches the frontier stations about the Jibbenainosay’s deeds, Bruce is adamant that the culprit cannot be one of the settlers because “Thar’s no man ‘arns a scalp in Kentucky, without taking great pains to show it to his neighbors” (*Nick*, 65). Throughout the novel’s early portrait of the frontier, the vocabulary that Bird utilizes to single out the Native American’s depravity surfaces in his description of the frontiersmen, and reflects larger



concerns about the absence of law. These concerns are most significantly embodied in the behaviors of the community's most conspicuous frontier celebrity, horse thief Roaring Ralph Stackpole, who has been given the informal title of "Captain" by the frontier's hoi polloi. Ralph, the "outlandish and ludicrous" "demibarbarian," stands "Ugly, mean, and villainous of look; yet with an impudent, swaggering joyous self-esteem traced in every feature and expressed in every action of body, that rather disposed the beholder to laugh than to be displeased by his appearance" (*Nick*, 66).<sup>191</sup> While Bird would mock the idealized Native American by stating that "The Indian is doubtless a gentleman; but he is a gentleman who wears a very dirty shirt, and lives a very miserable life, having nothing to employ him or keep him alive except the pleasures of the chase and of the scalp-hunt," Ralph scalps with abandon and proclaims "I'm a gentleman, and my name's Fight!" (*Nick*, 68).

An "extraordinary specimen" of Kentucky's inhabitants (*Nick*, 71), Ralph exemplifies a persona "wholly unknown to history, though not to local and traditional fame" (*Nick*, 68) and hyperbolizes the kind of roaring braggart that James Kirke Paulding presented on the stage in *Lions of the West* (1833).<sup>192</sup> Like Davy Crockett turned grotesque, the self-professed "alligator half-breed" possesses a performative animalism

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<sup>191</sup> Bird's description of Ralph shows that there is at least one exception to a rule he lays out elsewhere: "It is only among children (we mean, of course *bad ones*) and savages, who are but grown children after all, that we find malice and mirth go hand in hand,--the will to create misery and the power to see it invested in ludicrous colors" (*Nick*, 209).

<sup>192</sup> Paulding's Nimrod Wildfire, who has been recognized as a spoof of Davy Crockett, also claims himself to be half-man half alligator (Morgan, 2).

that summons every “chanticleer in the settlement” to watch him snorting and neighing like a horse, flapping his wings, barking like a dog, whining like a panther, and shouting like an Indian. The narrator thus calls him “A living menagerie, comprising within his single body the spirit of every animal noted for its love of conflict” (*Nick*, 70).

Though Ralph’s compulsive displays—punctuated by his repeated shouts of phrases like “Cock a Doodle Doo!”— resemble a form of madness, they hint more generally at a class instability and lawlessness within the community: Bird describes his apparent “madness” as strategic—a display that gives him social recognition, helping him evade “the contempt to which his low habits and appearance would have otherwise justly consigned him” (*Nick*, 75). Indeed, his first paroxysms immediately respond to Roland’s refusal to shake his hand. This instability is further underscored by the fact that Ralph’s major skill, and flaw, lies in his compulsive horse theft. While his skill in stealing Indian horses is one of the traits that make him a “A prime creatur’!” (so Bruce states), his habits have become hardwired so that “he can scarce keep his hands off a Christian’s” (*Nick*, 66-67). But because the poor people of the region have no horses for him to steal, he is tolerated by the masses and exempted from punishment.

Thus, in spite of Bird’s praise of the historical settlers’ role in setting a framework for civilization, national unity, and law through Indian-killing, the lawlessness of the frontiersmen he portrays was as controversial, if not more so, than his depiction of Native Americans. In a sharp critique of the novel, the Kentucky-based *Western Monthly*

*Magazine* reviewer complained that Bird could “hand down to posterity ‘representatives of the race’ of men who founded the commonwealth of Kentucky,” but “conceive of nothing fitter for his pages than ‘Roaring Ralph Stackpole,’ and *bruteing* [sic] ‘Cunel Bruce!’”<sup>193</sup> In spite of Bird’s introductory adulation, this reviewer was not far off from telegraphing Bird’s ridicule for rural westerners: writing home from a trip to Tennessee in 1833, Bird complained: “I think Hooger’s, Roarers, and, in general, all the geniuses of the river and prairie are mighty stupid rascals; and I wish I was back in Philadelphia.”<sup>194</sup>

Throughout these early scenes, Roland the Virginian registers a tension characteristic of Bird’s ambivalent attitude toward the frontiersmen. At first, he displays an aristocratic chauvinism that keeps the settlers at a distance. Upon first arriving in the frontier encampment, he refrains from contact with the settlers. The opening conflict of the novel, in fact, features Roland and his cousin, Edith, debating about how to react to these frontiersmen’s greetings. Roland, an aristocratic chauvinist who has fallen upon hard times, is repulsed by the “noisy barbarians” he has taken company with, and he refuses to associate with “the outcasts of our borders, the poor, the rude, the savage,--

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<sup>193</sup> “Monthly Review: Nick of the Woods,” *Western Monthly Magazine, and Literary Journal* 1 no.4 (May 1837). The reviewer also argued that Bird went beyond the good humored “*burlesque*” portrayals of the western character exemplified by J.K. Paulding’s *Westward Ho!* and turned them into actors in a minstrel show. Such figures, the reviewer avers, were “very much such a representative as Jim Crow Rice would be of Shakespeare’s heroes.”

<sup>194</sup> Curtis Dahl, “Introduction.” *Nick of the Woods, or the Jibbenainosay. A Tale of Kentucky* (New Haven, Conn: College & University Press, 1967), 10.

but one degree elevated above the Indians, with whom they contend.” Emphasizing the importance of this degree, Edith, whose tolerance and equanimity is a guiding light for Roland and others in the narrative, recognizes the genuine possibility of communion with the settlers: “these wild people of the woods do not confine their welcomes to kinsmen. Kinder and more hospitable people do not exist in the world,” and there are “many worthy of her regard and affection” (*Nick*, 45).

As Roland and the frontiersmen begin to collaborate, he begins to adopt elements of the frontiersmen’s brand of justice; when the aristocrat’s horse is stolen by Ralph, the local Regulators suspend their tolerance for the braggart and summarily tie a noose to his neck, leaving him sitting upon a pony in the woods. In this episode, which hearkens to Bird’s own concerns about the lynch-law of his contemporaries, Roland comes close to allowing nature to take its course and let him hang—an opinion shared by his slave, Emperor, who calls him a “white niggah” (*Nick*, 108). But as with the earlier episode, Edith responds to Roland’s attitude toward “Kentucky law” with a corrective philosophy which is attuned to a higher law that transcends the law of the frontier: “the law is murderous, its makers and executioners barbarians” (*Nick*, 109). Edith’s virtuous republican sentiment pays off in the form of Stackpole’s undying allegiance to the “angeliferous” woman and he supplicates every element of his body and soul to her:

‘Oh! You splendiferous creatur’! you angeliferous anngel! here am I, Ralph Stackpole the Screamer, that can whip all Kentucky, white, black, mixed, and

Injun; and I'm the man to go with you to the ends of the 'arth to fight, die, work, beg, and steal hosses for you! I am, and you may make a little dog of me; you may, or a niggur, or a hoss, or a doorpost, or a back-log, or a dinner—'tarnal death to me, but you may *eat* me! (*Nick*, 111)

While Edith is edified by exerting control over frontier violence, and Roland bonds with the community as he begins to acclimate to the frontier's violent norms, Nathan Slaughter the Quaker is roundly maligned for attempting to avoid participation in violence altogether. As "The only man in Kentucky that won't fight!" (*Nick*, 74), he is viewed with "disgust" by the community's "warlike personages" (*Nick*, 72-73). Though elements of Nathan's "uncommonly wild and savage" appearance shine through,<sup>195</sup> his madness appears to be symptomatic of his religious objection to the community's violent creed. His "conscientious aversion to bloodshed" violates the "canon of belief imprinted on the heart of every man in the district" that "it was incumbent upon every able-bodied man to fight the enemies of their little state" (*Nick*, 79). But if Nathan's apparent devotion to pacifistic principles make him a heretic in a community that is tenuously bound together by violence, his mad alter ego, the Jibbenainosay, follows the community's violent "doctrine" with a devilish orthodoxy. In the following pages, I will

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<sup>195</sup> "Some say his wits are unsettled," Bruce remarks, while reminiscing upon seeing him with "his mouth full of foam" (*Nick*, 74).

examine how Nathan's pathological submission to the communal urge toward violence makes the unsavory elements of the community's desires visible.<sup>196</sup>

**"A Spectacle too Palpable to be Doubted": Terror, Complicity, and Disgust**

Our terrors were ridiculous enough, when they could convert a peaceful man like you into a blood-thirsty creature.

*-Nick of the Woods, 127*

As Edith and Roland become lost in the wilderness while on their search for a relative on the frontier, Bird's focus shifts from a culture shaped by violence to depict the mental anguish, horrors, and thrills of violence itself. The horrors of Bird's tale of the "dark and bloody ground" of Kentucky territories are wrought through visceral details that strain boundaries between reader and text, history and the present. In its unmediated state, the conflict tests the limits of representation, providing Edith, the novel's mandatory damsel in distress, a "sight to rend her eyeballs from her sockets." But the narrator reminds us that these scenes are all too real: "It was no error of sight;

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<sup>196</sup> The sight of one of Nathan's mangled victims fills Edith with "such horror," that when her "eyes had once fallen upon it, it seemed as if her enthralled spirit would never have recovered strength to remove them." (*Nick*, 327-28).

no delusion of mind: the spectacle was too palpable to be doubted.” As the urbane and sheltered people venture deeper into the woods, their sanity and values are tested, and Roland’s vulnerability to the maddening effects of life in the barbaric wilderness comes to a head. Roland’s fears “crowd into his mind with benumbing effect, engrossing his faculties” and they “shock” his “mind from its propriety,” leaving “him in a manner unfitted to exercise the decision and energy so necessary to the welfare of his feeble and well-nigh helpless followers” (*Nick*, 115).

Ironically, given the novel’s projection of the Native American as an object of pervasive fear, the first terrifying encounter in the novel occurs when Roland’s party bears witness to one of the Jibbenainosay’s victims. Before Nathan’s identity is revealed, the spectral nature of the Jibbenainosay myth allows for his violence to be viewed without rationalization or moralization. As they stare at a cross carved into a Shawnee’s chest, the wound conveys a “wantonness of malice and lust of blood which even death could not satisfy” (*Nick*, 124),<sup>197</sup> and they are paralyzed and enraptured with horror as they witness the body.<sup>198</sup> After they look up from the corpse, they are primed for

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<sup>197</sup>The first Shawnee body they encounter is perhaps all the more horrifying due to the way that Bird brings medical nuance to the description: “they beheld with horror the body of a savage, of vast and noble proportions, lying on its face across the roots of the tree, and glued, it might also be said, to the earth by a mass of coagulated blood, that had issued from the scalp and axe-cloven skull...the earth was torn where he lay, and his hands, yet grasping the soil, were dyed a double red in the blood of his antagonist, or perhaps in his own” (*Nick*, 124).

<sup>198</sup> Their horse halts in “instinctive terror,” Edith is struck dumb by a sight that evokes “the highest degree of terror, and the feeling was so overpowering, that her lips, though moving as in the act of speech, gave forth no sound whatever.” Telie Doe, the young girl of the party, looks at the corpse with “mingled horror and wonder” (*Nick*, 122). Pardon, the New Englander, and Emperor, the loyal slave, are “discomposed by the spectacle.” Roland, meanwhile “gaze[s] upon the spectacle, amazed, and wondering” (*Nick*, 123).

further terrors as they see a “monstrous” and “wily” figure approaching from a distance. When this figure turns out to be the apparently peaceable Nathan, they laugh off their mistake: “Our terrors were ridiculous enough, when they could convert a peaceful man like you into a blood-thirsty creature!” (*Nick*, 127). In the ensuing pages, the terrors of the genteel aristocrats ultimately catalyze a conversion that brings Nathan’s violence into the open and forces the party to account for this violence as it is waged on their behalf.

Roland initially threatens to kill the Quaker if he does not join his party. In spite of his initial protests, Nathan soon betrays a smoldering, quasi-erotic desire to let his inner monster loose as Roland insults his masculinity. Operating outside of Roland’s field of vision, Nathan kills a warrior who has Roland in a death-grip, shooting “a jet of warm blood” onto Roland’s arm. Nathan denies his involvement, and Roland admonishes: “by Heaven, I hoped and believed you had yourself finished him like a man” (*Nick*, 161). Soon afterward, Nathan offers to prop up Roland’s unsteady gun, “If thee will not consider it an evil thing of me, and a blood-guiltiness, I will hold thee gun for thee, and thee shall pull the trigger” (*Nick*, 162).

The sexual threat that the Natives pose to the women of the party, Edith and Telie, ultimately leads Nathan to unleash his inner fury. Invoking the women several times, he shouts, “Blood upon my hands, but not upon my head!” and fires upon the throng of “murdering dogs” (*Nick*, 162). Disavowing guilt for joining into the fray, the



“man of peace” undergoes an immediate transformation in character that hints at the hyperbolic capacity for violence at his disposal: “entirely beside himself,” he behaves “as if the first act of warfare had forever released him from all peaceful obligations” and he rushes against one of the Shawnee, “dealing him a blow with the butt of his heavy-stocked rifle that crushed through skull and brain like a gourd, killing the man on the spot” (*Nick*, 163). Even though Nathan’s scruples are momentarily reawakened, the narrator (quite approvingly) recounts that Nathan “fired away with extreme good-will at every evil Shawnee creature that showed himself, encouraging Roland to do the same, and exhibiting throughout the whole contest the most exemplary courage and good conduct” (*Nick*, 166).

As *Nick of the Woods* verges into some of the most gruesome portraits ever written in frontier literature, Edith, the object of Nathan’s benevolent viciousness, and the narrative’s most progressive voice, is mentally protected from witnessing the violence waged in her name when she falls into a convenient stupor: “a lethargy of spirit, result from overwrought feelings, in which she happily remained, more than half unconscious of what was passing around her” (*Nick*, 163). Soon afterward, she is kidnapped by the Shawnee and taken back to the camp. While Edith is marginalized from the circulation of these affects, Roland is increasingly vulnerable to forgoing her civilized restraint. He thus navigates the vortex of frontier violence on his own terms.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> In a scene that depicts a wounded Piankeshaw warrior attempting his last kill, Nathan’s gorey violence amplifies the Native American’s horrifying appearance: “a dark and bloody figure, which staggering and

If Nathan is seduced into committing violence in the open on Roland's behalf, he is just as concerned with getting Roland to understand and accept his violent behavior: after revealing that his family was murdered by the band, he explains his violent purpose in a speech that uncannily blends his Quaker dialect (shown through his use of "thee"), sense of violent justification, and his propensity for madness:

'By night and by day, in summer and in winter, in the wood and in the wigwam, thee would seek for their blood, and thee would shed it;--thee would think of thee wife and thee little babes, and thee heart would be as stone and fire within thee--thee would kill, friend, thee would kill!' And the monosyllable was breathed over and over again with the ferocity of emphasis that showed how deep and vindictive was the passion in the speaker's mind. (*Nick*, 236)

Given the novel's incessant apologetics about Indian-killing and Roland's heartfelt gratitude for his actions,<sup>200</sup> Nathan's attempt to get Roland to accept his violence seems strange. After all, by this point in the narrative, it's quite certain that Roland needs little convincing about the virtues of Indian killing. He himself has been

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falling over the body of the young warrior, crawled like a scotched reptile upon Roland's breast; when the light of the fire shining upon it revealed to his eyes the horrible spectacle of the old Piankeshaw warrior, the lower part of his face shot entirely away, and his eyes rolling hideously, and, as it seemed, sightlessly, in the pangs of death, his hand clutching the knife with which he had so often threatened, and with which he yet seemed destined to take, though in the last gasp of his own, the soldier's life. With one hand he felt along the prisoner's body, as if seeking a vital part, and sustained his own weight, while with the other he made repeated, though feeble and ineffectual, strokes with the knife, all the time rolling, and staggering, and shaking his gory head in a manner most horrible to behold" (*Nick*, 218).

<sup>200</sup> "Condemn you indeed!" Roland responds, "it was an act to bind my gratitude for ever,—an act to win you the admiration and respect of the whole world, which I shall take care to make acquainted with it."

driven to near madness at the sight of Edith being captured.<sup>201</sup> Dana Nelson argues that this emphasis upon Roland's approval serves a larger political purpose of uniting the perspectives of the narrator, reader, Nathan, and Roland, in the project of Indian Removal: The narrator, by functioning "as Roland's twin," brings "the frontier lesson back to civilization and forward in time" and thus "implicate[s] its readers in its drive for revenge precisely by absolving them of complicity in political and historical circumstance."<sup>202</sup> While I agree with Nelson's assessment about Bird's general stance on Indian Removal, and significance of Roland's perspective, the scenes that depict Roland's discovery of Nathan's madness put increased pressure on the social implications of the violent desires that Nathan channels.

As Nathan falls into an epileptic fit, his cap falls off, exposing the source of Nathan's behavior. "Roland saw that Nathan carried with him a better cause for the affliction than could be referred to any mere temporary emotion, however overwhelming to the mind." He notices "A horrible scar disfigured the top of his head, which seemed to have been, many years before, crushed by the blows of a heavy weapon; and it was equally manifest that the savage scalping-knife had done *its* work on the mangled head." Aware that "injuries to the head often resulted in insanity of some

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<sup>201</sup> "Pain of body was then, and for many moments after, lost in agony of mind, which could be conceived only by him who, like the young soldier, has been doomed...to see a tender female, the nearest and dearest object of his affections, in the hands of enemies, the most heartless, merciless and brutal of all the races of men" (*Nick*, 189).

<sup>202</sup> Nelson, 44.

species or other; he could now speculate...upon some of those singular points of character which seemed to distinguish the houseless Nathan from the rest of his fellow-men" (*Nick*, 235). Though the dreadful calamities that "had made him what he was" are beyond articulation—the lacunae in Nathan's story are filled in by Roland's diagnostic imagination:

His imagination supplied the imperfect links of the story; he could well believe that the same hands which had shed the blood of every member of the poor borderer's family, might have struck the hatchet into the head of the resisting husband and father; and that the effects of that blow, with the desolation of heart and fortune which the heavier ones, struck at the same time, had entailed, might have driven him to the woods, an idle, perhaps aimless, wanderer....

How far these causes might have operated in leading Nathan into those late acts of blood which were at such variance with his faith and professions, it remained also for Roland to imagine; and, in truth, he imagined they had operated deeply and far; though nothing in Nathan's own admissions could be found to sanction any belief save they were the results partly of accident, and partly of sudden and irresistible impulse. (*Nick*, 243)

Through this imaginative projection, Roland's diagnosis of Nathan's trauma does reflect his identification with Nathan's overall purpose. Following Nathan's uncanny

Quaker-inflected solicitations,<sup>203</sup> Roland states that he understands Nathan's desire, and that he would have also "Declared eternal war upon them and their accursed race!...I would have sworn undying vengeance, and I would have sought it,—ay, sought it without ceasing. Day and night, summer and winter, on the frontier and in their own lands and villages, I would have pursued the wretches, and pursued them to the death" (*Nick*, 236). Nelson argues that this call and response urges the reader "to identify with Nathan and to consider him heroic" by giving the public "a reason to hate Indians that arises from a sense of innocent personal loss."<sup>204</sup>

In this way, Bird does summon up a sense of solidarity the Elizabeth Barnes finds in antebellum American texts which "transcended divisions of race and social division through their depictions of violence," and encouraged subjects to identify "with forms of power that make and unmake men." This kind of imagining, Barnes continues, could convert "insensible men into men of feeling through acts of violence in which they are compelled to participate, acts that then become a vehicle for their empathetic identification with others."<sup>205</sup> Along similar lines, Nelson argues that Roland "models his own behavior after the Indian-hater's."<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> "Thee has heard it, and thee knows it, thee knows what the Shawnee have done to me--they have killed them all, all that was of my blood! Had they done so by thee, friend," he demands with wild eagerness, "had they done so by thee, what would have done to them?" (*Nick*, 219-20).

<sup>204</sup> Nelson, 43.

<sup>205</sup> Barnes, *Love's Whipping Boy*, 100; 119-20.

<sup>206</sup> Nelson, 42.

However, I suggest that *because* these empathic procedures transcend lines between race and class, and come so close to the forms of anarchy that Bird feared were circulating in the public sphere of his contemporary moment through representations of violence, Roland in fact, learns to *not* model his behavior after Nathan's behavior, even as he recognizes that violence is necessary in the barbaric state.

Though Nathan's traumatic story elicits empathy, this fellow feeling is undercut by his inability to control himself: Nathan's "struggle to subdue the passions...served to add double distortion to his changes of countenance, which, assumed at last an appearance so wild, so hideous, so truly terrific, that Roland was seized with horror, deeming himself confronted with a raging maniac." A bit later, Roland disarms one of the Shawnee and he "begs" Nathan not to kill him, but to no avail: "'To the last man of his tribe!' cried Nathan with unexampled ferocity; and, without another word, drove the hatchet into the wretch's brain" (*Nick*, 254).

Moreover, as Nathan becomes comfortable with accepting his violent nature<sup>207</sup>, he increasingly resembles the uncloseted agents of violence that inhabit the frontier stations, and he adopts their coarse habits and language. This commonality becomes apparent when Nathan, Roland, and Ralph re-unite in the quest to save Edith from the

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<sup>207</sup> Resolving to persist in the quest to save Edith, he states that "things should never be done by halves" (*Nick*, 239)

Shawnee.<sup>208</sup> Ironically, as Roland views commonalities between Nathan, Ralph, and Native American savagery, he is shocked into a propriety that distinguishes him from the group. This civilized aversion becomes clearest when he watches his two companions “crowning their victory” with the scalps of their fallen enemies. Bird’s narrator explains their behavior thus:

Such is the practice of the border, and such it has been ever since the mortal feud, never destined to be really ended but with the annihilation, or civilization of the American race, first began between the savage and the white intruder. It was, and is, essentially, a measure of retaliation compelled, if not justified, by the ferocious example of the red-man. Brutality ever begets brutality; and the magnanimity of arms can only be exercised in the case of a magnanimous foe. With such, the wildest and fiercest rover of the frontier becomes a generous and even humane enemy. (*Nick*, 256-7)

In these scenes, Bird’s narrator affirms Ralph and Nathan’s behavior as a natural response to Native American warfare. But he is also careful to distinguish “compulsion” from “justification.” Moreover he betrays a hint of repugnance by stating that “we are sorry to say” that “conscientious Nathan” joined Ralph in the scalping. The scene itself is

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<sup>208</sup> Demonstrating a similar capacity for unrestrained violence, Roland spies Ralph in a “spectacle as novel as it was shocking.” While an “Indian lay on his back suffocating in mire and water” Ralph sits astride him “covered from head to foot with mud and gore, furiously plying his fists...about the head and face of his foe, his blows falling like sledgehammers or battering-rams, with such strength and fury that it seemed impossible any one of them could fail to crush the skull to atoms” (*Nick*, 254).

wrought with equivocation rooted in the distinction Bird lays out between the ethics of a lawless environment and a civilized one; while Roland would have “gladly” stopped the scalping, such sentiments are “opposed to all border ideas of manly spirit and propriety.” Given his inability to stop this compulsion, Roland’s reaction registers as an implicit ethical response by turning away in “disgust from a scene he could not prevent” (*Nick*, 257).

Roland’s impotent disgust reflects a compulsion to escape the natural cycles of brutality linked with proto-American culture, but also brings us back to William Ian Miller’s point about how ideas about class and civility are reinforced through repudiating the desires of others. Explaining the social significance of disgust within a broader context, William Ian Miller argues that

The vulgar are those given to the excessive, the cloying, the fulsome and facile, the refined are those who can discern vulgarity and reject it in advance by the mechanism of good taste, which is disgust. Taste thus manifests itself by refusing, by turning away in disgust, by recoiling at that which bears the marks of the vulgar, easy, cloying, and cheap. The disgusting is that which poses no resistance; it is the easy, that which just happens unless we cultivate and train to avoid and reject it; it is the path of least resistance, the allure of sinking back into the belly.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup>William Ian Miller, 169.



Roland is thus ennobled less for what he does in this scene than by the fact that he is disturbed by Nathan and Ralph's descent into the state of nature. In doing nothing, but gazing upon the enjoyments of his violent counterparts in disgust, Roland implicitly absolves himself from Nathan's compulsions and the frontiersmen's profane enjoyments.

Acknowledging the disturbing nature of Nathan and Ralph's behavior and Bird's statement that such behavior will never be "ended but with the annihilation, or civilization of the American race," Michael T. Wilson argues that the symptomatic nature of this rage provides an object lesson about the corrupting influences of the Native American presence.<sup>210</sup> However, this disgust is all the more critical in light of Bird's concerns about violence and instability within his contemporary moment. In posing the Native American as an eternal enemy, Bird makes the matter of managing the compulsion to kill them the test of American civilization. Nathan's spectacular madness provides a reservoir for examining this compulsion and vicariously accessing its attendant pleasures; however, Roland's aversion points to a need to harness and contain these sentiments. As such, Nathan's madness emblemizes a kind of spectral precursor for forms of violence that enable a lawful community to be created, but also ones that must be negated and displaced for civilization, law, and order to emerge.

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<sup>210</sup>"Nathan's struggle to reintegrate the split halves of his personality apparently cannot be accomplished short of the complete extermination of Indians on the frontier, a Final Solution that seems clearly echoed by the novel's implication that white violence cannot be rendered more palatable until it is no longer necessary for that same genocidal project." Wilson, 140.

## **The Insanity of the Moment**

After Roland recognizes the horrific nature of Nathan's violence, the mutual antipathies of the Natives and the European frontiersmen reach their apogee in a violent finale as they clash along the Ohio River beyond the fringes of the Kentucky territory. The final chapters of *Nick of the Woods* present an explosive series of scenes that juxtapose Nathan's repulsiveness with the arrival of George Rogers Clark's expeditionary force. Nathan's quest for revenge culminates in a scene that exhibits his most disturbing qualities. In marking Nathan's trajectory thus, Bird reflects the closing of the holistic depravity of the postlapsarian "barbaric state" and the emergence of a national framework that enables Kentucky to be established within the new American nation.

In a gruesome display of cruelty, Wenonga shows Nathan, who has been caught and tied up, a long stick bearing the scalps of his loved ones and which, presumably, contains Nathan's scalp as well. Nathan tricks Wenonga into setting him free. Believing that Nathan's epilepsy is proof that he is a medium for contacting the Jibbenainosay, Wenonga acquiesces to Nathan's demand that the chief untie him so that he can confront the "white man's devil." Once unfettered, Nathan fastens his eyes onto his jailer "with a wild but joyous glare" and a laugh that "would have become the jaws of a hyena." Then, "with rather the rancorous ferocity of a wolf than an enmity of a human being," he leaps upon Wenonga by the throat, seizes his tomahawk, and buries it in his

brain before they hit the ground. Using his knife, Nathan tears the chief's scalp from his "dishonored head" and then uses it as a crude scalpel to etch his final cross, "dividing skin, cartilage, and even bone." Completing this bloody ritual, he revels in the culmination of his vengeful quest in a moment of cathartic madness:

leaping to his feet, and snatching from the post the bundle of withered scalps—the locks of his own murdered family, which he spread a moment before his eyes with one hand, while the other extended, as if to contrast the two prizes together, the reeking scalp-lock of the murderer, he sprang through the door of the lodge, and fled from the village; but not until he had, in the insane fury of the moment, given forth a wild, ear-piecing yell, that spoke the triumph, the exulting transport, of long-baffled but never-dying revenge. (*Nick*, 323)

This moment of insane fury punctuates poetic justice with grisly details; using Wenonga's own weapon against him, crushing his brain, and parading his scalp, Nathan's actions redress the primal scene when Wenonga killed Nathan's loved ones with the Quaker's own weapons and brings closure to his covert quest for revenge. But even as this scene evokes the sublime "transport" of satisfying a "long-baffled but never-dying" revenge, the fearful symmetry of the prized scalps and the underlying erosion between boundaries of man and animal link this spiritual rapture, and the closure of a cycle of revenge, with the oblivion of the civilized subject.

In contrast with previous scenes of bloodshed I have recounted, which are marked by continuous attention to characters' reactions to this violence, the final stages of Bird's portrayal of Nathan's pursuit of cathartic vengeance have no witness save the reader; as he approaches a sleeping Wenonga, no character is

at hand to gaze upon [Nathan's] own, to mark the hideous frown of hate, and the more hideous grin of delight, that mingled on, and distorted his visage, as he gloated, snake-like, over that of the chief. ....Nathan [was] quivering through every fibre with nameless joy and exultation, and forgetful of everything but his prey. (*Nick*, 281)

It thus falls upon the reader to witness Nathan's adoption of the Shawnee's "obstreperous enjoyment," their serpentine features, and to negotiate the affective push and pull between the imperatives that justify his violence and their abject elements. For if Nathan's depravity in the act of killing provides an outlet for a fantasy of killing the Indian, his insane and transportive vengeance also realizes a fantasy of killing with the lawlessness and brutality of the Indian. Though Nathan's actions are not witnessed by a moralizing outsider in the "insane fury" of this moment, the behavior of its auditors, fellow inhabitants of the Shawnee camp, provide a counterpoint in their example of the society that is not shocked by violence: hearing these shrieks, the Native men and women are awakened, "but such sounds in a disorderly hamlet of barbarians were too common to create alarm or uneasiness," thus "leaving the corpse of their chief

to stiffen on the floor of his wigwam” (*Nick*, 324). If this scene does not overtly critique Nathan’s behavior, it offers an implicit acknowledgment of the structures of feeling constitutive of the natives’ everyday lives, and points to the moral edification of disgusted observers such as Roland.

Further problematizing the disturbing catharsis of this scene, Nathan, in his mad reverie, leaves the captive Edith in the hut, and, in doing so, fails to accomplish the quest that ostensibly led him to the camp: she lies in “painful slumbers,” in Wenonga’s wigwam, shielded from witnessing the action while remaining vulnerable. Though closing the circle of his private revenge, he has left the sacralized subject of civilization unprotected and the task of the civilized men unfinished. Moreover, Roland and Ralph are bound to stakes, about to be burned alive by the wicked squaw who is Edith’s counterpoint.

With Nathan momentarily out of sight, Clark’s forces appear as a chiasmatic inversion of the Native Americans’ devilish rage. As the Shawnee, captivated by their own “universal devotion to the Saturnalia of blood,” give a shout that awakens “responsive echoes among the surrounding hills,” they are interrupted by the explosion of fifty rifles, “sharp, rattling, and deadly, like the war-note of the rattlesnake, followed by the mighty hurrah of Christian voices” (*Nick*, 329). Following this logic, Clark’s soldiers and the local militia evoke and invert the fury of the violence ascribed to the Shawnee and Nathan. In the initial stages of the chaos which follows, “a din too horrible

for description,” it appears as if Clark’s soldiers may be partaking in the perpetuation of the Shawnee’s unpardonable sins. Observing the carnage while maintaining a defensive posture around Edith, Pardon Dodge, the greenhorn from Boston, expresses his fear of this development: “Everlasting bad work...they’re killing the squaws! hark, don’t you hear them squeaking? Now, Cunnel, I can kill your tarnal *man* fellers...but, I rather calkilate, I hadn’t no disposition to kill wimming!” (*Nick*, 336). Nathan appears at the vanguard of the local militia’s contingent, “flying with the scalp and arms of Wenonga in his hand, and looking more like an infuriated madman than the inoffensive man of peace he had been long so esteemed” (*Nick*, 339). Roland stares at

the medicine-man, and former captive, the Indian habiliments and paint still on his body and visage, though both were flecked and begrimed with blood. In his left hand was a bundle of scalps, the same he had taken from Wenonga; the grizzled scalp-lock of the chief, known by the vulture feathers, beak, and talons, still attached to it, was hanging to his girdle; while the steel battle-axe so often wielded by Wenonga, was gleaming aloft in his right hand. (*Nick*, 331)

Wearing the natives’ clothes and carrying the chief’s gleaming weapon into battle, Nathan appropriates the Natives’ appearances and demeanor, while their marks on his enciphered body, and the narrator’s adoption of his former captors’ designation of him as “the medicine man,” position Nathan as both a victim and iteration of the Shawnee’s cultural and psychological inscriptions. As he does so, the narrator remarks

that Nathan “was among the most zealous in destroying the Indian village, applying the fire with his own hands to at least a dozen different wigwams, shouting with the most savage exultation, as each burst into flames” (*Nick*, 343).

As the moment evolves, Bird portrays the General’s forces in contrast with the Kentucky militiamen. The volunteer forces, joined by Nathan and “burning” with revenge as they march into the battle, almost hamper Clark; their “impetuosity” almost thwarts the General’s strategic plan to “invest the Indian village, so as to ensure the destruction or capture of every inhabitant” (*Nick*, 339). Even so, Clark’s forces wreak a definitive and portentous victory: “within a few hours after they first appeared, as if bursting from the earth...nothing remained among the place and site of a populous village, save scattered ruins and mangled corpses.”

As the smoke clears, Bird’s narrator interjects to dispel fears that the military has succumbed to the Native Americans’ methods. In spite of the fears voiced by Pardon Dodge of Massachusetts, the general manages to spare “all of the women and children” while killing more than half of the Shawnee and sustaining minimal losses (*Nick*, 340). The demoniacal squaw who aroused Pardon’s conscience—who grinned at Edith as she kept watch over her and delighted in torturing Roland—has been burned by the flames she kindled for Roland’s destruction. And in a move which is proleptic to later generations of removal, the Shawnee move out to “the Settlements” (*Nick*, 340-41).

The avatars of national government harness and contain this rage by methodizing it into policy: “the village, with its fields of standing corn, had been entirely destroyed—a work of cruel vengeance, yet not so much of vengeance as of policy” (Ibid). As such, the military force poses an avenue for a collective agency that picks up almost seamlessly where Nathan leaves off, extending and purifying the divine injunction toward violence, but also acting as prophylaxis for the affective contagion of frontier combat. The government’s intervention realizes a philosophical apotheosis that offers a clean break from the cyclical hostility waged by the Native Americans that motivated the organization of frontier democracy and its provisional perversions. In thus capping the action’s repulsive desires, the novel fashions a vision of an America structured and sacralized through the government’s mediation of Kentucky’s (and American Democracy’s) constitutive violence.

### **The Vanishing Madman**

In the final pages of *Nick of the Woods*, the expulsion of the Shawnee leads to the restoration of the hierarchies disturbed by the Native American presence. And in the aftermath of these events, Nathan and Ralph abruptly exit the frontier stage. Ralph and Nathan’s disappearance reinstalls them into the umbraic narrative space that is maintained by tradition and tales—maintained through romance but outside the zone of official history. While we can say that Bird’s novel aims to give substance to this



legendary history, this documentation of the unrecorded and excluded element of history and local truth draws attention to the romance's capacity to articulate structures of feeling silenced by the merely historical. Even as power structures are affirmed with the termination of the Native threat, the disappearance of the novel's most bizarre figures offers a glimpse of the uncertainties of Bird's era as they reflect a new undercurrent of lawlessness amidst the frontiersmen's celebrations. Nathan, in fact, becomes cured of his madness by observing the frontiersmen's celebrations of his deeds:

It was not indeed until the work of destruction was completed, the retreat commenced, and the army once more buried in the woods, that the demon which had thus taken possession of his spirit, seemed inclined to relax its hold, and restore him once more to his wits. It was then, however, that the remarks which all had now leisure to make on his extraordinary transformation, the mingled jests and commendations of which he found himself the theme, began to make an impression on his mind, and gradually wake him as from a dream that had long mastered and distracted his faculties. The fire of military enthusiasm flashed no more from his eyes, his step lost its bold spring and confidence, he eyed those who so liberally heaped praise on his lately acquired courage and heroic actions, with uneasiness, embarrassment, and dismay; and

cast his troubled eyes around, as if in search of some friend capable of giving counsel and comfort in such case made and provided. (*Nick*, 343)

While victory plays a significant role in his transition, it is also significant that Nathan is shocked back into sanity through his own repulsion toward the community that deems him, like Stackpole and Bruce, one of the “redoubtable” men of violence who earned their place in popular legend. While in the town “he found the cheers and hearty hurrahs,” he “found as little to relish in encomiums passed on his valor as in the invectives to which he had formerly been exposed. He stole away, therefore, into the woods, abandoning the army altogether.” This refusal to take credit is also reflected in his unwillingness to accept Roland’s gift of property. Nathan retreats into the wilderness, with little commentary on his future other than the absence of his pathological violence. The Jibbenainosay in Nathan has been exorcized with the death of Wenonga and, as the narrator tells us, “the phantom Nick of the Woods was never more beheld stalking around the gloom; nor was his fearful cross ever again seen traced on the breast of a slaughtered Indian.” However, if Nathan is “cured” of these violent deeds as the Jibbenainosay vanishes, his actions have been assimilated into the popular legends of the region.

If Nathan has ultimately overcome the physiological constraints of his madness, Ralph has also become a reformed man by the end of the novel. But notably, he is not cured of his compulsion through benevolence. Soon after Roland and Edith gift their

property to him, Ralph's "improvident, harum-scarum habits" lead him to squander his gift, and he continues to steal horses. His propensity toward theft only diminishes when he is brought to the bar of judgment for these crimes and absolved by citizens who remember his valor in frontier combat. Incapable of transgressing frontier norms, Roaring Ralph Stackpole disappears with an air of mythos, as he, like Nathan, becomes a folk legend and is rumored to have turned into an alligator (*Nick*, 348).

The vanishing of *Nick of the Woods's* grotesque heroes could potentially point to the purification of the nascent community. In light of the purging of the Native American threat, Ralph and Nathan's disappearance might seem to signify the culmination of the restoration of law and order, and, moreover, the cure of the Indian as a corporeal and psychological threat; however, the conditions that set their voluntary exile in motion makes this closure problematic.

While it may seem that these characters' bizarre ways have rendered them incompatible to the developing system of government, and thus leave them with no recourse but to light out for the territory a la Cooper's hero, Natty Bumppo, at the end of *The Pioneers*,<sup>211</sup> the resolution of Bird's novel suggests that Nathan and Ralph's "barbarities" remain alive within a "civilized state." Far from rejecting these men's violence or pushing it under the rug, the populace within the newly civilized state have

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<sup>211</sup> Or, for that matter, the way in which Mark Twain's famous social outcast, Huck Finn, rejects being "sivilized" at the end of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

reasserted their love of violence in a space of relative safety and express their lawlessness through the means of law. The lawless fancies these fringe characters embodied, in other words, are not cured, contained or outmoded, by civilization, but they are instead given new life within an emerging legal and popular culture that resembles the contemporary culture Robert Montgomery Bird satirized in his madhouse stories. In the following chapter, I will examine how Oliver Wendell Holmes turns to medical and theological concepts to exorcise a similar form of “barbarism” within New England’s theological traditions.

### Chapter Three: “A Grave Scientific Doctrine”: Oliver Wendell Holmes’s Medicated Romance of Destiny

First serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* as *The Professor’s Story* from December of 1859 to April of 1861, the month in which the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.’s *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* turns to theological and medical discourses about insanity to reform and revitalize New England’s cultural traditions and make a plea for universal compassion.<sup>212</sup>

At the center of Holmes’s novel is the mysterious case of Elsie, an eighteen-year-old schoolgirl whose strange, snake-like traits titillate, mesmerize, and repel the inhabitants of the sleepy village of Rockland.<sup>213</sup> At the summer ball, the Dionysian “dark girl” with “flame in her cheeks and fire in her eyes...vigorous tints and emphatic outlines” (*EV* V.1 134), wears bizarrely patterned dresses and plays with a necklace that hides a serpent-shaped birthmark. Violating norms of paternal discipline, she slithers

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<sup>212</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes. *Elsie Venner, A Romance of Destiny* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861). Subsequent citations will appear as *EV*.

<sup>213</sup> The novel’s first description of Elsie is threaded through with consonance that links the snakelike features, behaviors, and adornments with the poetic feeling she incites: “She was tall and slender, but rounded, with a peculiar undulation of movement.... She was a splendid scowling beauty, black-browed, with a flash of white teeth which was always like a surprise when her lips parted. She wore a checkered dress, of a curious pattern, and a camel’s-hair scarf twisted a little fantastically about her. She went to her seat, which she had moved a short distance apart from the rest, and, sitting down, began playing listlessly with her gold chain, as was a common habit with her, coiling it and uncoiling it about her slender wrist, and braiding it in with her long, delicate fingers. Presently she looked up. Black, piercing eyes, not large...black hair, twisted in heavy braids,—a face that one could not help looking at for its beauty, yet that one wanted to look away from for something in its expression, and could not for those diamond eyes” (*EV* V.1 103).

out her window and disappears for days on end, returning with flowers and birds' nests from the treacherous and rattlesnake-infested (and always capitalized) "Mountain" that looms over the region. Her diamond eyes have the uncanny ability to charm snakes and women away from her desired suitor, Bernard Langdon, a destitute medical student from Boston who takes up a position as a schoolteacher in a village steeped in theological controversy.

While it eventually becomes clear that Elsie's anomalous behavior originates in a fatal rattlesnake bite that struck her mother before she was born,<sup>214</sup> the majority of Holmes's novel concerns the mindset of a community that finds itself attracted and repelled by her high-born beauty and atavistic tendencies.<sup>215</sup> Incredibly lonely, almost mute, and accompanied only by her African-American maid, Sophy, a manumitted descendant of cannibals, and her "savage," half-South American cousin, Dick, this "apparition of wild beauty" is read through the lens of fears about feminine desire and discipline, racial purity, and original sin.

Unable to understand, much less control, Elsie's "anomalous," "lawless," and "ungovernable" behavior, many of Rockland's denizens believe that this "crazy girl"

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<sup>214</sup> As Holmes's narrator puts it, this fatal bite took place in the year "184\_." This likely positions the setting of the novel somewhere in the late 1850's.

<sup>215</sup> She is "superb in vigorous womanhood, with a beauty such as never comes but after generations of culture," but also "as full of dangerous life as ever lay under the slender flanks and clean-shaped limbs of a panther" (*EV* 2:203; 2:38).

ought to be sent to an asylum (*EV* V.1 240).<sup>216</sup> But instead of institutionalizing her, Elsie's wise physician, Dr. Kittredge, tells everyone to "bear with her, and let her have her way as much as they could, but watch her, as far as possible, without making her suspicious of them" (*EV* V.1 185). By suspending the practical means for Elsie's removal, and putting pressure on the community's professionals to discipline themselves to conform to Elsie's icy gaze, *Elsie Venner* forces Rockland's doctors, theologians, and teachers, as well as the novel's readers, to

test the doctrine of 'original sin' and human responsibility for the disordered volition coming under that technical denomination. Was Elsie Venner, poisoned by the venom of a crotalus before she was born, morally responsible for the 'volitional' aberrations, which translated into acts become what as sin, and it may be, what is punished as crime?

Urging readers to read Elsie's prenatal disorder through the lens of emerging theories of moral insanity, Holmes teases out a parallel between her prenatal disease and human responsibility for Adamic sin.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> "Her temper was singular, her tastes were anomalous, her habits were lawless, her antipathies were many and intense, and she was liable to explosions of ungovernable anger" (*EV* V.1 240)

<sup>217</sup> "If, on presentation of the evidence, she becomes by the verdict of the human conscience a proper object of divine pity and not of divine wrath, as a subject of moral poisoning, wherein lies the difference between her position at the bar of judgment, human or divine, and that of the unfortunate victim who received a moral poison from a remote ancestor before he drew his first breath?" Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Second Preface," *Elsie Venner; A Romance of Destiny* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894), ix-x.

In this chapter, I explore how Holmes turns a medically-informed eye upon the community of professionals who speculate about Elsie and advances an argument for recognizing the broader implications of contemporary theories of insanity and moral responsibility. Drawing from theories, including phrenology and heredity, which postulated that physiology helped dictate moral capacities and responsibilities, Holmes positions Elsie and her savage cousin's moral constitutions within a continuum of physiological determinism which encompasses her observers as well. By doing so, *Elsie Venner* explicates links between socio-biological qualities of individuals, moral capacities, and sympathies in ways that call into question the limits of moral judgment.

Recognizing that Western culture had turned away from treating the lunatic as a figure of demonic possession, Holmes makes compassion for Elsie a starting point for displacing the judgment of sin with management of disease: "*Treat bad men exactly as if they were insane*" (EV V.1 283). By doing so, Holmes's novel unfolds a logic for reconstituting a vision of American society and divinity along revised notions of sympathy, compassion, and non-violence.

Due to its physiological analysis of New England culture, *Elsie Venner* has been recognized as an early precursor to American literary realism. In particular, Cynthia Davis and Jane Thraikill have drawn attention to the novel's "clinical" and "statistical" portrayal of human identity as a radical departure from traditional practices of sentimental representation. However, as Davis notes, when Elsie faces death, Holmes's



narrative returns to sentimental conventions with a vengeance—a dramatic shift which leads her to read the novel as a “confused” blend of “residual” and “emergent” modes.<sup>218</sup> By putting the theological argument Holmes centers in his novel into closer conversation with the era’s discourses of mental health, I examine how the underlying thread of biological determinism that motivates Holmes’s call to revise the doctrine of original sin lays the groundwork for reinstating exclusionary practices under the banner of medical compassion.

*Elsie Venner’s* provincial setting and non-violent message may initially seem unrelated to the spectacular frontier violence of *Nick of The Woods* and *Edgar Huntly*. In fact, when we are introduced to the sleepy mountain town of Rockland, we are shown that even the memory of the Native American seems to be fading away as demonstrated by the fact that the town is in the process of relabeling the indigenous names of local landmarks with Anglicized terms. But while Rockland’s settlers vanquished the “‘screeching Indian Divell,’ [sic] as our fathers called him,” they remain captivated by the symbolic system that turned the Native into a powerful avatar of evil. The region’s serpents, which were often metonymically linked with both the Native and Satan, remain alive and well as the village’s “reigning nightmare.” While it had been “easy enough, after a time, to drive away the savages,” the serpents survived the

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<sup>218</sup> Cynthia Davis, *Bodily and Narrative Forms: The Influence of Medicine on American Literature, 1845-1915* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 16. Jane Traillkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

exterminatory “great snake hunts” by always slipping out of the hunters’ sight and reach.

This irresolvable fear, rooted as much in theological myth as instinctive self-protection, continues to fuel the community’s internal conflicts. In an anecdote from Rockland’s history that takes a page from John Winthrop’s *History of New England*, the professor relates how a snake’s appearance and sudden death in the chapel of a controversial Reverend confirmed the opinions of people on all sides of the debate.<sup>219</sup> This obsession not only contributes to social division, it also distracts Rockland’s citizens from actual dangers: Crystalline Lake, the “smiling pond,” which now replaces the Native American-named Quinnepeg Pond, has drowned more young maidens than the serpents have ever claimed (*EV V.1* 63-67).

Elsie’s serpentine characteristics, in other words, confront Rockland’s citizens, as well as the novel’s readers, with the dangerous implications of a postlapsarian hermeneutics that warrants quests to find and destroy evil. While much of *Elsie Venner* seems to be hermetically sealed off from concerns outside of New England, I consider at the end of this chapter how Holmes’s linkage of territorial, biological, and psychological boundaries and medical authority speak to emerging national hostilities.

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<sup>219</sup> Holmes mentions the Winthrop anecdote in “The Medical Profession in Massachusetts.” Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Medical Profession in Massachusetts.” *Medical Essays 1842-1882* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 312-370), 356.

## A Post-Postlapsarian Romance

Oliver Wendell Holmes recollected that his psychological development was profoundly influenced by John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a text he would refer to time and again as an exemplary exponent of the Calvinist doctrine of his ancestors and many of his contemporaries. While he considered Bunyan's tale a "work of genius" that "captivates all persons of active imagination," he resented its portrayal of "the universe as a trap which catches most of the human vermin that have its bait dangled before them, and the only wonder is that a few escape the elaborate arrangement made for their capture." To Holmes, the sadistic God of this "wonderful work of the imagination, with all its beauty in power" seemed more like Satan and its pious hero, Christian, seemed a like a madman.<sup>220</sup> These inversions of the deific and the diabolic,<sup>221</sup> the sane and the mad, left an indelible stain on the moral constitutions of his contemporaries and

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<sup>220</sup> Holmes breaks down his diagnosis of Bunyan's hero "Christian" thus: "Suppose a person to have become so excited by religious stimulants that he is subject to what are known to the records of insanity as hallucinations: that he hears voices whispering blasphemy in his ears, and sees devils coming to meet him, and thinks he is going to be torn in pieces, or trodden into the mire. Suppose that his mental conflicts, after plunging him into the depths of despondency, at last reduce him to a state of despair, so that he now contemplates taking his own life, and debates with himself whether it shall be by knife, halter, or poison, and after much questioning is apparently making up his mind to commit suicide. Is not this a manifest case of insanity, in the form known as melancholia? Would not any prudent physician keep such a person under the eye of constant watchers, as in a dangerous state of, at least, partial mental alienation? Yet this is an exact transcript of the mental condition of Christian in 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and its counterpart has been found in thousands of wretched lives terminated by the act of self-destruction, which came so near taking place in the hero of the allegory." Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Pulpit and the Pew." *Pages From an Old Volume of Life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), 416-417.

<sup>221</sup> Holmes argued that the events of *Progress* seemed more like "the hunting of sinners with a pack of demons for the amusement of the Lord of the terrestrial manor than like the tender care of a father of his offspring." John Terry Morse, *Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1896), V.1 47.

himself: “No child can overcome these early impressions without doing violence to the whole mental and moral machinery of his being.”<sup>222</sup>

Holmes’s fascination with *Pilgrim’s Progress’s* ability to “captivate” and, effectively, hardwire New Englanders with a fear of innumerable worldly traps is a testament to the persuasive power of homilectic pedagogy, which, as Gregory Jackson argues, enabled “the possibility for accruing knowledge through *simulated* - rather than actual - experience” and encouraged “active readerly or performative engagement.” In a way that may remind us of the process of empathy segueing into disgust in Robert Montgomery Bird’s postlapsarian wilderness, homilectic pedagogy evoked emotions that were “so overwhelming that the body registered them as involuntary physiological responses” that would ideally “open the mind to new awareness, preparing it for spiritual transformation.”<sup>223</sup> At key moments, Holmes’s “physiological romance” brings readers into contact with a system which is no less divine or all-encompassing; however, when he does so, he encourages readers to take a less fearful attitude toward human agency and worldly observation.<sup>224</sup>

In composing *Elsie Venner*, Holmes shamelessly borrowed tropes and themes

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<sup>222</sup> Though “he may conquer them in after years,” the “wretches and strains which this victory has cost him leave him a cripple as compared with a child trained in sound and reasonable beliefs.” Morse, V.1 48; 39-40. Years later, writing to Stowe, Holmes argues that though their entire generation will be unable to fully overcome the Calvinist teachings which constitute them; however future generations may be able to do so.

<sup>223</sup> Gregory Jackson, *The Word and its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 69.

<sup>224</sup> Holmes, “Second Preface.” Xii.

from Nathaniel Hawthorne, who notoriously mocked the Calvinist obsession with rooting out sin; but Hawthorne's critiques of this obsession frequently reified the persistence of Adamic sin in the human heart and its inextricable relationship with human constructions.<sup>225</sup> As his post-apocalyptic tale "The New Adam and Eve" begins: "We, who are born into the world's artificial system, can never adequately know how little in our present state and circumstances is natural, and how much is merely the interpolation of the perverted mind and heart of man." In spite of this subjective entrapment in artificial and perverted structures, Hawthorne poses aesthetics as a mechanism for enabling the imagination to escape the confines of the body and reflect upon the symptoms of original sin: "It is only through the medium of the imagination that we can loosen those iron fetters, which we call truth and reality, and make ourselves even partially sensible what prisoners we are."<sup>226</sup>

A significant medium for this sense of transport and escape, for Hawthorne, lay in poetic ambiguity. Responding to his decision to leave unresolved the mystery of the title figure at the center of his *Marble Faun* (1860), who may be the incarnation of a man-animal-marble statue, Hawthorne explains that excitement, poetry, fancy, and

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<sup>225</sup> Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust," for example, features large a group of reformers who attempt to throw everything that bears the stain of imperfection into a great conflagration. However, by the end of the narrative, it is clear that the human heart, and hence, all humanity, would be destroyed in the process. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Earth's Holocaust." *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 163-190.

<sup>226</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The New Adam and Eve." *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 5-29.

beauty emerge through an aesthetic that is free from the “iron fetters” of scientific discourses of classification:

The idea of the modern Faun...loses all the poetry and beauty which the author fancied into it, and becomes nothing more than a grotesque absurdity, if we bring it into the actual light of day. He had hoped to mystify this anomalous creature between the Real and the Fantastic, in such a manner that the reader's sympathies might be excited to a certain pleasurable degree, without impelling him to ask how Cuvier would have classified poor Donatello.<sup>227</sup>

By suggesting that the affective and imaginary components of his aesthetic emerges through an interruption of the worldly effort of scientific classification, Hawthorne poses the grotesque as an aesthetic that shuts down feelings of aesthetic transport, bringing us back to the snares of a world. He also implicitly acknowledges that romance quickly turns grotesque when these lights are turned on.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun; or, the Romance of Monte Beni* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1876), V.2 284.

<sup>228</sup> Acting in the capacity of a physician-confidante, Holmes treated Hawthorne, and upon his death, he aimed to share Hawthorne's fear of going insane. Hawthorne's wife, Sophia, prevented him from publishing these lines. Peter Gibian, *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 290). It has also been speculated that Holmes's visit to Herman Melville at Arrowhead, purportedly to examine Melville's sciatica, may have been a mental health check-up prompted by Melville's wife (Gibian, 304). Though it is perhaps impossible to determine whether Holmes was an inspiration for Hiram Scribe, the interloper in “I and My Chimney” who collaborates with the obsessive narrator's wife to deconstruct the gigantic chimney that captivates the narrator's imagination, Holmes's constant argument that theological logics ossify and break down with the passing of time and need to be reconstructed to the needs of the day seems to suggest that the narrator, if not Melville himself, offers a paranoiac counterpoint to Holmes's pragmatism.

Similar to the “fairy-land, where the Actual and Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other,”<sup>229</sup> which Hawthorne uses to describe his aesthetic in *The Scarlet Letter*, Elsie’s case seems to belong “to that middle region between science and poetry which sensible men, as they are called, are very shy of meddling with” (EV V.1 274). Holmes’s narrator insists that viewing Elsie in purely romantic terms fails to account for her true nature. Observing Elsie’s collection of items from the forbidden Mountain, including nests and eggs of rare birds and “quaint monstrosities of vegetable growth,” he acknowledges that she “had her tastes and fancies like any naturalist or poet.” But then the narrator suggests that to read Elsie without scientific understanding is to disregard her otherness:

Nature, when left to her own freaks in the forest, is grotesque and fanciful to the verge of license, and beyond it. The foliage of trees does not always require clipping to make it look like an image of life.... There is a perpetual reminiscence of animal life in her rude caricatures, which sometimes actually reach the point of imitating a complete human figure, as in that extraordinary specimen which nobody will believe to be genuine, except the men of science, and of which the discreet reader may have a glimpse by application in the proper quarter. (EV V.2 45)

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<sup>229</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter, a Romance* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850), 40.

In order to understand Elsie, in other words, it is necessary to meddle with and reconsider the relationship between science and poetry. Moreover, as we shall see, humans who don't interrogate their relationship with nature will misunderstand Elsie as well as themselves. In scenes which turn on the scientific "lights" which Hawthorne dims, Holmes exposes relationships among cultural artifice, human instinct, and nature.

Mid-way through describing a debutante party held at the home of Rockland's Colonel Sprowle, Holmes's professor turns to the reader—a hypothetical guest—and disabuses him or her of the notion that courtship rituals can be taken at face value: "Deluded little wretch, male or female, in town or country, how little you know the nature of the ceremony in which you are to bear the part of victim" (EV V.1 122). Elaborating upon this "ceremony," Holmes likens the dance hall to "the burning room" of the *ancien régime's* halls of judgment and a savage encampments, where nothing but "strict justice" will be applied to the "White Captive" under evaluation.<sup>230</sup> "Why have they hung a chandelier above you, flickering all over with flames, so that it searches you like the noonday sun, and your deepest dimple cannot hold a shade? To give brilliancy to the gay scene, no doubt!—No, my dear! Society is *inspecting* you, and it finds undisguised surfaces and strong lights a convenience in the process." The scrutinizing

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<sup>230</sup> Knowledgeable of the literature and medical practice of Francois Rabelais, whom he cited in his medical works, Holmes may have known that the author escaped France in fear of the tribunal which had earned this dubious denomination during the publication of *Pantagruel*, one of the major contributions to grotesque literary form. Annie Lemp Konta, *The History of French Literature from the Oath of Strasburg to Chantier* (New York: D Appleton and Company, 1910), 121.



conventions of the ballroom, in fact, mediate a universal biological imperative that entails a form of duty: “You have got to learn that the ‘struggle for life’ Mr. Charles Darwin talks about reaches to vertebrates clad in crinoline, as well as mollusks in shells, or articulates in jointed scales, or anything that fights for breathing-room and food and love in any coat of fur or feather” (*EV V.1 122-123*, Holmes’s italics).

Referring to the recently-published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859), Holmes portrays social convention as an expression of humanity’s condition as an evolutionary creature.<sup>231</sup> As Jane Thraillkill points out, Holmes’s depiction of this scene draws attention to the agency invested in the ritual’s “design” and therefore gives evidence to society’s contact with and mediation of instinct.<sup>232</sup> In this way, Holmes anticipates neuroscientific philosopher Daniel Dennet’s claim that the web of discourses which constitute selfhood are inherent in humanity’s biological makeup; without them, “an individual human being is as incomplete as a bird without feathers, a turtle without its shell.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Since the beginning of *Elsie Venner’s* publication cycle as *The Professor’s Story* followed this event by a matter of months, Holmes’s reference to Darwin make *Elsie Venner* one of the first, if not the very first, pieces of American literature specifically to invoke Darwin’s theory of natural selection. It is likely that Holmes was acquainted with the substance of Darwin’s arguments a year or two earlier, however, for his colleague at Harvard, Asa Gray, received an abstract of *Origins* from Darwin two years before its publication, and Gray conversed with Darwin about its significance. Charles Darwin, *On Evolution*. Ed. Thomas F. Glick and David Kohn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 152.

<sup>232</sup> Thraillkill, 72.

<sup>233</sup> Daniel C. Dennet, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1991), 416.

The analogy of the dance hall to a barbarous ritual, then, points to technologies that shelter humanity from its own animalism and implicitly distance civilization from “savage” and premodern culture. The contrast between the elegant ballroom and the *ancien régime* tribunal or barbarous ceremony suggests that human progress can be measured by the beauty of its illusions.

But in closing this episode by interjecting “Thank Heaven” that “no young girl ever did, or ever will” have such reflections, Holmes’s narrator turns the screw once more (EV V. 123). By shifting from a second person address—which puts the reader in the position of recognizing his or her potential position as a “deluded wretch”—back to third person description, Holmes poses the reader-writer relationship as a site for sharing secret, sacred knowledge. This invitation encourages the reader to inhabit a position from which one can observe and affirm the sacred value of the mystification process which unifies nature and culture.<sup>234</sup> Though it implies a hierarchical relationship between the person who recognizes the value of illusion and the person who lives within it, it poses the reader as both a product and observer of nature.

Elsie steps into the ballroom a moment later as Bernard is dancing with one of

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<sup>234</sup> By drawing attention to a certain need for illusion, particularly as it pertains to the case of this young woman, Holmes’s professor projects an role for the physician-as-demystifier that anticipates the advice that Dr. Mandelet shares with Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*: “[Y]outh is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost.” Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone & Company, 1899), 291-292.

his beautiful pupils. While he initially is “bewitched” by the “revelation” of his dancing partner’s beauty, Elsie’s piercing gaze “disenchants the air.” By thus propelling the young woman away from Bernard, Elsie effectively strips away culture’s encoding protocols. She frightens not because she is evil, but rather because she disturbs the smooth functioning of the cultivated systems of tradition and confronts everyone on the level of instinct—providing an uncomfortable reminder that everyone in Rockland is an animal (E.V.V.1 136).

In light of this dinner party scene, Holmes suggests that peering at the relationship between the artificial and the natural is not to be feared, but rather regarded as an ethical obligation. Holmes argued that Jonathan Edwards’s “barbaric, mechanical, materialistic, pessimistic” system was a reflection of a pre-American imaginary that placed moral and legal authority in a noumenal realm outside of citizens’ understanding.<sup>235</sup> In a “free” society, where the people who make the laws are also subjects of the law, it was necessary to understand and tend the instincts that mediate human relationships. By cultivating this administrative gaze, he implies a necessity for recognizing how civilization enables biological imperatives, and the need for an elite to

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<sup>235</sup> “If [Edwards] had lived a hundred years later, and breathed the air of freedom, he could not have written with such old-world barbarism as we find in his volcanic sermons,” Holmes speculated. Quoting Montesquieu, Holmes adds that if the punishments of despots horrify humanity, it is because they take on an authority that is above the laws that they wage, but “It is not so in republics, wherein the laws are always mild, because he who makes them is himself a subject.” Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Jonathan Edwards,” *Pages from an Old Volume of Life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895), 395.

tend these pivotal functions.

### **Automatic Action in the Moral World**

Holmes's attention to the links between human institutions and natural forces appeals to a tradition of rhetoric that presented republican America as a "natural" and implicitly "egalitarian" system; however, it also reinforces the need for expert knowledge.<sup>236</sup> This was in keeping with his hierarchical understanding of society and protracted interest in critiquing the professions of law, medicine, and religion. As George Frederickson argues, Unionist intellectuals of the North such as Holmes put "a greater stress on the value of institutions, and in some instances, for the acknowledgment of an intellectual elite which would provide conservative leadership in thought and opinion by being in some way 'established,' like the clergy of the past."<sup>237</sup>

*Elsie Venner* introduces the standard bearers of Boston's professional culture,

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<sup>236</sup> Joan Burbick, *Healing the Republic: The Language of Health and the Culture of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2-3. Differentiating America's from European order, Holmes stated in *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, "The old-world order of things is an arrangement of locks and canals, where everything depends on keeping the gates shut, and so holding the upper waters at their level, the system under which the young republican American is born trusts the whole unimpeded tide of life to the great elemental influences, as the vast rivers of the continent settle their own level in obedience to the laws that govern the planet and the spheres that surround it." Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1892), 295.

<sup>237</sup> George Frederickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 23. Quoted by John Evelev, "Picturesque Reform in the New England Village Novel, 1845-1867." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*. V.53 No. 2 (2007), 160.

“The Brahmin Caste of New England,” in terms that merge the sacred, the hierarchical, and the physiological. This caste, which is the origin of the colloquial term “Boston Brahmin,” is also inherently American. Affirming that “there is nothing in New England corresponding to the feudal aristocracies of the Old World,” which are formed by titles designated by old feudal leaders and systems of privilege, the professor who narrates *Elsie Venner* tells us that this “harmless, inoffensive, untitled aristocracy” has emerged without coercion. Rather, these “races of scholars,” such as the famous theological family lines of the “Edwardses, Chaunceys, and Ellerys,” have naturally inherited a bodily “organization and physiognomy” that gives them an intellectual tendency. Not to recognize these features, the professor states, would be “mere stupidity” and an insult to the “goodwill and intelligence of his readers” (*EV V.1* 13-17).

These men of privileged stock have animal instincts that let them take to books “as a pointer or setter to field-work.”<sup>238</sup> While there are miraculous cases where a farmer’s son might join the scholarly culture, these exceptions prove the rule about heredity: when “a series of felicitous crosses develops an improved strain of blood, and reaches its maximum perfection,” a scholar “from an unworn stock” can be gifted by “Nature’s grace.” This anomalous felicity is “nature’s republicanism;” “thank God for it, but do not let it make you illogical” (*EV V.1* 16-19).

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<sup>238</sup> Using a horticultural metaphor, the professor states that the Brahmin “come chiefly from a privileged order, just as the best fruits come from well-known grafts” (*EV V.1* 16).

Though this portrait of New England's professional culture is undoubtedly chauvinistic, its emphasis upon physiognomy and heredity also foregrounds the novel's discussion of Elsie's condition by placing her within a continuum of identities organized by forces beyond individual control. *Elsie Venner* affirms the values and mental propensities of this dominant culture while examining blind spots that emerge in a world of contingent identities.

By presenting Elsie's condition a matter of "moral poisoning"—as a disorder which produces a deranged state of moral functioning—Holmes asks us to read Elsie's malady using theories of moral insanity that were frequently linked with racial and hereditary discourses during the 1840s and '50s.<sup>239</sup> Theorists of moral insanity, such as Isaac Ray and Amariah Brigham, two of the foremost figures in American medical jurisprudence and asylum management, did not adhere religiously to many of phrenology's conclusions, but they nonetheless believed that it demonstrated correspondences among the brain, body, and mind in ways which meant that some subjects had innate propensities to deviate from the law—and thus deserved mitigated

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<sup>239</sup> Though as I briefly described earlier in this inquiry, the understanding of moral insanity was always contested, the starting point for many mid-nineteenth century physicians was J.C. Pritchard's definition of moral insanity as a "morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination." Unlike the kind of clear case that could be made for madness due to, say, a blow on the head, moral insanity could conceivably occur without a clear injury, through either strong emotions aroused by a strange event, or properties within one's mental organization. For example, Elsie Venner is described as an intelligent student, but she is also prone to violent impulses. Hanna Franziska Augstein, "J. C. Prichard's Concept of Moral Insanity—a Medical Theory of the Corruption of Human Nature," *Medical History* 40 (1996).

sentences in the court or mental health treatment rather than criminal punishment. Moreover, they believed that phrenology was taking the scope of mental inquiry in the right direction by making physical, rather than metaphysical, paths of inquiry.<sup>240</sup> Such theories also potentially pointed the way toward focusing on educational strategies for mental development. Because patterns in behavior could be tracked across generations, heredity became an increasingly important factor in moral insanity's theorization.<sup>241</sup>

In several extended conversations in *Elsie Venner*, Holmes's professor and Dr. Kittredge advance the argument that "the great doctrine of moral insanity" has "done more to make men charitable than any one doctrine that I can think of since the message of peace and good-will to men" (EV V.1 281). Moral insanity "melted the world's conscience in its crucible, and cast it in a new mould, with features less like those of Moloch and more like those of humanity." This evolution in charity was a consequence of its ability to link the "the limits of human responsibility" with "fixed relations between [the body/brain's physiological] organization and mind and character" (EV V.1 281).

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<sup>240</sup> Imparting no small sense of science's triumph over faith, Roger Cooter argues that the main disciplinary contribution of phrenology was to shift the domain of mental health study away from religion: "with the mind reposing in the brain, sin was displaced from its religious stronghold in the soul and given an entirely biological secular dimension," and thus liberated the brain from "institutions of power that depended upon blind faith, superstition, and spontaneous irrational behavior." Cooter, Roger. *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 111.

<sup>241</sup> Grob, Gerald. "Psychiatry's Holy Grail: The Search for the Mechanisms of Mental Diseases." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 72.2 (1998).

Kittredge advances the idea that physicians have superseded religion in advancing charitable belief because religious doctrine puts too much stock in the ability to divine the moral nature of others; while “ministers talk about the human will as if it stood on a high look-out, with plenty of light, and elbow-room reaching to the horizon,” doctors “are constantly noticing how it is tied up and darkened by inferior organization, by disease and all sorts of crowding interferences, until they get to look upon Hottentots and Indians—and a good many of their own race—as a kind of self-conscious blood-clocks with very limited power of self-determination” (EV V.2 114). These conversations also register concerns about the limited understanding white men have about their own freedom. “We feel that we can practically do this or that, and if we choose the wrong, we know we are responsible; but observation teaches us that this or that other race or individual has not the same practical freedom of choice” (EV V.2 108).

Unsurprisingly, these views were being forcefully challenged, and, eventually, undermined by theorists of mind who saw the theory of moral insanity as a threat to law, order, and faith. The most prominent opponent to these theories was Dr. John P. Gray, the asylum director at Utica who achieved control over the publication organ of the American Association of Asylum Superintendents, *The American Journal of Insanity*. Throughout his career, he railed against phrenology and heredity, and preferred to consign all insanity pleas which were not based upon a concrete disease of the brain to



oblivion.<sup>242</sup> For Gray, the rigidity of the mind/body duality needed to be maintained at all costs, for it provided the basis for distinguishing between moral choices for which a subject could be responsible and maladies that exculpated the will.<sup>243</sup> Insanity, Gray argued, “is simply a bodily disease in which the mind is disturbed more or less profoundly, because the brain is involved in the sickness.... The mind is not, in itself, ever diseased. It is incapable of disease.”<sup>244</sup> These concerns about medicine overreaching into a domain beyond disease were also a matter of maintaining traditional divisions between religious and social institutions.<sup>245</sup>

Gray believed that moral insanity also threatened the credibility of the medical profession by making the distinction between sanity and insanity dependent upon

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<sup>242</sup> The byzantine nature of the debates within the AAAS is perhaps best described in Ruth B Caplan, *Psychiatry and the Community in Nineteenth-Century America: The Recurring Concern with the Environment in the Prevention and Treatment of Mental Illness* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

<sup>243</sup> Dr. Henry Maudsley described the congenital theory of moral insanity thus: “To those who take the metaphysical view of mind, it will no doubt seem improbable that absence of moral sense should ever be a congenital fault of moral organization; but it may be witnessed even in young children, who, long before they have known what vice meant, have evinced an entire absence of moral feeling, with the active display of all sorts of immoral tendencies, a genuine moral imbecility or insanity. As there are persons who cannot distinguish certain colors, having what is called color-blindness, so there are some who are congenitally deprived of moral sense.” Samuel B. Worcester, *Insanity and its Treatment* (London: Homeopathic Publishers, 1882), 419.

<sup>244</sup> Quoted in Nicole Rafter, *The Criminal Brain: Understanding Biological Theories of Crime* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 31.

<sup>245</sup> Synthesizing the implications of Gray’s argument, Robert Waldinger writes that “As long as aberrant behavior could be defined as a willful departure from particular social norms, then variability of behavior among individuals was amenable to control by the church, the school, and the courts.” Moreover, it threatened disciplinary systems which predicated upon a default setting equal rights, responsibilities, and capabilities of reason: “As long as the power of reason guaranteed each person an equal capacity to act morally, reason might be the medium through which moralists could exert their leverage.” Robert J. Waldinger, “Sleep of Reason: John P. Gray and the Challenge of Moral Insanity,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*. 34 no.2 (April 1979), 175.

indeterminate variables and arbitrary judgments. Moreover, it invited legal chaos because, he felt, it led juries to determine guilt based on sympathy rather than science. When a judge instructed that a homicidal-hysterical woman could be deemed insane if she were found to be acting upon “insane impulse, produced either by a diseased physical condition, or by moral causes operating on a diseased state of her system, stinging her to madness and for a time displacing reason from its seat,” Gray disparaged these instructions as “an invitation to the jury to gratify their own ‘impulses’ in a verdict of acquittal.”<sup>246</sup>

Whereas Gray believed that such theories of insanity would lead to arbitrary judgments, Holmes argued that the reality was precisely the opposite. In essays such as “Crime and Automatism,”<sup>247</sup> and “Mechanism and Thought in Morals,”<sup>248</sup> which expanded on the professor’s speeches on “automatic action in the moral world,” Holmes argued that conventional notions about punishment were based in erroneous assumptions about the nature of moral responsibility. While the legal system makes an exception for subjects who meet “technical conditions of the state defined as insanity,” Holmes’s writings on criminality argued that the law ought to reconsider criminal punishment more broadly in light of the network of physiological and social

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<sup>246</sup> Carole Haver, *The Trials of Laura Fair: Sex, Murder, and Insanity in the Victorian West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 104

<sup>247</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Crime and Automatism,” *Pages from an Old Volume of Life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895). Subsequent in-text references will refer to this essay as “Crime.”

<sup>248</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Mechanism and Thought in Morals,” *Pages from an Old Volume of Life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895).

contingencies that led people to behave criminally (“Crime” 322-24).

The presumption of free will, in Holmes’s view, perpetuated cruelty by holding individuals, each with their own physiological makeup, to arbitrary standards constructed by “instinct, tradition, and convenience.” When jurists failed to acknowledge the role that physiology and development played in criminal activity, *they* were effectively policing instinct with instinct (“Crime” 324). For Holmes, the incarceration and punishment of a “fellow-creature at whose deeds a whole community shudders” did not correct behavior so much as it fulfilled a brute instinct to punish.

It was bad enough that instinct was expressed in lawless desires for justice (such as “lynch-law”); it was worse that it was mediated through “the courtroom and even in the sanctuary” (“Crime” 323). The tendency to ascribe sin to physical maladies co-opted a process whereby an instinct to punish was given a divine sanction. While he acknowledged that such feelings were as “natural” as the desire to kill a serpent, and sometimes justifiable for the instruction of the populace, he believed that God would have more compassion.<sup>249</sup>

Furthermore, isolating responsibility within the erring individual failed to

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<sup>249</sup> Distinguishing human and divine judgment in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Holmes wrote, “I believe much, I dare not say how much, of what we call ‘sin’ has no moral character whatever in the sight of the great Judge;” rather, “sin” was a term that either stood in for human judgments about behavior: “much of what we call ‘vice’ is not only an object of the profoundest compassion to good men and women, but that the tenderest of God’s mercies are in store for many whom the so-called justice of the world condemns.” Given the sequence of Stowe and Holmes’s correspondence, this letter likely was written in May of 1876. Quoted in Morse, V.2 252.

acknowledge the role that cultures and institutions played in fostering criminality. As the professor in *Elsie Venner* states, “Crime and sin” are “the great preserves of two organized interests”—religion and law— and by assigning too much responsibility to subjects who do ill, they fail to address society’s responsibilities toward individuals. “It is so easy to hang a troublesome fellow! It is so much simpler to consign a soul to perdition, or say masses, for money, to save it, than to take the blame on ourselves for letting it grow up in neglect and run to ruin for want of humanizing influences” (*EV*. V.1. 280). However, he also suggests that the factors which shape moral character also limit who can be properly treated with “humanizing influences.” In a passage which was reprinted in Isaac Ray’s *Mental Hygeine* (1863), Holmes’s Dr. Kittredge argues that Anglo-Americans’ failure to “civilize” the Native American is symptomatic of the collective solipsism of a racially and culturally homogeneous (albeit superior) professional culture.<sup>250</sup> Because “the thinking classes of the highest races,” are “conscious of a great degree of liberty of will,” they foolishly believed that they could assimilate non-Christians: “in the face of the fact that civilization with all it offers has proved a dead failure with the aboriginal races of this country,—on the whole, I say, a dead failure,—they talk as if they knew from their own will all about that of a Digger Indian!” (*EV*. V.2 115).<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Isaac Ray, *Mental Hygeine* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 64.

<sup>251</sup> Holmes made some efforts to alter the homogeneity of the “thinking classes” As the Dean of Harvard Medical School, for example, he attempted to admit a woman and three African Americans, including the

Holmes's critique of postlapsarian notions of the inescapability of sin and the "crocodile crew that believe in election" became necessary, in part, because moral character became increasingly deterministic and differentiated.<sup>252</sup> Whereas the doctrine of original sin transmitted Adamic guilt as well as responsibility, Holmes speaks of a more compassionate, and in his mind, more Christian response to the deterministic nature of moral tendencies: "We doctors see so much of families, how the tricks of blood keep breaking out, just as much as in character as they do in looks, that we can't help feeling as if a great many people hadn't a fair chance to be what is called 'good,' and there isn't a text in the Bible worth keeping always in mind than that one, 'Judge not, that ye be judged' (EV V.2 116).<sup>253</sup>

Because of the series of impasses that make it difficult to know the line between responsibility and "automatism," much less the moral constitution of the other, the professor argues that society ought to "*Treat bad men exactly as if they were insane.*

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author and activist Martin Delany. However, upon being criticized by faculty as well as students who threatened "mutiny," he fell in line with the Harvard community's wishes. As Peter Gibian writes, his positions on race in the university put him at the "progressive vanguard," but he did not stand up for his ideals when "confronted by real-world political pressures" (Gibian, 176).

<sup>252</sup> "In place of the doctrine of predestination, in virtue of which certain individuals were to become or remain subjects of wrath, we are discussing organic tendencies, inborn idiosyncracies, which, so far as they go, are purely mechanical, and are the best excuse that can be pleaded for a human being, exempting him from all moral responsibility when they reach a certain extreme degree, and exculpating him just so far as they are uncontrollable, or unenlightened by any moral sense" ("Crime," 327).

<sup>253</sup> "We hear comparatively little of that 'original sin' which made man an ex officio a culprit and a rebel, and liable to punishment as such. But we have whole volumes on hereditary instincts of all kinds, sometimes in the direction of the worst crimes, and the more of this kind of original sin we find in a man, the more we are disposed to excuse his evil deeds" (Ibid.).

They are *in-sane*, out of health, morally” (EV V.2 283 Holmes’s italics).

### **A Charitable Virus**

While the medical discussions throughout *Elsie Venner* provide insight into the limited nature of moral responsibility, the most powerful scene of moral—and emotional—transformation in *Elsie Venner* culminates when Reverend Honeywood, the novel’s standard-bearer for Calvinism, revises his creed by reading Elsie’s condition through the lens of his heart. In the process, he revises a model of thinking which frames her behavior as a clue to the universal depravity of the human condition to one which accepts the contingencies of human responsibility and sympathies.

Early in the novel, Honeywood stands out as a good-hearted heir to the “old faith of the Puritans.” A man with the “Edwards blood in him,” he can recite all the technicalities of his ancestors’ doctrine and has a “logical basis laid down for the Millennium.” While yoked, as it were, to the bridle of Calvinism, and “bred by a clerical father,” Honeywood “exercised his human faculties in the harness of his ancient faith with such freedom that the straps of it got so loose they did not interfere with the circulation of the warm blood through his system.” This warmed Edwards blood gives him a “very warm, open, and *exceedingly human* disposition” that makes him instinctively disposed to innovating upon the Calvinist ethos when he is charged with the task of reaffirming the most conservative notions of his doctrine (EV V. 1 84-85, Holmes’s emphasis).

Because he has tended toward “preaching plain, practical sermons about the duties of life, and showing his Christianity in abundant good works among his people,” the senior deacon, who plays the role of Holmes’s straw man, tells Honeywood that the parishioners need to be reminded of the “great fundamental doctrine of the worthlessness of all human efforts and motives” because they “were altogether too much pleased with the success of the Temperance Society and the Association for the Relief of the Poor.” Taking the deacon’s direction, Honeywood attempts to re-emphasize his doctrinal authority by updating a “first-rate old sermon on ‘human nature.’” As he does so, his mind is focused on the “logical side-track” of technical dogma and attempts to shut out the more humane “highway of common-sense.” He is thus following “the chain of reason without fairly perceiving where it would lead him, if he carried it into real life” (*EV V.2 5-6*).

While Honeywood attempts to separate this logic from the workings of his heart and experience, these tracks intersect when he considers his affection for his granddaughter, Letty Forrester, who has visited from Boston. “Graceful,” “vivacious,” and “unselfish” to everyone, Letty has “life throbbing all over her.” Reading elements of himself in Letty as he sees “his features opening into their pleasantest sunshine,” his heart tells him that “there was nothing so very monstrous and unnatural about the specimen of congenital perversion he was looking at” (*EV V.2 7-8*). So he reflexively turns his thoughts to Elsie to return to his doctrinal orthodoxy.

Considering how Elsie, the “daughter of one of the first families in the place, a very beautiful and noble creature to look at, for whose bringing up nothing had been spared,” remains morally intractable seems to confirm that “there were mysteries in human nature which pointed to some tremendous perversion of its tendencies,—to some profound, radical vice of moral constitution, native or transmitted, as you will have it; but positive, at any rate.” Begging the question, theologically, Honeywood asks, “what was this but an instance of the total obliquity and degeneration of the moral principle? [A]nd to what could it be owing, but to an innate organic tendency?” By reading his intuitions about Elsie’s “innate organic tendency” through the lens of the doctrine of total depravity, Honeywood makes Elsie a conspicuous pillar for his position on the universality of Adamic sin (*EV V.2 9*).

But when Elsie’s African American caretaker, Sophy, who is a member of Honeywood’s congregation, interrupts his speculation to plead for help for Elsie, his opinions drastically change. Sophy, who has traveled on foot with more zeal than he supposes she would to “save the Union,” provides an exhaustive account of Elsie’s birth, childhood, and adolescence, expressing a fear that someone will either “kill her or shut her up her whole life” for circumstances that “a’n’t her fault.” Listening to Elsie’s story, which is paraphrased so that the reader will learn the “painful” truth about the snakebite in due course, in tandem with his observation that Sophy is virtuous in spite of the fact that her inner life also escapes his comprehension (*EV V.2 12-19*), Honeywood



escapes “from his old scholarly abstractions” and takes “the side of humanity instinctively” (EV V.2 21-22).<sup>254</sup>

Accepting the fact that Elsie is morally diseased rather than sinful, he finds that “his theory of ingrained moral obliquity” is invalid:

If by the visitation of God a person receives any injury which impairs the intellect or the moral perceptions, *is it not monstrous to judge such a person by our common working standards of right and wrong?* Certainly, everybody will answer, in cases where there is a palpable organic change brought about, as when a blow on the head produces insanity. Fools! How long will it be before we shall learn that for every wound which betrays itself to the sight by a scar, there are a thousand unseen mutilations that cripple, each of them, some one or more

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<sup>254</sup> Honeywood’s observations about Sophy also demonstrate the way in which *Elsie Venner* triangulates mental dysfunction and racial difference to chart the boundaries of “default” white perception. Sophy’s self-effacing demeanor also allows for a non-threatening parallel to Elsie’s mysterious interiority to be explored. She appears like a living fossil: “Black women remain at a stationary age (to the eyes of white people, at least) for thirty years. They do not appear to change during this period any more than so many Trenton trilobites. Bent up, wrinkled, yellow-eyed, with long upper-lip, projecting jaws, retreating chin, still meek features, long arms, large flat hands with uncolored palms and slightly webbed fingers, it was impossible not to see in this old creature a hint of the gradations by which life climbs up through the lower natures to the highest human developments.” Even though he can analyze her features as a specimen of evolutionary history, racial difference makes her interiority inaccessible: “We cannot tell such old women’s ages because we do not understand the physiognomy of a race so unlike our own. No doubt they see a great deal in each other’s faces that we cannot,—changes of color and expression as real as our own, blushes and sudden betrayals of feeling,—just as these two canaries know what their single notes and short sentences and full song with this or that variation mean, though it is a mystery to us unplumed mortals.” As a precursor to the kind of feeling he will show for Elsie, Honeywood gets his fellow deacons to “tolerate” Sophy in the “communion of fellow-sinners,” in spite of the fact that her cannibal lineage imparts a “heathen flavor in her Christianity” (EV V.2 11-13).

of our highest faculties? (*EV V.2 21*, my italics)

Honeywood's shift in thinking is subtle, yet decisive. If the doctrine of original sin presumed the universal presence of a malignant "innate organic tendency," he now sees God directing humanity through an equally inscrutable network of organic variables. The potential for invisible mental "mutilations" thus renders the "common working standards of right and wrong" contingent. Honeywood finds "monstrosity" in universalizing these "working standards" as a reflection of God's will, for God's operations are beyond the observer's ken.

Revising his sermon entirely, he writes "On the Obligations of an Infinite Creator to a Finite Creature" (*EV V.2 22*). The sermon ultimately takes on elements of Christian humanism. As he expresses a new logic that unites theological belief with human realities, he, like the professor and Dr. Kittredge, now sees moral and physical illness as one and the same: "a man with a crooked spine would never be called to account for not walking erect.... If the crook was in his brain, instead of his back, he could not fairly be blamed for any natural defect, whatever lawyers or divines might call it" (*EV V.2 22*). However, this perspective is no less deterministic than the one he originally believed:

if a person inherited a perfect mind, body, and disposition, that person could do nothing more than keep the moral law perfectly. But supposing that the Creator allows a person to be born with an hereditary or ingrafted organic tendency, and

then puts this person into the hands of teachers incompetent or positively bad, is not what is called *sin* or transgression of the law necessarily involved in the premises? (EV V.2 23)<sup>255</sup>

The truth of Elsie's condition thus "vaccinates" Honeywood with a "charitable virus" that makes him "a true, open-souled Christian of the mildest type" (EV V.2 297). This is the non-judgmental expression of a heart capable of all-encompassing compassion, which achieves a universality that, at least theoretically, exceeds racial particularity: "A man's love is the measure of his fitness for good or bad company here or elsewhere. Men are tattooed with their special beliefs like so many South-Sea Islanders; but a real human heart, with Divine love in it, beats with the same glow under all the patterns of all earth's thousand tribes!" (EV V.2 10). This religiously attuned heart realizes a broader extension of the "great breadth of true Christian love and charity" — precisely because it extends beyond the limits of his ability to understand Elsie.

This transformation is key to the novel's sentimental ethics. Holmes's affirmation of sympathy's boundaries allows for a recognition of difference in ways that were sometimes occluded by sentimental literatures and rhetorics that enabled the virtual crossing of boundaries of class, race, and creed at the expense of recognizing sources of inequality. Along these lines, Lauren Berlant has argued that one of the failings of

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<sup>255</sup> As with many cases in Holmes's writing about moral malignity, he piles on all of the negative influences to an extent that produces ambiguity about the relative significance of ingrained and acquired traits.

sentimental politics is that “the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the nonuniversality of pain.” The consequence of this is a “passive ideal of empathy” that is “impersonal and depersonalizing.”<sup>256</sup> Whereas Holmes pointed to the failure of the “thinking men of the highest classes” who solipsized the wills, desires, and cultures of the other, Honeywood’s recognition of Elsie’s difference at least potentially opens up the possibility that compassion and tolerance can emerge through the recognition that empathy for Elsie is impossible.

But it also raises a problem. Honeywood’s tolerance provides no clear antidote to Elsie’s marginalization. Just as Elsie is not “responsible” for her behavior, her suffering is private, irreparable, and outside the domain of *his* responsibility: “What prayers could be agonizing enough, what tenderness could be deep enough...for this poor...blameless child of misfortune...struck by such a doom as perhaps no living creature in all the sisterhood of humanity shared with her?” (*EV* V.2. 21). The impossibility of actual communion between these souls essentially leads to an acceptance that he can do nothing to help her. In this way, Holmes’s novel expresses the virtue of broad and all-encompassing tolerance, but this tolerance reinforces the irreducibility of difference.

Meanwhile, this theological shift revitalizes the emotional bonds that Honeywood *does* feel. As the penumbra of inherent vice lifts, Honeywood’s love for his

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<sup>256</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” *American Literature* 70 no.3 (September 1998), 641.

brooding, Letty, which is no less based in instinct than Elsie's behavior, becomes justified by his faith that her innocence, beauty, and their mutual "pleasantest sunshine" hide no dark secrets. As it inevitably comes to pass, however, both Letty and Elsie have affection for Bernard Langdon. In our next section we will explore the implications of the ethical bind that emerges from the tension between Holmes's advocacy of a compassionate "universal heart" that extends beyond racial and cultural boundaries and Rockland's revitalized sympathies and communal instincts.

### **A Compassionate Quarantine**

While *Elsie Venner* works against a heremenutic that reads human nature through sin, and suggests that humans make a grave error when they confuse human standards of "right and wrong" with God's judgment, the basis for this compassionate realization is that human instinct sets firm limits to sympathy, reformability, and the scope of moral judgment. After Honeywood expresses the feeling of compassion that an infinite entity might have for finite creatures, the rest of *Elsie Venner* deals with the tension between this "infinite" compassion and the obligations of *finite* creatures toward one another. In particular, the novel grapples with the problem of what happens when a concept of a divine compassion that transcends boundaries runs into conflict with the white community's instinctive, and arguably no less divine, compulsions for

survival.

*Elsie Venner* presents the underlying physiological basis for Rockland's inhabitants' adverse reactions to Elsie when Bernard hires a "dark, gipsy looking" woman to bring rattlesnakes from the Mountain. She nonchalantly arrives with a bundle of perfectly docile serpents in her apron. In spite of the serpents' "peaceable" demeanor, Bernard is seized with a feeling of "antipathy," which the professor explains as a feeling that is not quite fear nor disgust, but which shows "itself in paleness, and even faintness," when one encounters "objects perfectly harmless and not in themselves offensive in any sense." When Bernard calls the gypsy-woman "crazy" for being cavalier about carrying fatal snakes, she replies that "rattlers never touches our folks. I'd jest 'z lieves handle them creaturs as so many striped snakes" (*EV* V2. 258). These reactions triangulate a racial component to antipathy while expressing how the instinct to annihilate arises from biological drives that do not have a moral reference.

As Holmes's professor suggests in *The Professor at the Breakfast-Table*, antipathy registers unsettling realities about human nature. In a scene where an aggressive member of a breakfast-table discussion berates a deformed, harmless, and shriveled fellow diner, the professor in turn berates the antagonist. But he also recognizes that the man's prejudice arises from an imperative of racial preservation: this animus "has reference to the race, and not to the individual. Infirmity must be kicked out, or the stock run down. Wholesale moral arrangements are so different from retail! I

understand the instinct, my friend,--it is cosmic,--it is planetary,--it is a conservative principle in creation" (16). Whereas the professor can rebuke the aggressive man's morality in the "retail," the wholesale drive of racial instinct tends toward violent impulses.

The challenge that this antipathy poses to norms of civic inclusion is first described when Helen Darley, Elsie's school teacher, reads Elsie's descriptive essay about The Mountain. Helen, who applies her conscientious zeal to the point of exhaustion (and to the benefit of the school's exploitive owner), becomes horribly distraught by the writing in Elsie's "singular," "sharp-pointed," "slender hand." The narrator states that it is unclear whether the problem here originates in something inherent in Elsie's writing or Helen's overworked psyche, but in any case, Helen has a neuralgic reaction that verges upon hysteria. Helen's conscientiousness furthers her anxiety because she feels her labor is responsible for correcting and improving the lives of all her students.

Deferential woman that she is, Helen asks Bernard whether there are limits to her capacity as an instructor. Bernard, admitting that he sounds like the professor, provides a comforting answer that reifies natural limits to Elsie's correctability: "No doubt there are people born with impulses at every possible angle to the parallels of nature." While people with "slight obliquities" can be corrected through education, those who "happen to cut at right angles," are "beyond the reach of common

influences.” While education may be able to assist those with minor perversions, “penitentiaries and asylums take care of most of the right angle cases” (EV V1. 99).

Saved from the maddening anxieties of responsibility by Bernard’s authoritative words, Helen feels relief as the limits of her responsibility are contained: “I am glad you believe in the force of transmitted tendencies. It would break my heart, if I did not think that there are faults beyond the reach of everything but God’s special grace. I should die, if I thought that my negligence or incapacity was alone responsible for the errors and sins of those I have charge of” (EV V.1. 101).

As Bernard offers comforting boundaries to Darley’s condition, their eyes communicate an intimacy which is to be contrasted with the antipathy which divides Elsie from others. This bond, which is rooted in their shared lineage of downtrodden New England intellectuals, is called the “the natural law of elective affinity.”<sup>257</sup> By describing this feeling as “elective,” the professor effectively reinscribes the Calvinist notion of election onto the structures of feeling and exclusionary practices of this biologically organized community. Moreover, Bernard the Brahmin’s invocation of the

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<sup>257</sup> “The meek teacher’s blue eyes met the luminous glance that came with the question. She, too, was of gentle blood,—not meaning by that that she was of any noted lineage, but that she came of a cultivated stock, never rich, but long trained to intellectual callings. A thousand decencies, amenities, reticences, graces, which no one thinks of until he misses them, are the traditional right of those who spring from such families. And when two persons of this exceptional breeding meet in the midst of the common multitude, they seek each other’s company at once by the natural law of elective affinity. It is wonderful how men and women know their peers. If two stranger queens, sole survivors of two shipwrecked vessels, were cast, half-naked, on a rock together, each would at once address the other as ‘Our Royal Sister’” (EV V.1 100).



asylum and prison as sites outside the domain of correction also suggest that the limits of the professionals' efforts, and the systems of exclusion that reach beyond them, feel divinely ordained, and their denizens a kind of preterite class. The ethnopsychological boundaries marked by feelings of antipathy and affinity are thus—as far as this community, blind moles that they are, can see—the same as boundaries which organize and limit the scope moral judgment, law, and reform.<sup>258</sup>

While Elsie's potential for violence is never actualized in the novel, her cousin, Dick Venner raises a more emergent problem. In keeping with the novel's portrayal of the hereditary nature of morality, Dick's moral sense is damned by his blood. As the son of a member of the Venner family line and a woman of Spanish descent from Buenos Aires, Dick possesses a dangerous "double consciousness" which is divided along ethnic lines. "On his New England side he was cunning and calculating, always cautious," while his southern blood makes him "liable to intercurrent fits of jealousy and rage, such as the light-hued races are hardly capable of conceiving." These "blinding paroxysms of passion," feed "into the more dangerous forces that worked through the instrumentality of his cool craftiness" (*EV* V.2 155). And as the plot of the novel bears out, every intention he expresses bends toward immorality.

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<sup>258</sup> As Holmes writes in "Mechanism and Thought in Morals: "The moral universe includes nothing but the exercise of choice: all else is machinery. What we can help and what we cannot help are two sides of a line which separates the sphere of human responsibility from that of the being who has arranged and controls the order of things" ("Mechanism," 302). In other words, where the limits of choice end, God begins. This raises the problem: to what extent can society can play a mediate role in organizing the conditions of choice, and how does one draw the line between choice and machinery?

While many of Dick's disturbing features are innate, they are also developed through his tyrannical management of his horse: "The absolute tyranny of the human will over a noble and powerful beast develops the instinct of personal prevalence and dominion; so that the horse-subduer and hero were almost synonymous" (EV V.1 190). In this respect, Dick Venner's villainy may also grotesquely refract the character of a slaveholder. Realizing that Elsie is attracted to Bernard, Dick aims to kill the young Brahmin so that he may marry Elsie and obtain the Venner family fortune through further subterfuge.

Dick's behavior forces a need for some form of response; however, in light of the novel's advocacy of compassion, his malignity raises a problem. As the professor puts it, "I suppose we must punish evil-doers as we extirpate vermin; but I don't know that we have any more right to judge them than we have to judge rats and mice, which are just as good as cats and weasels, though we think it necessary to treat them as criminals" (EV V.1 281). In a heated moment, Bernard likewise feels the push and pull between the "impulse of extermination,—a divine instinct, intended to keep down vermin of all classes to their working averages in the economy of Nature" and "a cheerful tolerance,—a feeling, that, if the Deity could bear with rats and sharpers, he could." Along these lines, *Elsie Venner* navigates a dilemma that puts the "divine instinct" to commit violence against the ethical obligation of divine compassion.

It is clear from the start that the entire community has a natural prejudice

against Dick: at first glance, he appears like a demon from Puritan lore: looking like “Mephistopheles galloping hard to be in season at the witches’ Sabbath-gathering” (*EV* V.1 220). Though Elsie’s bizarre serpentine eyes escape the town judge’s categorization, he boasts of his ability to spot moral decay in Dick: “we old law doctors know just as well as the medical counselors know the marks of disease in a man’s face. Dr. Kittredge looks at a man and says he’s going to die; I look at a man and say he is going to be hanged.”<sup>259</sup> As the narrator describes the books that sit in his library “staring blindly” and embodying “the ghosts of dead attorneys fixed motionless and speechless, each with a thin, golden film over his unwinking eyes” (*EV* V.1 225), he also portrays the jurist’s advocacy of capital punishment as a construct of a serpentine tradition.<sup>260</sup>

Doctor Kittredge is no exception to the community’s prejudice.<sup>261</sup> However, he is also conscious of the fact that acting otherwise lies outside of the domain of Dick’s moral control. In a series of melodramatic scenes, Dick makes good on his predictably evil ways by attempting to noose Bernard with a lasso. Though he almost succeeds in his task, Doctor Kittredge’s hired man, Abel, interferes and Dick is apprehended. Given the novel’s emphasis upon the inborn prejudices of the people against this biologically

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<sup>259</sup> “I have had to face many sharp eyes and hard ones,--murderers’ eyes and pirates’,--men who had to be watched in the bar, where they stood on trial, for fear they should spring on the prosecuting officers like tigers,--but I never saw such eyes as Elsie’s; and yet they have a kind of drawing virtue or power about them,--I don’t know what else to call it” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>260</sup> This analogy is established through Holmes’s long description the fixed, unwinking stare of the rattlesnake (*EV* V.2 60).

<sup>261</sup> “He had been suspicious of Dick from the first. He did not like his mixed blood, nor his looks, nor his ways” (*EV* V.2. 141).

incompatible man, it is hinted that Dick will likely be lynched without trial the next morning (*EV V2*. 180). In response to these warring natures, Doctor Kittredge halts the machinery of rural justice; he seizes the reigns of judge, jury, and executioner of justice by grabbing Dick and hustling him to the Massachusetts border, exiling him from the state forever. "I can't judge men's souls," the Doctor states, "but I can judge their acts, and hold them responsible for those—but I don't know much about their souls. If you or I had found our soul in a half-breed body, and been turned loose to run among the Indians, we might have been playing just such tricks as this fellow had been trying. What if you or I had inherited all the tendencies that were born with his cousin Elsie?" (*EV V.2* 210).

In other words, compassion dictates that Dick must be expelled, for the community is as incapable of judging him by its terms as he is incapable of following the law. Just as Dr. Kittredge's decision to keep Elsie out of the asylum enables people like Reverend Honeywood to arrive at a larger conception of moral judgment, his decision about handling Dick also interrupts the automatic processes which would otherwise leave Dick at the mercy of divine retribution. By exiling Dick from the state, he succeeds in protecting the community from the danger Dick poses, and he also effectively halts the barbaric urges the town would have otherwise expressed through an unfair trial or lynching.

There is also potentially another element at work in the physician's intervention

and *Elsie Venner's* pleas of compassion. For, by linking the limits of this community's psychological jurisdiction with the border of Massachusetts, rather than, say, exiling Dick from the nation by taking him to the port of Boston, Holmes maps the limits of moral judgment upon state boundaries in a manner that is in step with Holmes's political leanings on state moral and legal jurisdictions throughout the 1850's. As a stalwart Whig Unionist, he signed a controversial petition in favor of Daniel Webster's Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>262</sup> Moreover, while he did not speak much about the wrongs of slavery before the war, he declared to Charles Sumner and Ralph Waldo Emerson that he would have fought with the abolitionists in Bleeding Kansas had he been an inhabitant of the state.<sup>263</sup>

Whether or not we read Kittredge's attempt to quarantine the community from the threat of violence which Dick Venner poses as a reflection upon emerging hostilities, at the back end of this compassionate medical intervention is an acknowledgment that without such an intercession, violence between warring natures is natural and inevitable.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Eleanor Marguerite Tilton, *Amiable Autocrat: A Biography of Doctor Oliver Wendell Holmes* (New York: Schuman, 1947), 224.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>264</sup> In the January 1861 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, the first month of southern secession conventions, James Russell Lowell's essay about the imminent threat of disunion, "The Question of the Hour," appeared alongside the chapter in which Dick is exiled, entitled "Moment of Peril." Lowell, James Russell. "The Question of the Hour." *Atlantic Monthly* 7 (January 1861). Likewise, in a March 1861 letter to John Lothrop Motley, Holmes was still holding out for the possibility of compromise. He expressed frustration with abolitionists as well as southern advocates of the confederacy as parties mutually interested in secession (qtd in Morse, V.2 154-155).

## **Mercy Killing**

After the novel's depiction of successful efforts at quarantining Dick from the New England community without resorting to violence, the plot rapidly hurtles through a course of events leading to further exposure of the nature of Elsie's condition and to her eventual death. Perhaps due to her recognition of the community's compassion, Elsie becomes increasingly aware of her isolation from Rockland's sphere of sentiment. More conscious of her loneliness because of this, and desirous of being within the fold, she desperately seeks to be loved by someone besides the always officious, but racially other Sophy, who remains her one true companion.

For most of the novel, Doctor Kittredge's treatment of Elsie is in line with Holmes's views on the self-limiting nature of disease and "moral treatment," a procedure which involved humoring the delusions of patients and allowing them to recognize the absurdity of their behavior and thereby to self-correct.<sup>265</sup> He waits for Elsie's malady to run its course without interfering in any way: "encouraging all her harmless fantasies, and rarely reminding her that he was a professional adviser." The hope is that Elsie might outgrow her snake-like tendencies. Her father has a parallel

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<sup>265</sup> Literary descriptions of the moral treatment are discussed in Justine Murison's *The Politics of Anxiety in American Literature*, and appear prominently in the final chapters of Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Egotism; or, the Bosom Serpent."

hope: “Are there not rough buds that open into sweet flowers? ...In God’s good time she would come to her true nature; her eyes would lose that frightful, cold glitter.”<sup>266</sup> The doctor speculates that love will ultimately cure the “cold circle of isolation” she carries with her: “she will not love any one easily, perhaps not at all; yet love would be more like to bring her right than anything else” (EV V.1 244).

On this front, the doctor seems correct: while knowledge of Elsie’s inner life is always indirect, she seems desirous of sympathy yet constitutionally incapable of having it.<sup>267</sup> But her only resource for self-knowledge is a literature that reaffirms her marginalization: Keats’s “Lamia,” Coleridge’s “Christabel,” and, of course, the story of Eve in the garden of Eden. Perhaps most tellingly of her condition, she bookmarks a line from the *Aeneid* for Bernard that that reads: “Incipit effari, mediaque in voce resistit,” which may be translated to mean: “She’d speak her heart, but her voice chokes, mid-word.”<sup>268</sup>

But he also gives advice that produces a paradox when Elsie’s health is concerned: he warns the man she loves, Bernard, that reciprocating that love would be dangerous—even fatal: “Keep your eyes open and your heart shut. If, through pitying

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<sup>266</sup> These two men also share an elective affinity: Elsie’s father, Dudley, and Dr. Kittredge share a common feeling when they discuss their hope that Elsie will grow out of her “illness”: “There are states of mind which may be shared by two persons in the presence of each other, which remain not only unworried, but unthoughted.... Such a mutually interpenetrative consciousness there was between the father and the old physician” (EV V.1 243).

<sup>267</sup> She has “nothing in common” with the other girls and is constantly described as making a “circle of isolation round herself” (EV V. 1 128).

<sup>268</sup> EV V.1 220; Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 2008), 130.

that girl, you ever come to love her, you are lost" (EV V.1 267). The latent sexuality in Elsie's depiction broaches the unmentionable possibility that she might reproduce and transmit her tendency to future generations.<sup>269</sup> Thus, while compassion for Elsie is a virtue, it has to be expressed without sympathy or love, but rather a form of stoic pity.

This medically sanctioned pity is given religious sanction when Helen Darley learns the truth about the snakebite that killed Elsie's mother from Sophy.<sup>270</sup> She affirms that a cure to Elsie's malady is more important than her life. Helen realizes that it's now "cruel" to call the look in Elsie's eye's malice, for she understands that Elsie is merely a

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<sup>269</sup> Additionally, her death is in keeping with views Holmes expressed in the year of *Elsie Venner's* publication that fatal diseases of a congenital nature may be "vital to the well-being of society." Expressing the principles of natural selection, Holmes argues that congenital diseases "are natural agencies which cut off the children of races that are sinking below the decent minimum which nature has established as the condition of viability, before they reach the age of reproduction. They are really not so much diseases, as manifestations of congenital incapacity for life; the race would be ruined if art could ever learn always to preserve the individuals subject to them. We must do the best we can for them, but we ought also to know what these 'diseases' mean." Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical Science," *Medical Essays 1842-1882* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company), 200. Just as the professor of *Elsie Venner* states that observing three generations is enough to triangulate the scope of a person's moral capabilities, his son, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., wrote the following when affirming the sterilization of a woman in his majority opinion in *Buck v. Bell* 1927: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." Paul Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2008).

<sup>270</sup> Helen remarks on Elsie's condition thus: "She knew the significance of the strange repulsion which she felt in her own intimate consciousness underlying the inexplicable attraction which drew her towards the young girl in spite of this repugnance. She began to look with new feelings on the contradictions in her moral nature,—the longing for sympathy, as shown by her wishing for Helen's company, and the impossibility of passing beyond the cold circle of isolation within which she had her being. The fearful truth of that instinctive feeling of hers, that there was something not human looking out of Elsie's eyes, came upon her with a sudden flash of penetrating conviction. There were two warring principles in that superb organization and proud soul. One made her a woman, with all a woman's powers and longings. The other chilled all the currents of outlet for her emotions. It made her tearless and mute, when another woman would have wept and pleaded. And it infused into her soul something—it was cruel now to call it malice—which was still and watchful and dangerous, which waited its opportunity, and then shot like an arrow from its bow out of the coil of brooding premeditation." (EV V2. 252).



sick soul. But she does not pray for Elsie to live, for “what could life be to her but a perpetual anguish, and to those about her but an ever-present terror?” She wishes instead that Elsie be “so influenced by divine grace, that what in her was most truly human, most purely woman-like, should overcome the dark, cold, unmentionable instinct which had pervaded her being like a subtle poison.” Viewing this cure as more important than Elsie’s life, Helen believes that Elsie’s ultimate fate is “left to a higher wisdom and tenderer love than her own” (*EV V2*. 252).

In what amounts to a procedure of sentimental euthanasia, Dr. Kittredge’s advice becomes a mechanism of grace and higher wisdom: with these principles, Elsie is quickly killed without anyone’s guilt entering into the equation. In light of an impasse that pits Elsie’s interests against those of the “human” race, she is killed when Bernard and Elsie follow the doctor’s prescription.

When Elsie approaches Bernard and exclaims “Love me!” he refuses her request for a romantic connection but instead tells her he will love her as if they were “born from the same mother.” Bernard’s offer of fraternal love rests upon an impossibility, for maternal affliction is the source of her difference (*EV V.2* 234). She swoons into a sickness which leaves her bedridden. Her condition worsens when Bernard gives her a “white ash” flower; a sympathy gift that, unbeknownst to him, was antipathetic with snakes. These forms of misunderstanding, in spite of Bernard’s best intentions, reflect the fact that the emotional disconnect between Elsie and every other white subject in

the novel is mutual and tragic, but also blameless.

As the sickness that Bernard imparts courses through her system, it blanches out the dark “foreign” element and gives the impression of racial and moral purification and her grotesquerie is evacuated: “there was a change in her whole expression and her manner. The shadows ceased over her features” and she begins to resemble her mother as her blood-curse is lifted, “the likeness she bore to her mother coming forth more and more, as the cold glitter died out of the diamond eyes, and the stormy scowl disappeared from the dark brows and low forehead.” Against the doctor’s orders that she must remain still or die, the girl gives her father a fatal embrace and utters her last words: “Good night, my dear father!” (EV V2. 272).

Because Elsie’s death comes with her assent to the structures of feeling which have kept her at a distance throughout the novel, Elsie’s death-cure universalizes the sacred bonds of the community with a sense of spiritual affirmation reminiscent of the famous death of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* Little Eva. The whole town, including her father, joins in mourning—and only Sophy does so without relief.

Elsie’s purification-through-death is further punctuated by the vanishing of the serpentine birthmark which she has been hiding beneath her golden necklace. This event bears no small resemblance to the finale of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark”—the tale of a man of science who rids his wife of a hand-shaped birthmark that

represents a “visible mark of earthly imperfection,” and, in the process, kills her.<sup>271</sup> But whereas Hawthorne’s tale implicates the mad scientist’s puritanical drive for perfection, the communal instincts of *Elsie Venner* and its physician’s restraint diffuses guilt into the ether.

In a postscript to the narrative, the professor departs from his wry detachment and joins in this tearful ceremony. Witnessing Bernard Langdon and Letty Forrester, the granddaughter of Reverend Honeywood together in Boston, he anticipates that they will marry. Upon closer inspection, he sees that Letty is now wearing Elsie’s necklace. “My eyes filled with tears as I read upon the clasp, in sharp-cut italic letters, E.V. They were tears at once of sad remembrance and of joyous anticipation; for the ornament on which I looked was the double pledge of dead sorrow and living affection” (*EV* V.2 312).

In observing the scenes that lead to Elsie’s death as a formal departure from the professor’s stoic, clinical and de-romanticizing gaze, Cynthia Davis reads the conclusion’s dripping sentimentalism and the professor’s tearful participation as a radical departure from the aesthetic and ethical stances posed earlier in the novel. Evinced a “weakness” for sentimentalism, “Holmes’s efforts to craft a clinical tale and legitimize a clinical perspective are ultimately hampered by the mandates of residual, more emphatic forms

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<sup>271</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark.” *Mosses from an Old Manse* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1851), V.1. 32-51.

of narrative” that he “could not finally resist.”<sup>272</sup>

Yet this sentimentality marks the revitalization of structures of feeling within a newly drawn ethnopsychological jurisdiction—a space where the workings of the law, morality, and grace are made possible through the inscription of physiologically inscribed boundaries. These tears bear witness to the triumphal destiny of revitalized medicine and religion, embodied by the “living affection” between Bernard and Letty. The scene of community and narrator joining the ritual of mourning puts the narrative totality of *Elsie Venner* in the position of the girl in the ballroom scene—protected from the harsh truths of biological destiny with a faith redefined by the physician’s powers: an authority that is “limited,” as the professor says, but “absolute in its range” (*EV* V.1 36).

### **Coda: A Conservative Revolution and the Surgery of War**

In the wake of Elsie’s death, a further machinery of destiny intervenes. Rockland’s Mountain partially collapses over the Venner home, burying the mourning Sophy on top of Elsie and her mother’s grave. Though the scene is described with enough geological information to confirm for us that this collapse is a natural event, it is, as Joan Burbick argues, “given a providential status,” which befits the conclusion of Holmes’s romance

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<sup>272</sup> Davis, 16.

of destiny.<sup>273</sup> Such an event conjures up the kind of cultural theodicy which followed the Lisbon earthquake—the event that inspired the anxious Calvinist of Holmes’s “Deacon’s Masterpiece” to develop a logical and aesthetic system that could hold together in the wake of nature’s violence.<sup>274</sup>

For much of the narrative, the ominous Mountain has been known to be unstable and thus the source of a legion of real and imagined fears—communal destruction, serpents, Elsie’s grotesquerie, the Native American presence—all threats that haunted the corner of the American imaginary I have been investigating throughout this inquiry. Instead of cataclysm, however, this avalanche winds up becoming “one of nature’s conservative revolutions.” The collapse destroys the The Rattlesnake Ledge which looms over the region and kills all the serpents.

Twenty-four hours after the falling of the cliff, it seemed that it happened ages ago. The new fact had fitted itself in with the old predictions, forebodings, fears, and acquired the solidarity belonging to all events which have slipped out of

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<sup>273</sup> Burbick, 246.

<sup>274</sup> In the context of the Lisbon earthquake and General Braddock’s defeat, the Deacon of Holmes’s 1858 poem develops a shay according to a “perfect” logical system that keeps the shay whole for a hundred years. However, the total collapse of the shay is a consequence of the logical system that made it strong—it is built so that the weakest part of the shay is as strong as the rest—and thus it goes to pieces in an instant. While the poem certainly operates as a critique of the rigidity of doctrine, and, in turn, the tendency for such doctrinal logics to be undermined by developments in culture and the sciences, the poem nonetheless expresses the town’s widespread reverence for the fact that it was nonetheless strong enough to last exactly a hundred years. Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Deacon’s Masterpiece, or the Wonderful ‘One-Hoss Shay’: A Logical Story.” *Humorous Poems* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 58-62.

Time and dissolved in the antecedent eternity. (EV V2. 287)

It is as if, once the community has stayed its internal barbarities, the savage threat will evaporate and its symbolic importance will cease to haunt the community's historical imaginary. As the novel's wisest members have overcome their instincts, and reconsidered the Adamic genealogy of sin, they have witnessed the evacuation of everything aligned with the "lawless" and "savage" without a hint of anger or animosity.

Of comparatively less poetic interest in these passages is the death of Sophy—the only woman in the novel who doesn't look upon Elsie's death with relief. Having ignored Elsie's father's order that all of his servants evacuate, Sophy states she would rather be buried with her "Masse" and Elsie. In a way that echoes the vindication of white normativity implied by Elsie's fatal embrace of her death-cure, she prefers to die with the white woman she loved and served.

For all of its emphasis upon arresting the annihilation imperatives expressed through instinct, theology, and law, this conclusion evinces an imagination that is just as violent as the slaughter expressed in *Edgar Huntly* and *Nick of the Woods*. Moreover, it demonstrates a continuation, indeed an evolution, of a cultural disavowal of complicity in such violence through the diagnosis and sequestration of the insane. For, if *Edgar Huntly's* Sarsefield and Edgar legitimized violence through silencing the personal investments in it that Clithero Edny showed, and *Nick of the Woods* turned to federal violence as the answer to the impossibility of restraining such investments, but left us

with the problem of the continuation of lawlessness within the post-frontier legal institution, Holmes's narrative disclaims institutional investments in violence by moving them into the cosmos: as force that can only be reacted to and managed. In each case, avatars of society's destiny have been absolved of responsibility for complicity in exclusionary practices by disentangling affiliation with the mad and following a duty aligned with providence. In Holmes's case, the metaphor of medical authority as a mechanism for restraining violence was closely linked with one which would soon authorize violence on a scale that was perhaps unimaginable before April of 1861.

In the month that the final chapter of *Elsie Venner* was published, the simmering crisis of slavery and sectional conflict turned to a boil as the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter. Though Holmes had spent considerable effort supporting causes that aimed to prevent the catastrophe of war, and to treat internal conflicts like self-limiting disease, his Fourth of July oration of 1863 offered a rallying call in support of the Union, declaring the conflict "The Inevitable Trial."

Amidst the feeling of collective loss, uncertainty, and confusion, he acknowledges that some of the "quiet burghers and farmers" of places like *Elsie Venner's* Rockland were experiencing doubts about the typhoon-like violence engulfing the nation: "if their trust in their fellow men, and in the course of Divine Providence, seems well-nigh shipwrecked, we must remember that they were taken unawares, and without the preparation which could fit them to struggle with these tempestuous

elements.” Amidst this atmosphere of collective violence and doubt in America’s sacred destiny, Holmes states that it may seem like the Union is only “madly persisting” in the conflict between North and South.

In reply to the possibility of national insanity, he encourages those in his audience with “vacillating minds” to view the war like a traditional illness—“an inevitable result of long incubating causes” rooted in the history of sectional unrest. As a malady with an etiology that could be traced across generations, the consequence of a chain of symptoms that had coursed through the body politic, it could be regarded as an infection that threatened the nation’s self-government. Departing from his usual distaste for “artful” medical and institutional intervention and, additionally, the fantasy of regional containment of conflict put forth in *Elsie Venner*, he tells his listeners that the body politic may only be saved through the cleaving of flesh: “the disease of the nation was organic, and not functional, and the rough chirurgery of war was its only remedy.” With this purpose, “we may join without madness in this day’s festivities.”<sup>275</sup>

Whereas *Elsie Venner* imagines a medical ethics that protects citizens from violence by establishing psycho-jurisdictional boundaries, this speech demonstrates how quickly the logic of communal preservation could jump to a national level. The invocation of medically administered violence has become a structuring metaphor for

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<sup>275</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Inevitable Trial,” *Pages from an Old Volume of Life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), 81-83.



sustaining a telos that purifies violence by imbuing it with an objective necessity. As with *Edgar Huntly* and *Nick of the Woods*, national violence passes its sanity test through its methodization in the name of a higher power.

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