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Inverting the Cave: *Edgar Huntly* and the Enlightenment

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Writers of post-Revolutionary America used their work to explore the changing atmosphere of the newly formed republic. Like several of his contemporaries, Charles Brockden Brown uses his writing to examine and comment on the political debate surrounding American independence. Brown's work demonstrates distrust in the American Enlightenment, the philosophy accepted by many Republican optimists such as Thomas Jefferson. Brown's skepticism is grounded in the contextual, political debate between Federalism and Republicanism. In *Edgar Huntly or Memoirs of a Sleep-walker*, Brown challenges the fundamental beliefs of the Enlightenment and aligns himself with the Federalists. Through Edgar's quest for truth, Brown explores the motif of light versus darkness and attempts to invert the Platonic ascension to enlightenment. Through the use of the American gothic, Brown ultimately questions republican optimism, the belief in progress, and the people's ability to use reason to rule themselves.

In his essay titled "What is Enlightenment? Some American Answers" Robert Ferguson explains how Immanuel Kant describes the Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity" and an "uncertain struggle of light against darkness" (371). Kant's emphasis on Enlightenment as a process conveniently accounts for the "anxiety," "extraordinary social upheaval," and "disaster" that accompanied the American Revolutionary War. Ferguson explains how the anxiety over separation from England creates a struggle between success and failure: "Separation from the mother country can imply either a natural movement toward the control of one's own destiny or the untimely, irreparable loss of the orphan" (383). It is within this tension that Brown emerges with his interpretation of the Enlightenment and prediction of the future of America. According to Ferguson, American literature "thrives in the resonant space between the hope of blessing and the fear of curse. It defines itself in that crisis; this is where it hold its audience" (387).

In the preface to *Edgar Huntly*, Brown explains that his novel is the result of "new springs of action" taking place in America (3). It is clear that Brown sees his narrative as a reflection of prevalent issues of the time. He also states that, "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" (3). This explanation encourages the reader not to view Edgar as an isolated figure but as a representation of the human condition.

Brown begins his story with the distraught narrative of Edgar Huntly, a man who claims to embody reasonable thinking and a dedication to methodical investigation. Edgar laments the recent death of his close friend Waldgrave and, overcoming his emotions, he vows to find the murderer: "Time and reason seemed to have dissolved the spell which made me deaf to the dictates of duty and discretion" (8). Edgar's quest begins with confidence in his abilities: "For this end I was to make minute inquiries, and to put seasonable interrogatories. From this conduct I promise myself an ultimate solution of my doubts" (15). His language, as well as the total absence of the law, suggests that he is capable of seeking out truth and administering justice entirely on his own. This type of self-governance is Brown's parallel to independence advocated by Jeffersonian Republicanism. Once he has asserted his ability to use reason, he begins his quest to find Waldgrave's killer.

At the beginning, Edgar seems in control of his quest: "Curiosity is vicious, if undisciplined by reason, and inconducive to benefit" (16). He demonstrates reflection and reasoning as he meditates on how to conduct his search. Edgar seems to possess characteristics such as truth, justice, courage, and self-control that mirror Plato's definition of a philosopher (Plato 180). Brown establishes these characteristics through Edgar's determination to find Waldgrave's killer. Because he embodies these characteristics, Edgar is meant to appear "enlightened." His philosophical reasoning demonstrates a faith in human nature and optimism in man's abilities. This is the starting point of Edgar's character from which he will slowly regress.

As Edgar develops an interest in Clithero, he gradually deserts his original objective. He becomes obsessed with forgiving and excusing Clithero of the crimes that drove him from his foreign home to America and states: "Could I not subdue his perverse disdain and immeasurable abhorrence of himself? His upbraiding and his scorn were unmerited and misplaced...Reason was no less an antidote to the illusions of insanity like his, than to the illusion of error" (91). Edgar thinks he can cure Clithero of his guilt and save him from insanity or suicide by teaching him to reason.

The shift from Waldgrave to Clithero leads Edgar away from reason and into the cave and darkness. Upon his first encounter with the cave, Edgar states: "at a few yards from the mouth the light disappeared, and I found myself immersed in the dimmest obscurity...But here it seemed as if I was surrounded by barriers that would forever cut off my return to air and to light" (95, 96). The entrance into the cave represents Edgar's first step towards regression and the primitive. As he leaves behind the light, he is also leaving behind reason and philosophy. In this way, Edgar begins the introverted journey of ascension. Instead of beginning in the dark and traveling towards light, Edgar abandons his philosophical state and travels downwards into the cave. In his article "*Edgar Huntly as Quest Romance*" Dieter Schulz explains

that "In the course of his search, the hero turns from his role as active agent of his quest into the object of uncontrollable forces within his own self" (325). This loss of self-control shows that there is darkness in the true nature of man.

According to Schulz, "Huntly's sleepwalking marks the point where the dark self fully asserts its power by breaking through the barriers of reason and morality" (330). When Edgar wakes from sleepwalking he finds himself engulfed in darkness: "but that which threw me into deepest consternation was, my inability to see. I turned my head to different quarters, I stretched me eyelids, and exerted every visual energy, but in vain. I was wrapt in the murkiest and most impenetrable gloom" (153). This lack of sight parallels the image of men chained to the wall in Plato's allegory of the cave (208). They too have restricted sight and are engulfed in darkness or lack of enlightenment. While Plato explains this as the starting point of mankind from which they can then rise, Brown portrays this decline as a natural state of mankind.

Edgar has gone from light to darkness and soon his behavior begins to reflect this change. He first admits that he has abandoned intellect and then becomes obsessed with satisfying his basic needs, hunger and thirst (153). This exchange demonstrates an animal-like transformation:

My hunger speedily became ferocious. I tore the linen of my shirt between my teeth and swallowed the fragments. I felt a strong propensity to bite the flesh of my arm. 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. (156-157)

Here, Brown uses imagery to portray the barbaric savagery that is taking hold of Edgar as he reverts to a primitive being. Schulz further explores Edgar's experience in the cave in relation to his quest: "The episodes in the caverns demonstrate the release of the dark self, under circumstances where the laws of morality are suspended. Even after he awakes in the pit, Huntly is sleepwalking in the sense that he has no control over his actions" (330). This regression demonstrates Brown's lack of faith in human nature.

Brown cleverly toys with the concept of light in the cave and inverts its meaning. Inside the cave there are two sources of light that attract Edgar's attention. Each source—the eyes of the panther and the Native American's fire—brings him deeper into chaos and barbarism and further from reason and enlightenment. The eyes of the panther are the first source of light:

The darkness was no less intense than in the pit below, and yet two objects were distinctly seen. They resembled a fixed

and obscure flame. They were motionless. Though lustrous themselves they created no illumination around them...These were the eyes of the panther. (159)

This source of light does not illuminate but instead leads him to kill and devour the panther: "I did not turn from the yet warm blood and reeking fibres of a brute" (160). This gruesome account further establishes Edgar's increasing barbaric nature.

Once he has satisfied his hunger, Edgar searches out a source to quench his thirst. This quest leads him to the Native Americans:

At length, on the right hand a gleam, infinitely faint, caught my attention. It was wavering and unequal. I directed my steps towards it. It became more vivid, and permanent. It was of that kind, however, which proceeded from a fire, kindled with dry sticks, and not from the sun. I now heard the crackling of flames. (163)

Again, this source of light brings out the savage in Edgar. Motivated by his own hatred for the Natives and the demands of thirst, Edgar debates whether or not he should kill the Native American. When the Native becomes aware of his presence Edgar learns that violence is necessary to survive and thus, he commits his first act of murder. This action confirms Brown's belief that: "violence lurked just beneath the social surface and within every man beat the heart of a beast" (Watts 120). This depiction of survival and savagery further demonstrates Brown's vision of America as an untamed wilderness in need of a stronger ruling government.

Similarly to how Brown inverts the meaning of light, he also alters the idea of reality. In Plato, Socrates explains that once man is brought into the light: "He will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water; but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is" (210). Whereas in Plato man finds reality in the sun, Brown inverts this idea and Edgar discovers the reality of his natural self in darkness. Brown's reality is man's inclination towards savagery. This sharp contrast further emphasizes Brown's pessimism and lack of faith in the Enlightenment.

The murder of the Native leads to a series of violent scenes where Edgar massacres three more Native Americans. He admits to a "desperate impulse of passion" and irrational actions: "I was the instrument of their destruction. This scene of carnage and blood was laid by me. To this havock and horror was I led by such rapid footsteps" (181, 185-86). Edgar has lost his sense of justice and ability to exert self-control. He is no longer a rational being or a model of the Platonic philosopher; he has gone from enlightened individual to a desperate savage. Edgar is aware of his regression: "the transition I had undergone was so wild and inexplicable; all

that I had performed; all that I had witnessed since my egress from the pit, were so contradictory to precedent events, that I still cling to the belief that my thoughts were confused by delirium" (186). Although he has emerged from the cave, acts of irrational violence bring him deeper into chaos and darkness. As Schulz states: "There is a steady escalation in horror, from the killing of the panther to the butchery of the last Indian" (330).

As Edgar journeys through the wilderness he is under the false assumption that once he finds civilization he will leave behind the horrific scenes and insanity that has plagued him since he entered the cave. Instead, he happens upon evidence of violence, chaos, and lawlessness throughout his journey. Edgar returns home a different man from when he left: "An horrid scar upon my cheek, and my uncombed locks; hallow eyes, made ghastly by abstinence and cold, and the ruthless passions of which my mind had been the theatre, added to the musquet which I carried in my hand, would prepossess them with the notion of a maniac or ruffian" (227). This image suggests that Edgar is a changed man and will never again be the rational creature he once thought he was. His journey has transformed him and brought out the darkness within him.

Steven Watts, author of *The Romance of Real Life: Charles Brockden Brown and the Origins of American Culture*, explores how Edgar's madness is paralleled in Clithero, therefore arguing for the universality of his themes. Watts states that "Brown depicted the maniacal Irishman as almost an alter ego for the protagonist" (126). He does this by having Edgar discover an "obsessive identification with Clithero" (126). Similarly to Edgar, Clithero explains through his story that he was once a respectable man. Before he accidentally killed Mrs. Lorimer's brother he led a normal and happy life. Both men undergo transformations from reasonable men, to subconscious sleepwalkers, to madmen. Watts states that while Clithero, "anguished over his domination by the darker impulses of his nature," likewise Edgar "revealed himself as a creature of confused perceptions and profound unconscious impulses" (124). Neither men are able to govern their minds with reason and ultimately give in to their darker selves.

Through the use of the American gothic, Brown effectively captures the dissent of the period. As Watts states: "Gothic texts... challenged confident liberal individualism by showing isolated characters confronting the brutality of the modern world as well as the hidden monsters of human nature" (18). *Edgar Huntly* is a true example of the American gothic because in contrast to European gothic—which characteristically ends with a resolution of some kind—*Edgar Huntly* ends in disturbing chaos. The use of this genre further demonstrates Brown's themes. Edgar's foolish attempt to reunite Mrs. Lorimer and Clithero, causing Clithero's suicide and Mrs. Lorimer's miscarriage, leaves a lingering sense

of chaos and darkness. Edgar, finally realizing his mistakes, exclaims: "Disastrous and humiliating is the state of man! By his own hands, is constructed the mass of misery and error in which his steps are forever involved...How total is our blindness with regard to our own performances!" (268). Blindness, or darkness, is the state in which Brown ends his gothic tale. This pessimism is a direct contradiction to the optimism and faith in human nature advocated by Plato.

In Jane Tompkins' discussion of Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Wieland*, she explores how the "key to *Wieland's* meaning lies in the historical situation that the novel itself attempted to shape" (43). Tompkins bases her argument in the fact that immediately after he finished writing the novel, Brown sent a copy to Vice President Thomas Jefferson. She states that this action proves that Brown believed the "usefulness [of the novel] lay in the area of natural politics" (43). *Edgar Huntly* is similar to *Wieland* in that its meaning is also closely related to its historical context. Both novels are an attempt to influence the political atmosphere by demonstrating a darker view of human nature and a distrust of republican optimism. Not unlike *Edgar Huntly*, *Wieland* is a novel where "the plot offers a direct refutation of the Republican faith in men's capacity to govern themselves without the supports and constraints of an established order" (Tompkins 49). This is seen in *Edgar Huntly* where the lack of authority results in chaotic violence and unleashed barbarism.

According to Tompkins: "whether one was for or against the Constitution, for or against the French Revolution, for or against Jeffersonian democracy, turned largely on whether one believed that men were by nature fit to govern themselves or needed the restraining force of an entrenched ruling order" (47). Brown uses *Edgar Huntly* to demonstrate that he does not see man capable of using reason to govern himself because of the dark side of human nature. Edgar's quest explores this dark side and directly counters Kant's Enlightenment and Plato's optimism. Instead of emerging from his immaturity, Edgar's quest leads him on an inverted journey of ascension back to a primitive, anti-philosophical state. Brown inverts the meaning of light and argues that reality lies in understanding that there is darkness in human nature. Emory Elliot states: "Most of all, Brown questioned the confidence of his age in the rational faculties of man...[and] came to believe that it is absurd to think that people are always guided by reason" (221). This lack of faith in human nature questions the enlightenment theory and demonstrates a lack of faith in the newly formed American government.

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