

Fearing American Wilderness:
Materialism in Charles Brockden Brown's
Edgar Huntly

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It is remarkable that the proceedings of the populace, on these occasions, were carried on with decorum, and regularity. They were not ebullitions of a thoughtless mob, but for the most part, planned by leading men of character and influence, who were friends to peace and order. These, knowing well that the bulk of mankind, are more led by their senses, than by their reason, conducted the public exhibitions on that principle . . . and its friends, both ridiculous, and odious.¹

David Ramsay, who studied medicine in Philadelphia but later became active in politics in South Carolina, expressed a concern about degeneration in his *History of the American Revolution* (1789). He viewed the future of the American nation as an extension or continuum of European history—the “mob” reminds us of the French Revolution and “reason” of the Enlightenment discourse of discipline. Charles Brockden Brown was writing his novel *Edgar Huntly* in the 1790s when the direction that the new republic was to take was becoming increasingly controversial. On the one hand, the Republicans, who had faith in people’s innate integrity, wished to see the new nation based on this principle with minimal state intervention. On the other hand, the Federalists, who viewed human nature as needing external controls to maintain law and order, stressed the importance of following the British model of discipline.

Brown’s imagination of colonial America also reiterates the same Enlight-

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enment debate over political order and personal liberty, except that he demonstrates fear of wilderness and moral degeneracy as a specifically American variation on European ideas about free will and materialism. European materialist philosophers argued in the eighteenth century that matter could form the mind.² They had little faith in intellectual and moral capacities of the will and often ascribed that power to the mechanistic body that operates on the principle of habits and custom. Materialists did not believe that rational capacity is free from external and internal influences such as the weather, the surrounding environment, and the condition of the body. Medical writers such as Erasmus Darwin and, later, the famous American doctor Benjamin Rush followed suit in characterizing the functioning of the body and nerves as autonomous from will in negotiating with the environment.³ If that environment consists of harsh, untamed nature with dark caves and craggy mountains, then “materialist ideas” would have a whole new implication in America.

Edgar Huntly (1799) presents a clear picture of what that might be. It is the story of a man who wanders in the midst of the Norwalk wilderness just outside Philadelphia.⁴ Wilderness is a particular type of wild environment with its plants, animals, and ecosystems, and as Michael Lewis has argued, it is appropriate to characterize wilderness, as distinct from wildness, by its sheer size.⁵ Since the 1960s historians such as Roderick Nash have propagated the idea of a wilderness movement. According to Nash, any place in which “a person feels stripped of guidance, lost, and perplexed may be called a wilderness,”⁶ and this definition has provided different meanings for settlers, writers, and artists in different stages of national development. The old European colonists with their conquer-and-dominate biases perceived wilderness as “howling” and fearful; in later years this gave way to wilderness appreciation and then to preservation.⁷ For example, wilderness’s overwhelming or “sublime” effect on the individual mind has been explored by many British and American Romantic writers, poets, and painters from William Wordsworth to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Cole.⁸ While Romantics looked on nature and its wilderness as offering an aesthetic and philosophical ideal, Brown’s images of wilderness resemble those of the early pioneers who saw “a cursed and chaotic wasteland”: “A more subtle terror than Indians or animals was the opportunity the freedom of wilderness presented for men to behave in a savage or bestial manner.”⁹

When European settlers applied the word “wilderness” to the New World, they no longer saw nature as something to which people belonged. It became an adversary: “Uncontrolled nature became wilderness.”¹⁰ Moreover, that

uncontrolled entity had material influence on human behavior. Indeed, many pioneers conceived of themselves as agents in facilitating the process of civilization, but Brown's *Edgar Huntly* portrays men who experience regression back to a Hobbesian state of nature. Brown expresses an extreme fear of the moral degeneracy caused by placing civilized men like Edgar and Clithero in the unexplored primitive regions where no legal influence is accessible. Their return from the wild, unexplored woods to civilized society testifies to man's urge to build a secure community in which "peace and order" can be maintained. It is also a story of somnambulism—a symbol of the hidden and involuntary springs of all human action.¹¹ Edgar's encounter with a sleepwalker, Clithero, who lacks control over his own behavior, also brings out uncontrollable, baser passions in Edgar.

Brown's interest in the materialist idea that one's moral behavior is greatly influenced by a tangible environment can be explained chiefly by his reading of the novels of William Godwin. Godwin, the eighteenth-century English philosopher and author of *Caleb Williams* (1794), recommended grounding moral and political principles on the concepts of rational understanding and pure reason. Brown was engaged in the same philosophical inquiry, which assessed the effectuality of reason—but he was far less certain of its controlling power. More important, Brown's materialist position can be explained by his relationship with Elihu Hubbard Smith. Smith, also his roommate, was an American medical scholar who imbibed the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment from his teacher, Dr. Benjamin Rush.¹² In 1797 Smith founded the *Medical Repository*, the best American medical journal of the day.¹³ One year later he published the first American edition of *The Botanic Garden* by the famous English doctor Erasmus Darwin.¹⁴ Despite Brown's close ties with Smith, critics have paid little attention to his medical interests and materialist views, although one original reading of Brown looks at the theme of yellow fever as a general criticism of eighteenth-century tenets of rationalism. The plague served as a perfect metaphor for the ugly, corrupt social truths about Philadelphia put forward in his novels *Ormond* (1799) and *Arthur Mervyn* (1799).¹⁵ Although Brown's negative views of American society are revealed through this kind of reading, such an interpretation does not show the profound implication that the medical discourse had on Brown's materialist position. In this article I argue that within the eighteenth-century context in which philosophers, historians, and medical writers had a dynamic sense of "writing" as an arena for imaginative expression, *Edgar Huntly* can be read as a response to the eighteenth-century philosophical question of the place of materialism in identity formation.

I

Brown's most powerful indictment in *Edgar Huntly* is that of reason succumbing to passions, which can be viewed as pursuing the Godwinian question of free will.¹⁶ Godwin's rationalist philosophy presupposes the capacity of the general population to take a critical stance toward the corrupt state of affairs, such as can be seen in the property monopoly of aristocracy, which he termed "things as they are." Godwin's assertion that "man is a rational being"¹⁷ is premised on his conviction that those "philosophical reasoners" who have desired to vindicate the freedom of will are capable of "self-determination." According to Godwin, "our external actions are then said to be free when they truly result from the determination of the mind" (*PJ* 246). Brown is said to have been introduced to Godwin's successful philosophical treatise *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* as early as 1793 through reading *New York Magazine*; the latter's influence is indisputable as has been pointed out by many.¹⁸ However, critics who have recognized common elements between the two authors have tended to regard Brown as a mere imitator of Godwin.¹⁹ Dorothy J. Hale, for example, has shown how Brown applies *Political Justice* doctrine in his texts. She sees Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* as a "translation" of Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, which slightly falls short of the latter's unwieldy emotional complexity due to Brown's adopting America's new commercial values.²⁰ Instead of just simply ascribing Brown's interest in the formation of a moral self to Godwinianism, it would make more sense to place it in a wider, transatlantic philosophical tradition in which *both* Godwin and Brown ruminate on the same question.

Godwin's *Caleb Williams* was published in England in 1794 just after the appearance of his *Political Justice*, which made him a "widespread celebrity."²¹ *Caleb Williams* was also published in Philadelphia in 1795. There is no doubt about Godwin's influence on Brown, but the importance that both writers attach to materialist thinking—the susceptibility of the mind to external stimuli—is consistent with a new and widespread philosophical-medical discourse about sensibility in the eighteenth century. Brown's fascination with materialism may have intensified after reading Godwin's works. Godwin, however, was neither a staunch rationalist nor a devoted materialist; his contradictions about reason and passion are embedded in the various editions of *Political Justice*, and in his sentimental novels.²² The major paradox of this "rationalist" is that passion for him is inseparable from reason (*PJ* 136, 137).²³

The character of Falkland in *Caleb Williams* is a case in point. Falkland,

who is the guardian and, later, employer of Caleb, committed a crime in the past. He is a benevolent character at first, but because of his acutely sensitive mind that renders him potentially vulnerable to people's accusations, he unjustly charges Caleb with a theft to protect his honor. Caleb, taken under Falkland's protection, became curious of his master's past and tried to unearth the secret. He suspects that in the past Falkland killed a self-centered squire, Tyrrel, due to the former's pride and irrevocable passions: "Mr. Falkland's mind was full of uproar like the war of contending elements" (*CW* 96). If Falkland's crime is attributable to his succumbing to his passions, Caleb's persecution of Falkland is also traced back to his uncontrollable curiosity—he opens Falkland's secret trunk, which supposedly contains the proof of his wrongdoing.

What Godwin means by the statement "Mind is a real principle, an indispensable link in the great chain of the universe" (*PJ* 352) is that man's nature is inevitably affected by the surrounding physical universe in which phenomena occur according to necessary laws. It gives rise to the contradictory idea that the mind, which should be independent, becomes passive, lacking in an active agency with the power of "self-determination." Of course, Brown read Godwin's works, but the philosophical treatises and medical books that both these authors read deserve to be scrutinized as well. Philosophers and medical writers in the eighteenth century attempted to postulate a self within a range of sensual and emotional tendencies and rational capacity.

Godwin's ambivalence has its root in Lockean sensational psychology²⁴ and the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, including Adam Smith, David Hume, and Thomas Reid. That ideas are sensory impressions of bodily states was a premise of Hume's philosophy, and the question about the sources and the strength of personal identity raised in his *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739) was closely connected with his belief that the senses, impressions, and passions preside over reason: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."²⁵ Hume defines the self as "that connected succession of perceptions" (*TH* 277) or "bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (*TH* 252).

Having based his philosophy on a Lockean understanding of sensibility, and influenced as well by reading Hume,²⁶ Godwin regards "feeling" as, not just an obstacle to realizing what the mind determines, but something that enables the mind to evolve: "The human mind, so far as we are acquainted with it, is nothing else but a faculty of perception" (*PJ* 146). It is said that in

the first edition Godwin's philosophy is based on "the belief that reason can become the sole determinant of human action,"²⁷ whereas in the third edition he endorses moral conduct based on "virtuous" motives and the role of "feeling" (*PJ* 377), drawing on the philosophy of the third Earl of Shaftesbury and Hume.

However, there is a pitfall in materialism in that the self could be exposed to dangerous impulses and external influences without the censorship of reason. For a skeptic like Hume, the law of mechanism led to a dead end where no independent agency has control. He explained, "I cannot perceive this self without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions" (*TH* 634). When he turns his attention to the notion of "personal identity" in his appendix to *A Treatise on Human Nature*, he finds himself "invol'd in such a labyrinth": "I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent" (*TH* 633). Sensible quality in a person also has a social ramification. This implies that moral degeneracy stems, not entirely from the biological makeup of an individual, or even religious factors such as predestination, but also from the historical, social, and cultural configurations of a distinctive way of living as a "savage" in a primitive environment or as a social elite in a fashionable civilized world. In *Edgar Huntly*, the Lockean promise in America of a personal identity endlessly remade in encounters with new environments turns into "a gothic nightmare of an identity bifurcated and transformed with no possibility of external confirmation."²⁸ Interestingly, this materialism is also observed in J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782):

Men are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which the plant grows. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment.²⁹

Crevecoeur believed that it is the new American "soil" that forms the ideas, morals, and self of the American people, but he warned his readers of the savage wilderness of the western regions: "He who would wish to see America in its proper light and have a true idea of its feeble beginnings and barbarous rudiments must visit our extended line of frontiers" (*LAF* 71).

Brown's friend Elihu Hubbard Smith received a distinctively Scottish medical training, since his teacher, Benjamin Rush, had attended the medical school of the University of Edinburgh, which was led by people such as

Robert Whytt, William Cullen, and John Brown. This medical school famously provided a theoretical framework for later prominent physicians such as Erasmus Darwin, who embodied the attitudes and values of eighteenth-century materialism.³⁰ Whytt, for example, in his medical treatises does not attribute human agency to an ultimate soul in the brain but figuratively dissolves it to all the sensible organs. This depiction is in direct opposition to Descartes' conception of mind having control over the body. In like manner, Whytt postulates that the agent ("Soul") that "perceives" or "feels"³¹ a stimulus resides in the "intestine" as well as in any other organ of the body (*PE* 144, 168). A muscle reaction, therefore, becomes "unconscious perception" for Whytt.³² This idea that a sensory faculty, which he calls "the Soul," could be in the tongue, the nose, the eyes, or the ears as well as in the brain was revolutionary. The material influence of a sense organ that bypasses rational mind also became the foundation of Rush's materialist philosophy.

Brown, under Smith's influence, may well have read Benjamin Rush's *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical* (1798) and *Medical Inquiries and Observations* (1809). Like Erasmus Darwin, Rush was concerned with sensibility that responds to environmental stimuli thereby molding the moral self. Brown met Smith, William Johnson, and William Dunlap through the New York intellectual circle called the Friendly Club, which met to discuss political, philosophical, and medical issues. Brown is said to have attended at least seventeen meetings.³³ Like Godwin and all other English philosophers, Brown had a profound interest in how the moral self was formed. Yet, even though Brown's philosophical interest bears a resemblance to that of Godwin, due to their geographical distance, their expressive modes could not have coincided. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Godwin sought to reconcile political despotism with social justice in *Caleb Williams*. The fear of corruption in the form of aristocratic degeneration was transformed into that of savage nature awakened in perfectly civilized people on the American frontier.

II

Brown's *Edgar Huntly* recapitulates the debate on the problem of free will and materialism, particularly through the characters Edgar, an educated American, and Clithero, an Irishman with impressive eloquence. Edgar meets Clithero in the American wilderness and finds out that Clithero, while he was sleepwalking in the woods, took the life of Edgar's friend Waldegrave. He then learns that Clithero had left his native country, Ireland, to try to get

away from a shameful past. Edgar is convinced that “there was reason to suppose him [Clithero] smitten with the charms of solitude, of a lonely abode in the midst of mountainous and rugged nature” (*EH* 91). It is understandable that Brown’s similarity to Godwin was taken for granted by British reviewers, for there is close likeness at the level of the plot.³⁴ Edgar’s “curiosity” (*EH* 110) to know Clithero’s past reverberates with Caleb’s obsession with opening Falkland’s trunk. In a sense, Clithero’s somnambulism is a parody of these weak-willed Godwinian characters who cannot suppress their passions.

When Clithero talks of Waldegrave’s death as if he were only a spectator—“I can still weep over the untimely fall of youth and worth” (*EH* 84)—he is disavowing his presence of mind (rationality) when he struck Waldegrave. He can neither admit nor deny that he killed Waldegrave, because even if he did commit the crime, he was not conscious. The story of Clithero is told in an epistolary form: Edgar addresses his letter to Waldegrave’s sister, Mary, to whom he narrates the story of his encounter with Clithero and Waldegrave’s tragic death. Clithero avoids all human contact after leaving his native country. At first Clithero himself was not aware of his “perturbed sleep,” which caused his lips to give away his thoughts and his body to wander around without being conscious: “Yet, I was anew distressed at the discovery that my thoughts found their way to my lips, without my being conscious of it, and that my steps wandered forth unknowingly and without the guidance of my will” (*EH* 84).

Clithero’s early symptom of his illness is observable from a dream he has about Clarice. In Ireland he forms an attachment to his patroness’s niece, Clarice, but has to repress his desire because of his lowly status. Clithero benefits from education provided by Mrs. Lorimer. While serving her as a steward, however, his secret passion for Clarice grows, which eventually takes the form of a dream:

The pathetic cast of her features, the deep glow of her cheek, and some catch of melting music, she had lately breathed, stole incessantly upon my fancy. . . . These images did not content themselves with invading my wakeful hours; but, likewise, incroached upon my sleep. I could no longer resign myself to slumber with the same ease as before. When I slept, my visions were of the same impassioned tenor. (*EH* 49)

Clithero’s unconscious desire may appear to modern readers to be easily intelligible in Freudian terms, but Erasmus Darwin, in his *Zoonomia* (1794),

had already elaborated on the suspended operation of volition during sleep: "There is a peculiar circumstance attending this causation [or volition], which is, that it is entirely suspended during sleep; whilst the other classes of motion . . . continue to strengthen their habits without interruption." Darwin also reports of a "sleep-talker" who speaks with clear articulation during sleep but does not remember uttering a word of what she said the previous night.³⁵

The problem of human action without volition was also extensively discussed by an English philosopher, David Hartley, who characterized sensation and feeling as the sole motivators of human action. In his *Observations on Man* (1749),³⁶ Hartley developed a mechanistic theory of the body, applying Newtonian physics to his theory of vibrations. He tries to explain the internal actions that he calls "automatic motions" as well as the sensory and mental actions by his system of vibrations: "If the doctrine of association be founded in, and deducible from, that of vibrations . . . then all the sensations, ideas, and motions, of all animals, will be conducted according to the vibrations of the small medullary particles."³⁷ Thus he admits that this kind of "mechanical system" (*OM.i* 508) of the nerves "takes away philosophical free-will" and "overturn[s] all the arguments which are usually brought for the immateriality of the soul from the subtlety of the internal senses, and of the rational faculty" (*OM.i* 511–12). It is this kind of materialism that Edgar's friend Waldegrave imbibed from devoting himself to meditation and books. Waldegrave's earliest creeds tended to "deify necessity and universalize matter; to destroy the popular distinctions between soul and body" (*EH* 125).

Clithero's symptoms of sleepwalking are similar to Darwin's "sleep-talker" in that he remembers nothing of his conduct during his sleep. His justification for his actions is that his past crimes have haunted him, which provoked him to do things while he was asleep. Clithero has fled Ireland desperately in need of "temporary forgetfulness" (*EH* 84), but he encountered and killed Waldegrave while sleepwalking. All he can say is that his frequenting the murder scene is accounted for by its resemblance to his disastrous past. Clithero also relates his story of an attempted murder of his patroness to Edgar. He explains that he accidentally killed Mrs. Lorimer's brother, Arthur Wiatte—Clithero was carrying money when Wiatte attacked him, leading to his slaying him in self-defense. For fear that the knowledge will cause her "calamities," he decides to put Mrs. Lorimer to death while she is asleep or, in his words, to "prevent [her] from returning to a consciousness" (*EH* 78).

My fancy began to be infected with the errors of my understanding. The mood into which my mind was plunged was incapable of any propitious intermission. All within me was tempestuous and dark. My ears were accessible to no sounds but those of shrieks and lamentations. It was deepest midnight, and all the noises of a great metropolis were hushed. . . . I paused on the brink of the precipice, as if to survey the depth of that phrensy that invaded me; was able to ponder on the scene, and deliberate, in a state that partook of calm, on the circumstances of my situation. My mind was harassed by the repetition of one idea. . . . I had ensured the destruction of my lady. (*EH* 74)

It was his “fancy” that infected his understanding. His mind is no longer an active agent: it is “harassed” by the idea that he will kill Mrs. Lorimer. His attempt fails because he finds Clarice in the room, but the fact that Clithero becomes a sleepwalker after leaving Ireland typifies his mental state that is “tempestuous and dark.” While he is asleep he is an uncontrollable monster like the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*—the horror is that there is no stopping Clithero from wandering in the woods or even committing a murder.³⁸ Edgar surveys the sleepwalker’s countenance and sees that the “emotions, which were visible during awakefulness, had vanished during this cessation of remembrance and remorse, or were faintly discernible” (*EH* 107).

While Clithero demonstrates a Humean incoherence of self, Sarsefield, Mrs. Lorimer’s lover, represents the early Godwinian rationalism. Sarsefield is miraculously known to both Edgar—as a tutor in America and Clithero—as a friend in Ireland. When Clithero first meets Sarsefield, he is impressed with the latter’s soundness of judgment and says that “till now I had imagined that no character was uniform and unmixed” (*EH* 59).

Time had made no essential alteration in his sentiments in this respect, that he still fostered an hope, to which every day added new vigour, that whatever was the ultimate event, he trusted in his fortitude to sustain it, if adverse, and in his wisdom to extract from it the most valuable consequences, if it should prove prosperous. (*EH* 59)

Clithero’s pessimistic view that subsequent events obliterate impressions is reminiscent of Hume’s skepticism, while Sarsefield’s “fortitude” to sustain hope embodies early Godwinian philosophy that believed it possible to extricate oneself from the tides of impressions.

III

In the novel, Edgar prides himself on his familiarity with the deep region of the Norwalk, saying that “perhaps no one was more acquainted with this wilderness than I,” but he also admits that his knowledge is “extremely imperfect” (*EH* 92). He repeatedly follows Clithero into the deep woods, but finds himself lost or caught in a dangerous situation. After a while, Edgar finds himself occasionally “relaps[ing] into fits of incoherent fancies” (*EH* 152). He has also become a sleepwalker. What he does not realize is that he is making the same mistake of transgressing reason as Clithero—letting his passions take him over. Edgar’s remark is intuitive: “Every man who suffers is unavoidably shackled by the errors which he censures in his neighbour, and his efforts to relieve himself are as fruitless as those with which he attempted the relief of others” (*EH* 106). Edgar does not remember the events that took place during his sleep. The last thing he remembers when he wakes in the cave is that he was inside his room, had laid aside his clothes and placed the light on a chair, and had thrown himself on the bed. He does not know how he reached the bottom of the pit. Edgar, who claims that his temper “never delighted in carnage and blood” (*EH* 119), when faced with a panther in the cavern, does not hesitate to slay the animal: “My heart overflowed with cruelty, and I pondered on the delight I should experience in rending some living animal to pieces, and drinking its blood and grinding its quivering fibres between my teeth” (*EH* 157). Surrounded by savage nature, Edgar’s bestiality gradually surfaces. The coherence of self no longer holds in the changed environment, and this reminds us of Hume’s statement that “I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent.”

According to Karen O’Brien, since there was a profound fear that people’s interaction with the wilderness of the North American Continent might precipitate their biological and social decline,³⁹ materialist philosophy was still considered dangerous. Ramsay, for example, portrayed the western regions, which extended to the Mississippi, as being infested with “idle or disorderly” people who “disrelished the restraints of civil society.”⁴⁰ As we can see from Ramsay’s depiction of America, the anxiety about biological, moral, or social degeneration was thematised in the literature of the early republican period.⁴¹ Rush’s medical and moral treatises are extreme in his materialist position insofar as he claims that immoral behaviors are caused by physical factors such as climate, diet, disease, and uncleanness. In his medical treatise, he states:

We read likewise of a similar degradation of our species, in respect to moral capacity and feeling. Here it will be necessary to remark, that the low degrees of moral perception, that have been discovered in certain African and Russian tribes of men, no more invalidate our proposition of the universal and essential existence of a moral faculty in the human mind, than the low state of their intellects prove, that reason is not natural to man. Their perceptions of good and evil are in an exact proportion to their intellectual faculties.⁴²

Both Rush and Ramsay believed in the monogenesis of the human species, asserting that racial diversity and variations in moral capacity of people in different regions are accidental. Edgar's account of his regression to a primitive state of indulging in an appetite for raw meat, which he can only remember with loathing and horror, is the very picture of a savage: "I did not turn from the yet warm blood and reeking fibres of a brute" (*EH* 160).

Edgar has a traumatic past due to losing his parents during "former Indian wars" (*EH* 165). Since this novel is set in 1784, the outbreak of the French and Indian War in 1754 may not coincide with Edgar's childhood years, but the historical events that Brown had heard or witnessed must have stayed with him until he became a writer. The killing of 115 settlers by September 1757 (in Northampton County alone) and the British occupation and devastation of Philadelphia in 1777 perhaps left Brown with a strong impression of the struggles of the infant republic.⁴³ In the novel, Edgar and his two sisters survive the attack, but he is "haunted by some species of terror or antipathy" (*EH* 165). His childhood experience foreshadows his predicament in the wilderness. On leaving the cave, he finds a band of Indians sleeping along with their "captive," a girl whom they had reserved for torment or servitude (*EH* 168). Although he manages to rescue the girl, he is compelled to confront these Indians and kill them: "The savage rushed from his covert in order to complete his work; but at three steps from the threshold, he received my bullet in his breast" (*EH* 185). Whenever he pulls the trigger, he checks his conscience: "Horror, and compassion, and remorse, were mingled into one sentiment, and took possession of my heart" (*EH* 192). Edgar is conscious that his education and the habits of the civilized world have been shifted backward, for all his education tended to "unfit [him] for a contest and a scene like this," but he is also aware that he "had imbibed from the unparalleled events which had lately happened a spirit vengeful, unrelenting and ferocious" (*EH* 184). When he finds a house where he asks for relief from his thirst, the woman and her family cannot help but express fear: "The uncouthness of my garb, my wild and weather-worn appearance, my fusil and toma-

hawk, could not but startle them" (*EH* 196). Brown's depiction of the process of "un-civilisation" thus demonstrates the threat of moral degeneracy.

It is ironic that the narrator, Edgar, whose animalistic features emerge in the deep forest, writes beforehand to Waldegrave's sister to warn of materialist ideas. Waldegrave's early philosophy of materialism contained this very adaptability to environment. It is curious to observe that Edgar's reference to Waldegrave's creed that sanctified the universalization of matter is placed at the center of the book's narrative. It seems as though Edgar's—or America's—anxiety about materialist views is buried at the deepest level of his psyche. Edgar's mission is to destroy the letters and manuscripts that contain these ideas, for Waldegrave wished to subvert his opinions. Fearing that Mary would be easily susceptible to the dangerous tenet of materialism, Edgar hesitates to share the knowledge:

Thou, like others of thy sex, art unaccustomed to metaphysical refinements. Thy religion is the growth of sensibility and not of argument. Thou art not fortified and prepossessed against the subtleties, with which the being and attributes of the deity have been assailed. (*EH* 127)

The most noticeable word is "sensibility," and the fact that Edgar attributes this quality to the female sex is remarkable. Edgar says that exposing the manuscripts that Waldegrave wrote about materialism could corrupt Mary's imagination, leading to her "fall" (*EH* 127). Although he is conscious of gender categories, distinguishing the masculine reason and the feminine sensibility, there is an implicit cultural understanding that a civilization that is capable of "metaphysical refinements" is free from such a danger. If lack of refinement and civilization affects people's moral capacity, the cultural ramifications of the binary opposition, reason and sensibility, go beyond gender classification.⁴⁴ Rush, in a Godwinian tone, states that "reason, though deposed and oppressed, is the only just sovereign of the human mind."⁴⁵

The box containing a secret is significant as a symbol of the unconscious in *Edgar Huntly*. Clithero buries a "square box" (*EH* 109) under the elm tree. Edgar happens to see Clithero hiding it and is convinced that this box contains important information about his strange conduct. Although Edgar knows that "the box contained nothing with which others had a right to meddle," he cannot subdue his voyeuristic inclination. In the same way, Edgar hides Waldegrave's manuscripts in a locked "secret drawer" (*EH* 128) for safe keeping: "Clithero had buried his treasure with his own hands as mine had been secreted by myself, but both acts had been performed during sleep"

(*EH* 268). Edgar is baffled to find that the letters have disappeared, for “thou [Mary] only, of the beings who live, wast acquainted with the existence of these manuscripts” (*EH* 129). Later he is told by his former tutor, Sarsefield, that Edgar himself while asleep took the letters and “roved into Norwalk” in a setting full of prominences and pits, “destitute of the guidance of his senses” (*EH* 240). The rationalist Sarsefield explains to Edgar what he saw at their first encounter after returning from Ireland. He says that Edgar’s “reason” had “deserted” him: “None but a man, insane or asleep, would wander forth slightly dressed, and none but a sleeper would have disregarded my calls” (*EH* 239–40).

Sarsefield’s motive in coming to America was to provide Edgar with “means of intellectual gratification and improvement” (*EH* 237) with the fortune he acquired through marrying Clithero’s patroness in Ireland. However, to his surprise, Sarsefield finds that Edgar has turned into a sleepwalker and a savage (*EH* 238). Sarsefield comes across Waldegrave’s letters when trailing Edgar to Chestasco. The letters of Waldegrave were found “carefully concealed between the rafters and shingles of the roof, in a spot” (*EH* 250). Edgar like Clithero is transformed into a wild, irrational automaton who cannot be accountable for his own actions.

IV

Sensibility, according to Edgar, is a vulnerable quality in man. However, there is a degree of ambivalence in his views toward sensibility. As we saw earlier, he condemns the feminine characteristic of being sensible to external influences—particularly with reference to moral and philosophical ideas. Nevertheless, when Edgar sympathizes with Clithero’s narrative, he himself loses the rational ground on which his moral self is founded. First, he acknowledges that Clithero killed Wiatte without intending to do so: “He acted in obedience to an impulse which he could not controul, nor resist. Shall we impute guilt where there is no design?” (*EH* 87) If we accept Edgar’s proposition that a man cannot be accused of murder if there is no intention, Clithero’s murder of Waldegrave should also be considered permissible. Edgar says that his “judgement was, for a time, sunk into imbecility and confusion” (*EH* 87). Certain “impressions” were made upon his mind, which became “full of the images unavoidably suggested by this [Clithero’s] tale” (*EH* 87). Edgar believes that Clithero’s “intents” when he decided to kill his patroness “were noble and compassionate” (*EH* 88).

Sentimental tradition from Shaftesbury and Richardson on, which is based

Lockean sensationalism, is alive in Clithero's narrative.⁴⁶ Affected by the narrative, Edgar justifies Clithero's past conduct by depicting him as the frail man incarnate: "If consequences arise that cannot be foreseen, shall we find no refuge in the persuasion of our rectitude of human frailty?" (*EH* 87). For Edgar the word "criminal" (*EH* 88) no longer has a fixed meaning in either a legal or moral sense.

In his "Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," Rush states that "the human mind is disposed to exaggerate everything that is removed from it, by time or place" (*ME* 147). It is apt that Edgar asks himself whether there is "a criterion by which truth can always be distinguished." His conviction that the tale that "apparently related to scenes and persons far distant" should not hinder his judgment is a naive one. His belief that "the death of my friend was . . . an act of momentary insanity and originated in a like spirit of mistaken benevolence" (*EH* 86–87) may have some relevance to Rush's statement. Edgar is confident that Clithero's narrative "had all the appearances of truth" (*EH* 253) despite the narrator (Clithero) and the audience (Edgar) both being "a thousand leagues" (*EH* 86) removed from the crime scenes. However, Edgar cannot escape the emotive power of Clithero's narrative, which portrays his distress. His sympathy toward Clithero is demonstrated by the fact that he is confounded by Clithero's virtuous character—"operations of his principles" and "the uniformity of his integrity"—and the action he takes (*EH* 88). The affective power of sympathy is elaborated by Rush:

By an immutable law of our nature, distress of all kinds, when *seen*, produces sympathy, and a disposition to relieve it. This sympathy, in generous minds, is not lessened by the distress being the offspring of crimes: on the contrary, even the crimes themselves are often palliated by the reflection that they were the unfortunate consequences of extreme poverty—of seducing company—or of the want of a virtuous education, from the loss or negligence of parents in early life. (*EL* 141)

Brown's literary experiment is to put a rational character to the test. Sarsefield is shocked to hear that Edgar believed the tale of Clithero's criminal past (*EH* 253). Initially Sarsefield is adamant about his attitude to Clithero and his past conduct, saying that the latter will "live only to defy justice and perpetrate new horrors" (*EH* 258). When Clithero is found heavily injured, Sarsefield refuses to give him surgical assistance, though he "was the only one of that profession whose aid could be seasonably administered" (*EH* 263).

Edgar resorts to using the power of his eloquence to save Clithero. He

knows well that this could be done by “a simple recital of the incidents that had befallen, and by repeating the confession which had been extorted from Clithero” (*EH* 263–64). During this recital, Edgar “fixed [his] eyes upon the countenance of Sarsefield” and “watched every emotion as it rose or declined” (*EH* 264). Moved by the eloquence of Edgar, Sarsefield “reluctantly assented to the truth of [his] arguments” and “consented to return” (*EH* 267). Sentimentalism and emotional rhetoric are thus closely linked in terms of truth claims.

Brown is perhaps more sensitive to the affective power of a narrative than is Godwin, for his conscious design in placing Sarsefield’s narrative at the outer layer of the novel is in a sense a challenge to Godwinian rationalism. Brown shows the inherent contradiction of Godwin’s theory that “feeling” enables the mind to evolve, for there is no ultimate agent to draw a line between what one feels to be right and what one rationally thinks should be right. Rush’s warning about the uncertainty of the sense impressions is dramatized by the narratives of Clithero, Edgar, and Sarsefield. There is no value judgment offered about this uncertainty. Although Rush acknowledges the importance of “the sentinel [sic] of our moral faculty” that would “guard the mind from the inroad of every positive vice” (*LE* 143), he promotes society’s tolerance of those conducts that are “unfortunate consequences” of, for example, extreme poverty. The fact that Brown’s reworking of Godwin has characterized Clithero, the criminal, as having an impoverished upbringing rather than being a wealthy landlord such as Falkland is the point of departure.

In this article, first, I have examined Brown’s intellectual environment in which he imbibed the materialist views on the formation of self and moral degeneracy. This does not, however, demonstrate his complete allegiance to European philosophical tradition. Second, I have distinguished Brown’s materialism from its European—chiefly British—counterpart by examining the metaphor of wilderness in *Edgar Huntly*. When he chose a setting in the unexplored regions of America, he was working on a new imaginative ground where wilderness is more than a primitive region that is unexplored. The American wilderness penetrates the three layers of narrative that represent civilization—those of Clithero, Edgar, and Sarsefield. Even Sarsefield, an embodiment of reason, after delving deep into wilderness is open and vulnerable to Clithero’s narrative via Edgar, which consequently obliterates his initial hostility formed by his reason. The presence of wilderness has the dangerous power of stripping humans of their armor of reason. Thus Edgar’s rhetorical question addressed to Mary, “Would it be just to expose thee to

pollution and depravity from this source?" (*EH* 127), can equally well be regarded as self-directed.

NOTES

¹ David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, vol. 1, 1789, ed. Lester H. Cohen (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1990), 65.

² John Yolton's influential studies on materialism survey the British legacy of Locke's suggestion that matter could think. Among philosophers influenced by Locke were David Hume, David Hartley, and Julien Offray de La Mettrie. See *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

³ Edward Reed, for example, has made a point that some prominent medical scientists are unfairly termed "physiologists" and not "psychologists," despite their having made substantial contributions to the understanding of the human mind. He argues that scientists such as Luigi Galvani and Erasmus Darwin are not just physiologists but psychologists. Edward S. Reed, *From Soul to Mind: The Emergence of Psychology from Erasmus Darwin to William James* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), x.

⁴ Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, 1799, ed. and intro. Norman S. Grabo (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1988). In text hereafter cited as *EH* with page numbers in parentheses.

⁵ Michael Lewis, introduction to *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

⁶ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 3.

⁷ Roderick Frazier Nash, "Celebrating Wilderness in 2004," *George Wright Forum* 21, no. 3 (2004): 6.

⁸ Cole's *The Oxbow* gives audiences a panoramic view of the Connecticut River Valley in western Massachusetts, where the river turns back on itself. From the rugged peak of the nearby mountain, the valley below is a vision of agrarian peace, all the more through contrast with the wilderness on the left side of the canvas. "He saw colonization as a process by which nature's energies—tied to his own creative power—were drained away." See Angela Miller, "The Fate of Wilderness in American Landscape Art," in *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 98–100.

⁹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 29.

¹⁰ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, xiii.

¹¹ Grabo, introduction to *Edgar Huntley*, xxi–xxii.

¹² Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 118.

¹³ Robert A. Ferguson, "Yellow Fever and Charles Brockden Brown: The Context of the Emerging Novelist," *Early American Literature* 14 (1979–80): 296.

¹⁴ Erasmus Darwin, *A Poem in Two Parts. Part I Containing the Economy of Vegetation. Part II. The Loves of the Plants. With Philosophical Notes*, ed. Elihu Hubbard Smith (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1798). He was an English physician, natural philosopher, physiologist, and poet who was hugely influential in North America as well as in Britain.

¹⁵ William Hedges, "Benjamin Rush, Charles Brockden Brown, and the American Plague Year," *Early American Literature* 7 (1972–73).

¹⁶ W. M. Verhoeven argues that this view is the "traditionally one-sided representation in Brown scholarship," an analysis that is based on "an older and now largely superseded tradition in Romantic studies." See his "Radicalism and Conservatism in Brown's Early Writings,"

in *Revising Charles Brockden Brown: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality in the Early Republic*, ed. Philip Barnard et al. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 11.

¹⁷ William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 3rd ed., 1798, ed. and intro. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1985), 141. Hereafter cited as *PJ* with page numbers in parentheses.

¹⁸ John Neal, for example, wrote in *Blackwood's* magazine that Brown was "an imitator of Godwin" and that he was "the Godwin of America." See "American Writers, No. II." *Blackwood's* 16 (1824): 415–28. See also Dorothy J. Hale, "Profits of Altruism: Caleb Williams and Arthur Mervyn," in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 22. no. 1 (Autumn 1988); and Clemit, *Godwinian Novel*.

¹⁹ Clemit, *Godwinian Novel*, 105.

²⁰ Hale, "Profits of Altruism," 68.

²¹ Hale, "Profits of Altruism," 49.

²² His major literary works include *Caleb Williams* (1794), *St. Leon* (1799), *Fleetwood* (1805), and *Mandeville* (1817). *Caleb Williams* is hereafter cited as *CW* with page numbers in parentheses.

²³ This citation is from the chapter "Voluntary Actions of Men Originate in Their Opinion" in the third edition; this chapter was not part of the first edition; from this we may speculate that much of his discussion on the interdependent relation between reason and passion was developed after reading David Hume.

²⁴ Godwin's concern with the sources of self sprang from Lockean sensational psychology based on the concept of tabula rasa or blank slate, which was also explored by David Hume in the eighteenth century.

²⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3 vols., 1739, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 415. Hereafter cited as *TH* with page numbers in parentheses.

²⁶ Paul Hamilton makes a special note of Godwin's reading of Hume's *Treatise* in 1795, which explains why Godwin "reinstates 'feeling' as the prime mover of human action, and reserves the purely rational act as at best an ideal or limiting case." See Paul Hamilton, "Coleridge and Godwin in the 1790s," in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. R. Gravil and M. Lefebure (London: Macmillan, 1990), 44.

²⁷ Godwin, William, *St. Leon*, 1799, ed. and intro. Pamela Clemit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), xiv.

²⁸ Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 228.

²⁹ J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, 1782, ed. Albert E. Stone (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1986), 71. Hereafter cited as *LAF* with page numbers in parentheses.

³⁰ Erasmus Darwin wrote a medical book, *Zoonomia* (1794–96), that included many evolutionary concepts that Charles Darwin, his grandson, would later adopt.

³¹ Robert Whytt, *Physiological Essays* (Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour and Neill, 1745), 188. Hereafter cited as *PE* in parentheses with page numbers.

³² R. K. French, *Robert Whytt, the Soul, and Medicine* (London: Wellcome Library History of Medicine Collection, 1969), 71.

³³ James E. Cronin, "Elihu Hubbard Smith and the New York Friendly Club, 1795–1798," *PMLA* 64 (1949): 471–79.

³⁴ Hale, "Profits of Altruism," 54.

³⁵ Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia; or The Laws of Organic Life*, vol. 1, 1794 (New York: AMS Press, 1974). The first volume of Darwin's *Zoonomia* was printed in Smith's *Medical Repository*.

³⁶ *Observations on Man* was still current in the late eighteenth century and promulgated

among the Romantic writers, including members of the Godwin family, and they had particularly influenced the philosophical thinking of William Godwin.

³⁷ David Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 2 vols., 1749, 1791 (Poole and Washington, DC: Woodstock Books, 1998), 109. Hereafter vol. 1 will be cited as *OM.i* and vol. 2 as *OM.ii* in parentheses with page numbers.

³⁸ Mary Shelley is the daughter of William Godwin.

³⁹ O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, 227.

⁴⁰ Ramsay, *History of the American Revolution*, 441.

⁴¹ O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, 228.

⁴² Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1809), 185.

⁴³ Ted Morgan, *Wilderness at Dawn: The Settling of the North American Continent* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 295.

⁴⁴ See P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: EBLA, 1982).

⁴⁵ Rush, Benjamin, "Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," in *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical* (Philadelphia: Thomas and Samuel F. Bradford, 1798), 137. In text hereafter cited as *ME* in parentheses with page numbers.

⁴⁶ Sentimentalism is everywhere in Godwin's novels too. Implicit in the published ending of *Caleb Williams* is the power of emotive rhetoric. Despite the fact that no one believes Caleb's narrative about Falkland's criminal past, his eloquence in the court overturns the situation. Caleb speaks in a language of heightened feeling: "I will confess every sentiment of my heart. . . . I poured them out with uncontrollable impetuosity." When Caleb's true story is finally disclosed, or his truth that Falkland was "indeed the murderer of Tyrrel" is "confessed" in public, justice is done (*CW* 314–21).