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The American Frontier and the Initiation Rite  
to a National Literature.  
The Example of *Edgar Huntly*  
by Charles Brockden Brown

The migrations which led to the foundation of the first stable European settlements along the eastern coast of the present United States of America influenced and molded much of American writing as early as the seventeenth century, giving origin to a rhetoric of migration where migration was viewed as a rite of passage to a distinctive "American" character—a much sought after and often times found, rediscovered or redefined character in American cultural history. In a recent study, Stephen Fender has examined the ways in which the rhetoric of migration was embodied in such early works as *A True Relation* (1608) and *The Generall Historie of Virginia* (1623) by John Smith as well as in other travel accounts, emigrants' letters, diaries, and autobiographical writings of all sorts. The succeeding decades and centuries developed their own models of emigration literature where migration was either real or metaphorical and the rite of passage was not necessarily enacted. As regards the twentieth century, for example, American Jewish literature, from the first generation (Mary Antin, Abraham Cahan, and Anzia Yezierska, up to its major exponent, Henry Roth) is structurally shaped by some paradigm of emigration—and so is the literature of some Mexican writers who emigrated to the United States.

This internal westward migration of the newly arrived colonists, which inaugurated the long phase of the frontier, offered manifold contributions to the shaping of American national culture and literature after the political independence from Great Britain. The westward movement—which did not always consist of one-way journeys, especially for the more cultured East Coast Americans who

ventured West primarily out of their desire for knowledge—became, in time, a re-enactment of the primary archetypal experience of the forefathers' migration to America. Coming to the frontier was tantamount to discovering new lands as well as to achieving a personal rite of initiation ("it toughened their character, made it self-reliant"); it collectively resulted in "an initiation into American manhood," and for those who wrote about it, "reflection on the experience also sharpened the distinct outline of the American character" (Fender 185).

Hence, it is not surprising that Post-Revolutionary American writers often drew material for their works from this historical experience and interpreted it in ways most consonant to their own temperament and ideological background, even when they did not produce specifically *western* works. By the time the Post-Revolutionary writer felt committed to draw inspiration solely from the events of the New World, the experience of the two previous centuries had already become established as archetypal matter, although the movement towards the frontier was still in progress and would not be completed before the end of the nineteenth century. Thus it was suitable for translation and reelaboration into narrative material, soon giving birth to a whole body of myths which was missing in Anglo-American culture, as Leslie Fiedler frequently observed.

As a sign of polemic and programmatic refusal of all material coming from the European creative imagination, certain prose writers and poets trying to establish a national literature explicitly declared their fierce adherence to American facts and events in the prefaces to their works. A favorite, supremely American subject was the meeting or clash between civilization and nature and any other experience somehow related to the broadly inclusive concept of "frontier." The most representative of these writers is Charles Brockden Brown, the first professional writer of the New Republic. In a prefatory note to his novel *Edgar Huntly* (1799), Brown wrote:

It is the purpose of this work . . . to exhibit a series of adventures, growing out of the condition of our country and connected with one of the most common and most wonderful diseases or affections of the human frame. One merit the writer may at least claim: that of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors. Puerile superstitions and

exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility and the perils of the Western wilderness are far more suitable.... (EH 29)

Hence, in this gothic novel somnambulism ("one of the most common ... diseases ... of the human frame") and the perilous wilderness—which eventually coincide as metaphors—are sources of inquietude and terror for the characters, causing events to be misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Amongst the intricate and delirious events of this novel, which prompted Fiedler to define it as "a charmingly, a maddently disorganized book, not so much written as dreamed" (Fiedler 1975, 157), is the scene in which Edgar, the protagonist, decides to investigate who killed his friend Waldegrave. At first he comes to believe that the murderer is Clithero Edny when he sees him weeping one night under the elm tree where Waldegrave's corpse had been found. Even before the disclosure of his identity, the sinister shadow hovering in the darkness is not evocative of ghostly images or of evil, mysterious creatures from unknown places. Edgar wonders: "But whence comes he? He does not start from the bosom of the earth, or hide himself in airy distance. He must have a name and a terrestrial habitation" (EH 38). This is the distinctive cipher of the novel: evil and the ensuing horror are not engendered by any supernatural mechanism invented by the narrator; on the contrary, they are visible and explicable features related to natural life.

From that moment on, Clithero is "to become the subject of my [Edgar's] scrutiny." We learn that he is a sleepwalker tormented by his sense of guilt for the murder not of Waldegrave but of another person and for several other errors. After relating the particulars of his past, Clithero disappears into the woods. Day and night, Edgar continues his pursuit of Clithero and finally turns somnambulist himself. Thus, a sort of identification between the two characters takes place: by scrutinizing Clithero's nature, Edgar scrutinizes himself and in time discovers his double in Clithero, namely, that irrational part of himself he rationally rejects. What differentiates the two characters is that Clithero is plagued by his past while Edgar is obsessed with his future or, rather, by what he will discover in his search.

For Edgar, this search is actually an investigation into the meanders of the human psyche, into the mechanisms leading to obsessive guilt, into the nature and origin of evil, and into the sense of what is commonly defined as madness in human behavior. Everywhere Edgar finds the imprint of error, of superstition, and of the endless misunderstandings produced by illusory, mystifying appearances. He thus becomes aware of the relativity of each facet of the reality his contemporaries thought they knew. Clithero is the first to warn him not to try to discover the truths of life by means of inappropriate tools. When he denies having killed Waldegrave, he accuses Edgar: "You are unacquainted with the man before you. 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" (*EH* 55). Clithero actually accuses Edgar of purging him of his torment and remorse for having killed his benefactress's twin brother, alias the father of the woman he loved. As this accusation is also extended to "others," it sounds more like an anathema Brown pronounces on a culture which is still entangled in the puritanical fabric of error and superstition. This perception of possessing only an imperfect knowledge justifies Edgar's search. Inspired by the Enlightenment's thirst for knowledge, Edgar probes human consciousness to discover the rational motivations underlying irrational behavior and to explain what was thought to be inexplicable. He thus takes on a task which was once only God's. He pioneers through his actions and identifies the frontier landscape—which is the projection of a condition of the mind in the novel—with the dire loneliness of his journey:

There was a desolate and solitary grandeur in the scene . . . A sort of sanctity and awe environed it, owing to the consciousness of absolute and utter loneliness. It was probable that human feet had never before gained this recess . . . Since the birth of this continent, I was probably the first who had deviated thus remotely from the customary paths of men. (*EH* 110)

The overall plot of the novel highlights the symbolic action Charles Brockden Brown attributes to the frontier. Edwin Fussell, although probably too categorical in identifying the concept of the

West with that of the frontier, maintains that Brown "was perhaps the first American writer to suspect that the West might more profitably be defined as a condition of the soul than as a physiographical region" (Fussell 9). While stalking Clithero into the wilderness surrounding Norwalk, Edgar obsessively rambles through the same maze-like paths again and again as if they were the routes his mind follows in his quest for knowledge. Indeed, as he himself confirms, he had already ventured on the same quest in the past while exploring the entourage of his house: "Every new excursion . . . added somewhat to my knowledge . . . My rambles were productive of incessant novelty, though they always terminated in the prospect of limits that could not be overleaped" (*EH* 105).

Myriads of doubts, uncertainties, and fears assail him, underlying the many questions he asks himself:

. . . for what purpose shall I prosecute this search? What benefit am I to reap from this discovery? How shall I demean myself when the criminal is detected? . . . But why . . . should it be impossible to arm myself with firmness? . . . If forbearance be the dictate of wisdom, cannot it be so deeply engraven on my mind as to defy all temptation, and be proof against the most abrupt surprise? . . . No caution, indeed, can hinder the experiment from being hazardous. Is it wise to undertake experiments by which nothing can be gained, and much may be lost? Curiosity is vicious, if undisciplined by reason. . . . (*EH* 40)

Edgar wishes to transcend these boundaries and probe human thought, consciousness and passions. This is an extremely difficult task as the human frame is intricate, labyrinthine, and full of asperity like the paths Edgar follows through the wilderness; the recurrent use of the word *maze* is suggestive of the protagonist's real and metaphorical journey (Bulgheroni 170-71). Hence, the mysterious and impenetrable territory lying immediately beyond the civilized world becomes the metaphor for that which Edgar tries to grasp but is fearful of discovering. The very condition of the frontier, the presence of that labile barrier between the known and the unknown, poised between the (precarious) certainty of present knowledge and the uncertainty of future acquisitions, seem to prefigure thegnoseological and philosophical turmoil of Post-Revolutionary Americans torn between their

superstition-ridden past and their enlightened present. Thus, Edgar Huntly and his inner struggle with his thirst for knowledge is the image of the new American: a problematic, disoriented personality caught between the ancient and the modern worlds which continually cross but never mingle. The new American bears much resemblance to Shakespeare's man of the Renaissance who is also problematically hovering between old and new sciences, and between medieval and Renaissance culture.

The disquieting metaphor of sleepwalking, which gives a unifying pattern to the novel, portends a state of perilous uncertainty between sleeping and waking, between the apparent order of waking existence and the chaos inherent in sleepless nightmares. In so doing, it reproduces that condition of the soul which is mirrored in life on the frontier where order is undermined by constant tension. Those who live on the verge of chaos, on the border of the unknown as represented by the wilderness, have no certainties, for it is impossible to predict when the dangers lurking beyond the labile barrier will materialize and start disrupting the course of everyday life.

As has been remarked, in this peculiarity the frontier environment in *Edgar Huntly* takes on the same function of the frightening mazes and dungeons of medieval castles or convents in English Gothic novels. It often excites new forms of psychological terror, anticipating those evoked and analyzed by Hawthorne or Edgar Allan Poe. For instance, in his pursuit of Clithero, Edgar suddenly comes upon a grey panther whose howl terrifies him:

His gray coat, extended claws, fiery eyes, and a cry which he at that moment uttered, and which, by its resemblance to the human voice, is peculiarly terrific, denoted him to be the most ferocious and untamable of that detested race. . . . (EH 126)

The narrator explains that the horror seizing him was not solely determined by his impossibility to escape death: "The evil of my present circumstance consisted chiefly in suspense. My death was unavoidable, but my imagination had leisure to torment itself by anticipations" (EH 128). The *expectation* of death and the state of *suspense* are worse than death itself which, he realizes, would have freed him from his anguish within seconds.

The atmosphere of terror reaches its climax in Chapter XVI, from which Edgar Allan Poe borrowed numerous motifs for *Gordon Pym* (premature burial, cannibalism, hallucinations) and which he echoed in "The Pit and the Pendulum," transferring the narration to a Spanish prison during the Inquisition. In his continuous wandering after Clithero, Edgar walks in his sleep and falls into a pit in the cliffs. Upon awakening, he finds that he is unable to fully relate to reality and is taken by a sort of delirium, on a razor-edge between lucidity and madness. At intervals, he loses his sense of time and space and his hallucinated mind whirls with conjectures and upsetting thoughts, like that of being condemned to experience the nothingness of death or the horror of living burial:

I existed, as it were, in a wakeful dream . . . Methought I was the victim of some tyrant who had thrust me into a dungeon of his fortress, and left me no power to determine whether he intended I should perish with famine, or linger out a long life in hopeless imprisonment . . . Sometimes I imagined myself buried alive. Methought I had fallen into seeming death. . . . (EH 156)

He is overtaken by the terror of being abandoned in that inaccessible locality and his anguish at being sealed off in a small space reflects the stifling condition of his consciousness. Driven to a quasi-mad state (the author often defines it as "frenzy") and tormented with hunger and thirst, which remind him hideously that he is still alive, Edgar starts tearing and swallowing bits of his shirt. He is tempted to consider self-cannibalism and even thinks of thrusting a tomahawk into his heart because, should he miss the blow, he would at least be appeased by drinking his own blood. Thus, Edgar experiences the same repression of impulses (for instance, the will to die) and the same type of irrationality as Clithero. He begins to understand—and will receive confirmation later in the novel—that he too is vulnerable to the negative, impellent urge for violence and that this urge cannot be dismissed as the mere fruit of madness. Quite the contrary: compelled by circumstances, man can easily become like a beast. It is human nature itself which is imperfect.

When Edgar finally manages to get out of the pit, he must to cope with the horrible perils lurking in the wilderness and face other

wild beasts—and even eat the flesh of one of them. Shocked by the sight of a white girl held captive by Indians, Edgar overcomes his natural repulsion of blood and kills the Indian sentry to rescue the captive and regain his own freedom. In the ensuing chain of events he kills other Indians. Stirred to outrage by the memory of his own family having been slain by the Indians, Edgar comments: "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" (*EH* 190). In the frontier territory which is the emblem of an unresolved conflict between the past and the future, of the dichotomy between a civilized present and a past not yet effaced by the violence of the Europeans, Edgar is thus initiated into the drama of life and the complex struggle for knowledge. He resumes roaming the wilderness, finally to discover that Waldegrave had been killed by the Indians. His journey into the Pennsylvania forests presents the same initiatory aspects as the journeys of the pioneers going to settle the West.

The typical suspense of Gothic tales in *Edgar Huntly* is also engendered by the presence of the Indians whom Brown often defines as *savages*, *assassins*, *grotesque*, *brawny* and *terrific figures*. Such is the depiction of the "ignoble savage" whom Edgar kills. Although tormented by his doubts and scruples, which reproduce the oscillations of the consciousness of a man living in an era of great upheaval, Edgar nonetheless does kill the Indian, justifying the killing with words that echo the ideology of the Manifest Destiny: "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. Fate has reserved him for a bloody and violent death" (*EH* 188).

Undoubtedly, these passages in the novel draw upon reports of Indian savagery found in the *captivity tales* or in oral and written accounts (i.e., diaries) of the frontier life. In these accounts are represented many restless and sleepless nights endured by the settlers under the constant threat of impending Indian excursions. The loneliness of those vast American spaces was made more terrifying and gloomy by continuous psychological tension and uncertainty. The conflict between the Indians and the white settlers, which in the development of American culture concurred to form a national mytho-



logy based on the frontier archetype and its various ramifications (Fiedler 1969), seems to be treated in a Manichean fashion in *Edgar Huntly*. Unlike the Indians in Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and, particularly, *The Last of the Mohicans*, the Indians in *Edgar Huntly* represent exclusively the forces of evil and are described as the gods of wickedness. However, the global sense of the novel indicates that the two opposites are only seemingly irreconcilable because, as portrayed by Brown, the Indians are actually a poetical creation. Given no names which would identify them as human beings, except for Old Deb, they are the symbols of the primeval and instinctive brutality of nature, of primal instincts and of the urge for survival which sometimes surface even in the most rational of persons, such as Edgar.

If, then, it is true that *Edgar Huntly* partially derives from the English Gothic novel—since, notwithstanding their programmatic denials, the first American authors did after all continue to find inspiration in European models, nor could they have proceeded otherwise—it is also true that Brown totally reversed the traditional canons of the genre, not only because the atmosphere of intrinsic horror is generated by the American wilderness and its native inhabitants rather than by the corrupt institutions of the past, but especially because evil takes on an ontological rather than historical dimension. That is, evil seems not to be determined in any way by the evolutions or involutions of history. The frontier environment and the numerous metaphors originating from it, utilized as narrative expedients to depict more clearly the main themes of the novel (which are not always fully developed), are the elements initiating this reversal, since terror in Brown's novel is no longer a mere artifice but actually coincides with reality. It is real life itself which takes on the contours of a nightmare, it is human nature which shows its propensity to evil. While the English Gothic novel was conceived in reaction to and as a rejection of eighteenth century narrative realism, in *Edgar Huntly* Charles Brockden Brown tries to bring reality back into the novel to utilize it as an instrument for metaphysical investigation. This option, which anticipates the works of Hawthorne and Poe as well as of Melville, confers new and "American" features to the Gothic novel, just as some decades later Iki James Fenimore Cooper americanized Walter Scott's historical novels with his narratives on frontier conflicts.

It follows that, if it is farfetched to claim that the American cultural identity was exclusively molded by the frontier experience, as Frederick Jackson Turner maintained in the fervent speech he delivered to the American Historical Association at the Chicago World Fair in 1893, it can, however, be asserted that the frontier experience did concur in engendering a "breakaway" literature which veered away from traditional schemes. This was an innovative form of literature in the sense that it endeavored to establish its own original and independent features and to free itself completely from subjection to European prototypes. *Edgar Huntly* is only one of many possible instances of such a process. Other instances are the works of Cooper and John Neal. Cooper's and Neal's use of the frontier as background, narrative theme or metaphor, and their treatment of the Indians—who in their novels are no longer simply exorcised as they are in Puritan writings—are telling indications of the diversity of American culture from that of the Old World. Even Washington Irving, who in *The Sketch Book* discusses the need to re-establish an organic relationship with Europe in order to find a link with the "original" culture of America, emblematically indicates in "Rip Van Winkle" that the frontier environment is the place where Americans may solve their identity crisis. Rip, whose name itself is suggestive of the breach caused in America by the transition from the state of colony to that of an independent Republic, takes refuge in the wilderness. The American wilderness here represents the maternal womb, or better yet, the amniotic fluid protecting Americans from "newness." On the other hand, Rip's long, revitalizing sleep in the wild severs his links from his "local" and provincial past and helps him find his new identity. For Irving, therefore, the wilderness comes to signify the "American Tradition" in which to seek shelter against "newness," but also the means necessary to reach maturation. It is by maturity alone that the models of the past may be discarded.

As a writer of the New Republic, Brown strives to reach that maturity by pooling from diverse literary genres of the European and American traditions (such as autobiography, the Gothic tale, the sentimental novel, the adventure novel, the *Bildungsroman*, and the captivity tale), adapting them to the myths generated by the American experience. He is successful to the extent that *Edgar Huntly*, probably

more so than any other novel written by Brown, actually offers one of the embryonic models of the "American" novel and prefigures some of the characteristic themes of future American writings.

One such theme is the dialectic between virgin nature and corrupt social reality as epitomized by Europe. An example may be found in the Edgar/Clithero opposition. These two characters represent the two souls of America and portray the contrast between American purity and European corruption which will return in the works of Henry James or in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Although Clithero the Irishman is not, in fact, Waldgrave's murderer, he did kill Arthur Wiatte back in Ireland and his past is a tangle of errors open to various interpretations. This makes him an emblem of the ambiguity of evil. Conversely, in spite of his inability to re-establish the realm of good, Edgar embodies two aspects of the myth viewing America as absolute purity. The first emerges in his attitude while listening to Clithero's confession. He evinces a clear propensity to absolution and redemption even before finding out that Clithero had not killed his friend: "It shall be my province to emulate a father's clemency, and restore this unhappy man to purity and peace," he says to himself (*EH 54*). Later on, when he thinks back to the tormented account he listened to, he wonders: "It must at least be said that his will was not concerned in this transaction. He acted in obedience to an impulse which he could not control nor resist. Shall we impute guilt where there is no design?" (*EH 101*). This, Michael Davitt Bell has observed, is the question "the novel sets out to answer" (Bell 53).

A second theme is to be found in the figure of the frontiersman as represented by Edgar in his metaphysical search for what is new and best, especially in his endeavor to persuade other characters that evil-doing is not only a fatalistic but an event-driven mechanism. This is echoed in his defense of Clithero at the end of the novel when Edgar converses with Sarsefield:

"... he has told a tale that had all the appearances of truth—"  
 "Out upon the villain! The truth! Truth would prove him to be unnatural, devilish, a thing for which no language has yet provided a name! He has called himself unhappy? No doubt, a victim to injustice! Overtaken by unmerited calamity. Say! Has he fooled thee with such tales?"

"No. His tale was a catalogue of crimes and miseries of which he was the author and sufferer. You know not his motives, his horrors—"

"His deeds were monstrous and infernal. His motives were sordid and flagitious. To display all their ugliness and infamy was not his province. . . ."

"No. Among the number of his crimes, hypocrisy is not to be numbered. . . . He has told me all. Alas! the criminal intention has been amply expiated. . . ." (EH 237)

In the face of Sarsefield's intransigence and of his refusal to save Clithero from certain death, Edgar bitterly considers: "But what is that guilt which no penitence can expiate?" (EH 241). Anticipating the Hawthornian theme of the relativity of guilt and of human judgment, Edgar tries to comprehend the intermingling causes and contingencies of moral responsibility, thereby alleviating the Ego from the burden of the Law. Very likely, Clithero's greatest mistake—as perhaps Hawthorne would have noted—is that by now he "holds as little intercourse as possible with the rest of mankind" (EH 254). Interestingly, in his critical analysis of Hawthorne's short stories, Agostino Lombardo remarks upon how much the latter borrowed from the writings of Brown; Lombardo 18-19, 46-47 and *passim*.)

Other indications of subsequent developments may be detected in Brown's kaleidoscopic novel if one interprets Edgar's encounters with the wilderness, the Indians, violence and Clithero himself as encounters of innocence with experience and otherness, in the attempt to define one's own identity. Such a reading may be prompted by Edgar's relation of how he fought and killed a band of Indians, which concludes with an implicit allusion to a rite of initiation:

Thus, by a series of events impossible to be computed or foreseen, was the destruction of a band, selected from their fellows for an arduous enterprise, distinguished by prowess and skill . . . completed *by the hand of a boy, uninured to hostility, unprovided with arms, precipitate and timorous!* (EH 190; italics added)

This invites us to consider Edgar Huntly as the archetype of many young heroes in American literature, from Huck Finn travelling down the river with his black friend Jim, to Nick Adams overwhelmed by the simultaneous mysteries of birth and death in "Indian Camp."

Similarly, in Brown's wilderness we see prefigured the outline of a mythical place beyond the boundaries of historical time, which is an expression of the mystery hidden within the American universe: a universe that, with all its errors and faults, embodies in *The Great Gatsby* "the last and greatest of all human dreams," before which man, from the earliest days of colonization, "must have held his breath . . . compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (Fitzgerald 171).

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