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Cartographies of the Abyss:
Tropics of Sublimity in the Fictions of Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe

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**Cartographies of the Abyss:
Tropics of Sublimity in the Fictions of Charles Brockden Brown
and Edgar Allan Poe**

Sean Moreland, MA, PhD

**Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Faculty of Arts
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CARTOGRAPHIES OF THE ABYSS: ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a number of major intersections between selected fictions of American authors Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe, arguing for the significant and often unrecognized importance of Brown's influence on Poe, and via Poe, on late nineteenth century literary Modernism. It approaches these interwoven fictions through their engagement with the philosophical discourse on the sublime, a discourse that emerged early in the eighteenth century and continued to exert a tremendous influence into the mid-nineteenth century. It argues for the importance of these fictions as pioneering proto-Modernist works due to their development of a literary aesthetic of complex indeterminacy. This indeterminate aesthetic is inextricably bound up with the critical investment in the sublime which these fictions share. This thesis also explores the connections between the sublime aesthetic of these fictions and their provocative scepticism toward dominant paradigms of Enlightenment thought, a scepticism which leads them to explore concepts which in the nineteenth century began to crystallize in the discursive creation of the unconscious.

The first chapter focuses on Brown's novel *Wieland* in terms of its investigation of the relationship between religious inspiration and insanity through the rhetorical sublime. The second considers Brown's *Edgar Huntly* as a critique of the interlinked concepts of sympathy and sublimity, concepts which were central to the aesthetic and political discourse of the early United States. The third considers the continuation of this critique performed by Poe's only completed novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and examines the ways in which this story borrows from and transforms Brown's treatment of the natural sublime in *Edgar Huntly*. The final chapter considers Poe's tale "The Fall of the House of Usher" as an incisive fictional

critique of influential theories of the sublime, as articulated by Edmund Burke, James Usher, and Immanuel Kant, and explores the ways in which this transformation of concepts of the sublime informs Poe's importance as a proto-Modernist literary innovator.

INTRODUCTION: “Where Even the Darkness is Something to See”

“we shall best understand what is meant by clear and obscure in our ideas, by reflecting on what we call clear and obscure in the objects of sight.”

John Locke, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)

“’Tis certain nothing more powerfully animates any affection, than to conceal some part of its object by throwing it into a kind of shade, which at the same time that it shews enough to pre-possess us in favour of the object, leaves still some work for the imagination. Besides that, obscurity is always attended with a kind of uncertainty; the effort which the fancy makes to compleat the idea, rouzes the spirits and gives an additional force to the passion.”

David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740)

“...let it be considered that hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do while we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.”

Edmund Burke, *Enquiry Concerning the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757)

“The field of sensuous intuitions and sensations of which we are not conscious, even though we can undoubtedly conclude that we have them, that is, *obscure* representations in the human being (and thus also in animals), is immense. *Clear* representations, on the other hand, contain only infinitely few points on this field which lie open to consciousness; so that as it were only a few places on the vast map of our mind are illuminated. This can inspire us with wonder...”

Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Viewpoint* (1798)

“... ‘you will observe that this image, while indistinct, is not confused.’

‘How can any thing be indistinct and not confused?’ said Mr. S--.

‘Ay, that question is from the new school,’ replied W.; ‘but recollect, that obscurity, or indistinctness, is only a negative, which leaves the imagination to act upon the few hints that truth reveals to it; confusion is a thing as positive as distinctness, though not necessarily so palpable; and it may, by mingling and confounding one image with another, absolutely counteract the imagination, instead of exciting it’

Anne Radcliffe, “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826)

’The error is analogous with that which leads the immature poet to think himself obscure, because obscurity is a source of the sublime, thus confounding obscurity of expression with the expression of obscurity.”

Edgar Allan Poe, Review of *Macaulay’s Miscellaneous Essays* (1841)

“In America the geography is sublime, but the men are not.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Considerations by the Way in Conduct of Life”

In a caveat aimed at contemporary studies which reterritorialize the sublime as a strategy for aesthetic evaluation, James Kirwan explains that “writers take the category from the aesthetic tradition, sublimate it to a formula so abstract that nothing could escape its net, and then proceed to show how their favourite art – be it Newman or Nabokov – fits the dynamic of this formula. But the word sublime is already spoken for: it designates a certain kind of involuntary, overwhelming, pleasurable, gut response to an object. It is an ‘affective jolt’, not an opinion of an object into the sharing of which another can be ingeniously argued. You cannot prove something is sublime. This has been the worst effect of the recent ‘return of the aesthetic’: it is not the aesthetic that is returning but rather revived forms of its nineteenth-century excrescences” (157). In approaching these fictions by Brown and Poe via the sublime, I hope I have not fallen into this trap of empty attribution. While I *feel* that these works remain eminently capable of producing sublime affects in some readers¹ (this is the stimulus that initially motivated *my* interest in each), I *know* that they are also self-consciously situated in and through the historical discourse on the sublime; a discourse on which each of them draws in producing its unsettling effects.

Critic Martin Donougho has offered a complementary warning, writing that “the sublime has by now come to form part of the furniture of our common world (artistic, philosophical or everyday). Yet that should not blind us to the attendant fact that – as with other categories of aesthetics – the sublime is historically specific, and has been taken in a

¹ My experience teaching Brown and Poe’s fictions to undergraduate students, rather than my familiarity with any particular strand of reader-response theory, informs my unwillingness to make assertions about the affective responses these fictions actually elicit from contemporary readers. Take, for example, the mixed responses of students to Poe’s most representative and oft-taught tale, “The Fall of the House of Usher:” “So here is this *narrator* guy, reading this *crazy* book from the dark ages with *dragons* and *clanging* swords and everything to his *insane* and over-imaginative friend to try to *calm him down* – even though he *knows* the guy *hates* the book. *Hahahaha!* What an *idiot!*”

wide variety of ways. We should be wary of reifying it therefore, but equally wary of reading one sense of the sublime backwards or forwards into another time period, thus assimilating history to theory” (99). Similarly, Donald Pease cautions that “[u]nless historicized, the sublime can degenerate into one of those vapid critical terms which, like auratic or demonic, one inflects nowadays mostly in italics. Sublimations still threaten the framing power of a critical discourse like the abyss imagery of a Poe short story” (169). My approach to these fictions by Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe is not *primarily* historical; rather, I attempt to open interpretive possibilities within these fictions using key concepts drawn from the discourse on the sublime. Nevertheless, tracing the trajectory each fiction takes toward the asymptote of the sublime requires a degree of historical context, and I hope the degree provided is sufficient to keep my argument from the confusions that result from a de-historicized attempt to come to terms with the sublime, which is, as Thomas Weiskel (11) accurately observed, more a vast collection of epiphenomena than a singular phenomenon in itself. Nevertheless, part of the appeal of the sublime as a literary hermeneutic lens is precisely the indistinctness and uncertainty that defines it, and that its affective production from a literary text is dependent upon. To dispense with this inspiring and pregnant obscurity altogether would be tragically to lose sight of what gives the sublime its peculiar power to fascinate.

Following his warning about the dangers of de-historicizing studies of sublimity, Donoghue insists that “[f]or all its historical contingency, we may nonetheless continue to speak of the sublime, or more cautiously, of *styles* of the sublime” (909-10) and it is with four distinct, although intricately inter-related, styles of sublimity that this thesis is concerned. Wallace Stevens’ poem “The American Sublime” asks its reader “How does one

stand/ to behold the sublime?” and each of these fictions represents a particular, and particularly critical, stance toward the sublime. While each of these works engages with the sublime through a distinctly American vein of Gothic fiction, each draws on different conceptual formulations from the discourse on the sublime and marries them to specific historical contexts. Taken together, they represent the tracing of a brief but tremendously influential phase in the trajectory the sublime has taken in the course of American literature. In keeping with the geo/cartographic metaphor that informs the title of this thesis, I explore these fictions as tropics of sublimity. While these fictional tropics are proximate to one another, each is uniquely inflected by the historical and philosophical context in which it was written, so that each tropic presents a different stance toward the complex of concepts called the sublime. Each of these figurative stances, however, is self-consciously predicated on the impossibility of apprehending (let alone comprehending) sublimity from any particular vantage point.

Before considering the ways in which these fictions trope the sublime, it is necessary to consider the historical and intellectual context in which the discourse on the sublime first flourished, and to explain my own conceptual stance toward, and interest in, this discourse. In doing so, I would like to invoke a notable master of the strategically obscure, Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things*, the English translation of Foucault's *Des Mots et Des Choses*, describes the “archaeological mutation” that constituted the emergence of Modernity in terms aptly reminiscent of the discourse on the sublime itself. At this point in history, Foucault writes that “European culture is inventing for itself a *depth* in which what matters is no longer identities, distinctive characters, permanent tables with all their possible paths and routes, but *great hidden forces* developed on the basis of their primitive and

inaccessible nucleus, origin, causality and history. From now on things will be represented only from the *depths of this density* withdrawn into itself, perhaps *blurred and darkened by its obscurity*" (251; my italics). The great hidden forces he refers to are the subject of *The Order of Things*, which "describes the unconscious of science" (xi). The revelation of this unconscious substrate of epistemology is, according to Foucault, what signifies the emergence of the Modern episteme from the collapse of Classical discourse with the Enlightenment. In other words, this "unconscious of science" is the figurative *darkness* against which the *light* of positive knowledge must be defined. Foucault terms this the *unthought*, which is the necessary corollary of *thought* (in the sense of positive discourses of knowledge), and which ineluctably determines its formations.

Foucault's terms in describing this subjective, cultural and epistemological *unthought* can be readily recognized from their centrality to the discourse on the sublime. This resemblance is hardly a coincidence. As Ashfield and de Bolla explain in their introduction to *The Sublime: A Reader in eighteenth Century British Aesthetics*, "in relation to the subject of aesthetics it fell to [the eighteenth century] to articulate the complexities of affective experience, and it did so in the context of an emerging new understanding of the construction of the subject. This new subject, the site of various appetites and desires, was increasingly cut loose from the old certainties, those which grounded and provided guarantees for the subject in a predominantly religious culture. What the period said and thought about artworks is bound up with what it thought and said about the nature of human experience generally. In this sense for the period in question the aesthetic is not primarily about art but about how we are formed as subjects, and how as subjects we go about making sense of our experience" (1-2). With Edmund Burke's widely influential *Enquiry into the*

Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, the focus of the discourse on the sublime shifted away from the theo-ethical significance of the sublime, and toward its physiological basis. As Kent Ljungquist explains, “[b]efore Burke, the response to the sublime was almost always teleologically informed, that is, an appeal to immensity was divinely sanctioned, morally oriented, or scientifically based. Burke opened the Romantic sensibility to utter vastness because of his radical sensationist bias” (Ljungquist 20).

In his introduction to Burke’s *Enquiry*, James Boulton writes that “to define taste was to define one’s aesthetic presuppositions. The investigation led with Burke – and with Hume, Gerard, Alison, and others – to psychological criticism: an enquiry into the working of the human mind when faced with an aesthetic experience” (xxviii). Of course, such bold attempts to make sense of just *how* we make sense of aesthetic experience are notoriously fraught, and then, as now, constantly faced with the possibility of collapsing into nonsense. As Thomas Weiskel recognized in his 1976 study, *The Romantic Sublime*, “[a]ny aesthetic, pressed beyond a certain point, becomes a psychology. The very openness of a sublime to psychological conjecture proves an obstacle to a rigorous analysis” (83). Authors who were concerned to explain the aesthetic process underlying the affective experience of the sublime were faced with a double difficulty. Not only were they attempting to explain the process of aesthetic evaluation itself, rather than merely performing such an evaluation, they were also attempting to clearly express an idea that was definitively linked to ineffability and incomprehensibility.

Recognition of the paradoxical nature of this enterprise led Burke with the *Enquiry* to loosely sketch an affective theory of poetic language that privileged the suggestive power of obscurity and indeterminacy. As Boulton explains, Burke’s *Enquiry* “represents a reaction

against the distrust of language among post-Baconian writers in the previous century, against their desire to evolve a language in which words would simply be marks of things and in which emotional and historical associations would be non-existent” (lxxvii). In his *Essay*, Locke had cautioned that “the first capacity of human intellect, is, that the mind is fitted to receive the impressions made on it, either, through the *senses*, by outward objects, or by its own operations, when it *reflects* on them” (II.i.24 39). Based on this assumption, Locke looked proscriptively at linguistic representation, asserting the existence of limits which were always incurred from the limits of the senses, cautioning that “[w]e should not then perhaps be so forward, out of an affection of an universal knowledge, to raise questions, and perplex ourselves and others with disputes about things, to which our understandings are not suited; and of which we cannot frame in our minds any clear or distinct perceptions” (I.i 5). Reacting against Locke’s prescription that language must always be made as transparent as possible, Burke explicitly links the *power* of language, which serves as a medium for the intersubjective transmission of passionate transport, to its very obscurity, writing that “a clear idea is another name for a little idea.” This claim is probably influenced by Hume, who considered that “obscurity is always attended with a kind of uncertainty; the effort which the fancy makes to compleat the idea, rouzes the spirits and gives an additional force to the passion” (300). This kind of obscurity is emphasized repeatedly within Burke’s *Enquiry* as a necessary corollary of sublime terror, and becomes the theoretical groundwork for the poetics of complex indeterminacy that will be pioneered in the fictions of Brown and Poe².

² In considering the power of language, Burke conceives of a category distinct from that of the signifier and the thing signified. This third category is the affective power of language, a power which can be linked either to the linguistic sign itself, or the thing signified. Burke writes that “If words have all their possible extent of power, three effects arise in the mind of the hearer. The first is, the sound; the second, the picture, or

The interest in, and criticism of, Lockean views of perception and cognition displayed by these American authors arose from the fact that, as Alan Axelrod explains, “the empiricism of John Locke took especial root in America, most likely because the demands of the New World experience were themselves so eminently empirical” (96).

While each of these fictions is strongly sensational in its exploration of subjective states and their physical correlatives, each is also concerned with the apparently incommensurable relationship between sensation and rationality. The inability of reason to adequately comprehend or represent the sublime is also taken for granted by Burke’s *Enquiry*. He explains that “[t]he passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and Astonishment is that state of the

representation of the thing signified by the sound; the third is, the affection of the soul produced by one or both of the foregoing” (V.iv 166)

This affective power is closely linked to the ambiguity or indeterminacy allowed for by linguistic representation. This led Thomas Weiskel to define the sublime as “that moment when the relation between the signifier and the signified breaks down and is replaced by an indeterminate relation” (ix). As Philip Shaw explains it, “although language fails to raise a clear idea of things in the world, it succeeds as a means of ‘conveying the affections of the mind from one to another.’ What words evoke, therefore, with greater force than any other medium, is the entanglement of the objective and the emotional” (50). The sublime can thus be recognized as a site of affective contagion. This notion, and Burke’s phrase “contagion of the passions,” again appears to have been drawn from Hume, one of the first Enlightenment philosophers to fully emphasize the (sometimes dangerous) power of sympathy. Hume claimed that “[w]hen any affection is infus’d by sympathy, ‘tis at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation which convey an idea of it. The idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection” (226). The migration whereby the passion of another becomes a passion of one’s own thus offers an experiential parallel for the migration of an idea into a physical impression in a state of subjective intensity. The intimacy of these ideas is explored by each of the fictions discussed in the following chapters, but most fully by Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*, which suspiciously represents sympathy in a manner which highlights the centrality of this concept for the new Republic in which he was writing. This intersubjective contagion is another of the ways in which the discourse on the sublime presents challenges to conceptions of a fixed or stable subjectivity, and thus informs the emergence of the Modern subject.

soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises that great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force” (II.i 57). Burke was well aware that the power of the sublime was bound up with its power to exceed, anticipate and even motivate attempts at rational explanation. And yet, Burke and numerous other writers set as their task a reasoned account of this “irresistible force.” What Burke shares with most of the other multifarious theorizations of the sublime produced throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the idea that certain objects or classes of object appear to overpower the mind through their dangerous display of strength, magnitude or mysterious obscurity. These objects were identified chiefly by the affects they were supposed to elicit; in Burke’s formulation, a commingling of “awe and terror.” This awe and terror was linked to a sense of elevation in the experiencing subject, but one which was necessarily proximate to the possibility of its own extinction. James Kirwan writes that

“[t]he sublime of the eighteenth century, then, was a matter of a certain fairly clearly delimited class of objects or notions. It was a class that could include any object that was observed to arouse a ‘passion’ ‘sentiment,’ or ‘emotion’, variously characterized as ‘elevation,’ ‘transport,’ ‘enthusiasm,’ ‘exaltedness,’ ‘astonishment,’ ‘ecstasy,’ ‘enthusiastic terror,’ ‘delightful horror,’ ‘pleasing astonishment,’ ‘enthusiastic awe,’ ‘indescribable awe,’ ‘ineffable complacency,’ ‘sacred enthusiasm,’ ‘madness of rapture,’ ‘divine transport of admiration and amazement,’ ‘thrilling and delightful wonder,’ or ‘the emotion of grandeur.’ While the cause of the feeling might require explanation, there was no question as to what was felt: to be the sublime this sense must, as Richardson said, ‘strike vehemently upon the mind, and fill, and captivate it irresistibly’” (Kirwan 3).

The logic whereby such an awe-full object could cause a radical transformation of the experiencing subject by affectively catalyzing it came to prominence in a context informed by two major philosophical paradigms: the metaphysical rationalism associated

with Descartes, and the empiricist sensationism associated with Locke. The subjective event of an encounter with the sublime appeared to offer a powerful challenge to both these paradigms. This is because the sublime, which, in Burke's phrase, "anticipates our reasonings and hurries us onward by an irresistible force" reveals a non-conscious power operant within the mind – one which appears to come from without, but which is also understood as inseparable from the mind's own activity. The mysterious effects of this power do not, it seems, reveal their causes readily to an act of conscious introspection, which suggests that the human mind is not a transparent object of its own rational investigations. The intra-subjective alterity which is the heart of the sublime encounter undermined the cognitive transparency which is the cornerstone of Descartes' foundational rationalist gesture, *Cogito ergo sum*.

At first glance, the idea of a physical object acting or impressing itself upon the mind via the senses was one that seemed to fit neatly with Locke's sensationalist conception of the mind. Nancy Yousef explains that "Locke typically depicts the world and others in it as intrusions into an enclosed mind. Objects 'solicit' the senses, are 'conveyed into' the mind, 'impressed' on it from the outside, with the sense of the term outside extended so as to include the implications of the foreign, the alien, the strange" (26). It is for this reason that "[t]he epistemology of John Locke provides the crucial linkage that furthered the cult of the natural sublime" (Ljungquist 17). However, even in Longinus's early formulation, the sublime was conceived as arising *not* from the ostensibly sublime object itself, but rather from the act of (not necessarily conscious) *reflection* it precipitates in the subject. Considering the sublime as an element of rhetoric, Longinus wrote that "the mind is naturally elevated by the true sublime, and so sensibly affected with its lively strokes, that it

swells in transport and an inward pride, as if what was only heard had been the product of its own invention” (23). This conception points to the literal relationship suggested by the word reflection; to reflect upon an object is to produce a mirror-image of it in the mind – a mirror image that can, in terms of the subjective intensity characteristic of sublime experience, all too easily be mistaken for the object itself.

This tension between subject and object in the sublime experience would be taken up and redefined by numerous later commentators. Two of the most influential early English presentations of this subject-object ambiguation were those of John Dennis and Joseph Addison. In *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), Dennis wrote that “most of our thoughts in meditation are naturally attended with some sort and some degree of passion; and this passion, if it is strong, I call enthusiasm. Now the enthusiastic passions are chiefly six, admiration, terror, horror, joy, sadness, desire, caused by ideas occurring to us in meditation, and producing the same passions that the objects of those ideas raise in us, if they were set before us in the same light that those ideas give us of them” (Ashfield and de Bolla 35). Thus, according to Dennis’s formulation, the effects of a sublime object which exists merely as an idea in the mind can be just as powerfully moving, and just as *real*, as the effects of one which is a physical existent in the world. Vijay Mishra points out Dennis’s vital and often unrecognized importance in the development of the sublime prior to Burke’s *Enquiry*, writing that “it seems unlikely that Burke’s singular achievement would have been possible without the intermediate work of John Dennis [...] In both *The Advancement of Modern Poetry* (1701) and its incomplete sequel *The Grounds of Criticism* (1704) Dennis expanded Boileau’s reading of the sublime as residing in a great artist’s mind to make a series of correlations between the sublime, the highest art, and the expression of the greatest

passion [...] In making the connection between terror, religious awe, and the sublime through the centrality of emotion, Dennis foreshadowed Edmund Burke's reduction of the individual subject to the effects of a particular structure of emotion based on an unresolved tension between a scientific empiricism on the one hand and psychological idealism on the other. The technology of the sublime in Burke is terror" (29-30). Mishra's account suggests the importance of conceptions of sublimity as a dark and disputed ground between the psychological idealism which was Descartes' philosophical legacy, and the sensation-based empiricism which was Locke's. His account also emphasizes that the terror of the sublime is as much a response to the revelation it precipitates, as to the object that elicits it.

Addison further emphasized the act of reflection as the basis of sublime sensation. In *The Spectator* (no. 418, 1712), writing of the pleasure of the sublime experience in reading poetry, he claimed that "it does not arise so properly from the description of what is terrible, as from the *reflection* we make on our selves at the time of reading it." (Ashfield and de Bolla 68; my italics). Like Longinus's conception, Addison's emphasizes the subject's encounter with *itself*, over the aesthetic object that seemingly elicits it. Addison's treatment of the sublime would subsequently be taken up by Hume, Burke and Kant³.

The positing of reflection as productive of apparent sensation during states of sufficient subjective arousal presented a situation in which the apparently commonsensical distinction between contents of consciousness (thoughts, emotions and ideas) and physical objects was revealed to be labile. This apparent migration of ideas into the realm of physical

³ Paul Crowther writes that [t]he influence of Addison upon Kant has never been adequately studied, but [...] many of Kant's ideas in the *Observations* are also to be found in Addison's *Spectator* essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination. Given also the fact that Kant mentions the *Spectator* by name, late on in the *Observations*, I would suggest that the piecemeal affinities between Kant and Burke's texts are probably due to common source material" (12).

impressions was first fully developed by David Hume in a way which provocatively suggested the proximity of the sublime encounter to the dreams of the sleeping and the hallucinations of the mad, a proximity that would be central to the fictional treatments performed by Brown and Poe. In the opening passages of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume observed that “in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of the soul, our *ideas* may approach to our *impressions*” (1). The state of subjective intensity which characterizes the sublime encounter is another case in which this migration of idea into perceptual impression can occur. In such states of affective arousal, contents of consciousness can easily be mistaken for objects of perception. Hume’s *Treatise* goes on to deploy the term popularized by Longinus’s *Peri Hypsos*. Hume claims that “when any impression becomes present to us, it not only *transports* the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity” (71). The idea that a certain class of objects can produce such transports, and likewise that they can infuse the mind with something of their own “force and vivacity,” is one which was popularized by Longinus’s treatise and subsequent attempts to theorize the sublime, and it is one which had tremendous influence on the production and reception of literary texts.

The development within the discourse on the sublime of an understanding of subjectivity radically at odds with the dominant Lockean and Cartesian concepts is one which directly anticipates and informs the (definitively Modern) discovery of the unconscious at the level of the individual subject, just as Foucault’s interest in the development of the unconscious at the disciplinary and discursive level subsequently mirrors and magnifies this discovery. As Nicholas Rand explains, “as early as 1776 a now-obscure German philosopher, Ernst Platner – teacher of the well known poet Jean-Paul Richter –

spoke, in his *Philosophical Aphorisms* of ‘unconsciousness’ (*Unbewusstseyn*) as opposed to ‘consciousness’ (*Bewusstseyn*). Platner and others, in particular Kant and Herbart, reacted to the empirical tradition of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), via Locke’s formidable if unsystematic critic G. W. Leibniz. The latter worked out a theory of knowledge in opposition to both Descartes and Locke” (3). This discovery (or discursive invention) of the unconscious implicitly problematizes the conception of the individual, rational and transparently perceiving subject, just as this interrogation (and potential dissolution) of the subject anxiously informs many key attempts to theorize the sublime in the eighteenth century, and is subsequently dramatized by the psychological Gothic fictions of Brown and Poe. This epistemological frontier of the unconscious, so vividly captured by the epigraph from Kant’s *Anthropology* (1798) that opens this chapter, would be mapped on the sublime geography of the American frontier by these pioneering fictions.

As Alan Axelrod writes, “Brown belongs with Poe in the tradition of America’s ‘frontier’ writers” since “the influence of Brockden Brown is responsible for Poe’s abstracted and rarified frontier vision” (35). While authors like Cooper and the later Whitman would attempt to map the American frontier by (at least periodically) attempting naturalistic accuracy, Brown and Poe explored the American frontier in a very different fashion. They are ‘frontier’ authors, not in that they attempted accurate representations of the American frontier’s material conditions, but in that they exploited the landscape’s potential as a ground from which to launch explorations of the frontiers of human knowledge and identity. As Axelrod affirms, “the examples of Brown and Poe [...] suggest that a more specific and contemporary feature of American life motivated our most characteristic authors’ fascination with epistemological themes. For Brown and Poe and, as Edwin Fussell

demonstrates, for Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman, the idea of the frontier figured centrally as a metaphor of the confrontation between subject and object.” (47) As the following four chapters explore, these fictions successively re-imagine the intra-subjective alterity of the sublime encounter through this metaphorized frontier.

These fictions are also united by their reliance on chiaroscuro as a figurative means of engaging with ideas of Enlightenment and ignorance, consciousness and the unconscious. Foucault’s presentation of the “archaeological mutation” of Modernity emphasizes the *negativity* (darkness) that the assertion of discourses of *positive* knowledge (Enlightenment) already presupposes. This negativity came to be significantly figured and conceived through the increasing attention given to the sublime, which moved from a minor notion in classical aesthetics and rhetoric to an overarching trajectory that intersected most of the major elements of eighteenth- century thought. In fact, particularly in the case of Kant, it became the ground on which some of the key formulations of modern subjectivity would occur. Each of the fictions discussed in the following chapters gestures toward its own critical engagement with Enlightenment thought by deploying the same trope. Each presents a paradoxical figuration of negativity and darkness as a positive and palpable force, one which arises as a consequence of philosophical attempts to reveal the truth. However, in each of these cases, the desire to enlighten leads only to the discovery of ever-deeper darkneses. Each of these fictions thus represents an imaginary cartography of the abyss.

The title of this thesis echoes and alters that of Dennis Pahl’s important 1989 study, *Architects of the Abyss*. Here, Pahl uses the fictions of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville as “proving grounds” for the work of (post)structuralist thinkers such as Lacan and Derrida. In doing so, he reinforces received wisdom about the historical development of American

literature by attending to this “great Romantic triumvirate.” My aim is to reinforce the importance of Brown to this development, and the key role his fictions played in influencing “the big three,” in particular by pointing to his direct influence on much of Poe’s fiction. While Brown was also indubitably of tremendous importance for Hawthorne (and perhaps Melville; in particular, the relationship between Brown’s novels and Melville’s *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* is tantalizing), I have elected to focus exclusively on the fictions of these two authors for the purposes of this study. Pahl also effectively dehistoricizes Poe’s pioneering explorations of aesthetic obscurity and indeterminacy by retroactively reading his texts through a Derridean deconstructive lens. My aim is instead to explore the influence that earlier writers on the sublime have had on Poe’s poetics of negativity and indeterminacy. Finally, in developing a thesis that describes the strategic aporias and resistances to closure developed in the fictions of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, Pahl relies, perhaps perversely, on the metaphor of architecture, generally understood to represent fixed and solid spatial configurations.

I see the metaphor of cartography as being far more apt to the claims I make for the fictions of Brown and Poe. My use of the term is informed by Gilles Deleuze, who in *Essays Critical and Clinical* writes that “[a] cartographic conception is very distinct from the archaeological conception of psychoanalysis. The latter establishes a profound link between the unconscious and memory: it is a memorial, commemorative, or monumental conception that pertains to persons or objects, the milieus being nothing more than terrains capable of conserving, identifying, or authenticating them. From such a point of view, the superposition of layers is necessarily traversed by a shaft that goes from top to bottom, and it is always a question of penetration. Maps, on the contrary, are superimposed in such a way that

each map finds itself modified in the following map, rather than finding its origin in the preceding one: from one map to the next, it is not a matter of searching for an origin, but of evaluating *displacements*” (63). The depiction of this cartographic activity, not as quest for origins but as an evaluation of displacements, is particularly apt to the study of these fictions, as it allows attention to be drawn to their simultaneous use of formulaic repetition and radical experimentation. This thesis traces the textual transformations that form the basis of my claims for the trajectory pursued by *Wieland*, *Edgar Huntly*, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and “The Fall of the House of Usher,” each of which adapts and displaces elements of its textual sources in surprising combinations of imitation and innovation.

While the archaeological conception of psychoanalysis is informed by an emphasis on the continuity of the singular and discrete experiencing subject, the implications of subjectivity as the byproduct of an affective assemblage such as the sublime encounter calls into question precisely this separate and continuous subject, the “I.” This skeptical interrogation of the self is one which takes its cue from Hume’s *Treatise*, which provocatively stated that “what we call a mind, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppos’d, tho’ falsely, to be endow’d with a perfect simplicity and identity” (148). Against the classical metaphysical notion of a singular and continuous soul and Locke’s primarily forensic conception of individual identity, Hume wrote that “self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos’d to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro’ the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations

succeed each other, and never exist all at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv'd; and consequently there is no such idea" (180). As Luke Gibbons points out, "Hume here is not so much denying the existence of the self as the possibility that we may entertain an idea of it, or enjoy privileged access to it through the immediacy of inner experience" (90). In other words, Hume is attacking the Cartesian notion of a self which is transparently available to its own introspective efforts. "By denying that introspection of the Cartesian sort is the ultimate source of our knowledge of ourselves, and hence of personal identity, Hume lays the basis for the argument that the self is socially constituted and mediated through our understanding of others" (Gibbons 90).

This skepticism about the unity of the self and the nature of identity is anxiously imagined in these American Gothic fictions, each of which derives many of its horrific (and humorous) affects from crises and collapses of identity. These crises are frequently figured in the fictions of Brown and Poe by both a blurring of intersubjective boundaries and by literal dissolutions, fragmentations that occur in the face of ineffable intensities. Trying to salvage elements of the rationalist philosophical tradition against Hume's excoriations, Kant reterritorializes the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* as a way of establishing both the transcendental moral vocation of humanity, and the basic continuity of the experiencing subject through the unity of apperception. These fictions, on the other hand, negatively approach the experience of the sublime, finally refusing such attempts to force the sublime to capitulate to the utility of a philosophical agenda. As Martin Donougho observes in "The Development of the American Sublime," the sublime "marks the instance of discontinuity in experience, the moment of loss and disfigurement" (909). This also characterizes much of

Brown and Poe's fiction: representations of the discontinuous and indeterminate nature of subjectivity, and interrogations of dominant philosophical attempts to "fix" this cracked subject.

Furthermore, each of these fictions tropes its exploration of sublime subjectivity by framing acts of reading within their narratives. Each fiction emplots acts of reading literature so as to emphasize the close relationship between mind and text, as each features characters which are forced to face abysses both literal and literary. In this respect, the fictions of both Brown and Poe exemplify a tendency that, according to Ashfield and de Bolla, informs the transformations that occur within the theoretical discourse on the sublime itself. They write that, "in the technical descriptive analytic of the reading activity [...] the tropes of ravishment and transport begin to generate transformations at the descriptive level of the discourse [...] the analysis of reading becomes stained by a set of discriminations which it neither knowingly inherits nor necessarily welcomes from the discourse on the sublime" (7). Fictionally embodying these transformations of the act of reading through the discursive contagion of the sublime, each of these fictions features protagonists who are also "readers," and whose powers of imagination and judgment are formatively swayed by the transports they experience; transports which, in turn, are meant to shake readers of these fictions into a radical re-evaluation of their own perceptual and critical awareness. These fictions thus become works both *on* and *of* the sublime.

Their exploration of the affective power of radical indeterminacy is what gives these untimely fictions their influential intimacy with the Modernism of the turn of the 20th century. They demonstrate the truth of Vijay Mishra's claim, in *The Gothic Sublime*, for the genealogical connections between eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic fiction and

postmodern aesthetics: a “literary history based on the Gothic sublime is thus a literary history that, in an uncanny fashion, demonstrates postmodernism’s earlier moment of explosion in the negative sublime and connects Lyotard’s nascent state(s) of postmodernism with the Gothic. This is largely because the literary Gothic, then, transforms a metaphysic (the sublime from Longinus to Kant) into a psychology by situating it at the level of character itself” (256).

A number of other critics have also recognized the uncanny continuities that exist between the eighteenth century Gothic and the turn of the 20th century developments of Modernism. John Paul Riquelme has more recently observed that “[t]he essentially anti-realistic character of Gothic writing from the beginning creates in advance a compatibility with modernist writing” (586). This assemblage of the Gothic and Modernist negativity is most fully developed in Poe, whose influence on literary Modernism was far more direct than that of any other Gothically inclined author. Considering the emergence of this negative Modernism in literature, Lyotard asserts that, “[b]eginning with Mallarme, and perhaps even with Jean Paul, the aesthetic negatives, the thinking about writing, the reflection on modern art, have put forward the thing before which thinking retreats and toward which it races” (68). But we could open this claim to include an earlier figure; namely, Poe. Like Baudelaire and Valery, Mallarme’s engagement with the negative sublime was to some degree inspired by Poe’s poetics. I will consider how this negative sublimity is textually embodied in Brown’s fiction and, through his sustained engagement with tropes drawn from Brown’s fiction, how it is transformed and intensified by Poe.

“How almost palpable is this dark”: The Sublime Subject of Charles Brockden

Brown’s *Wieland, or the Transformation: An American Tale*

“One who concludes somebody to be near him, when he hears an articulate voice in the dark, reasons justly and naturally; tho’ that conclusion be deriv’d from nothing but custom, which infixes and inlivens the idea of a human creature, on account of his usual conjunction with the present impression. But one, who is tormented he knows not why, with the apprehension of specters in the dark, may perhaps, be said to reason, and to reason naturally too.”

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

“Even in the barbarous temples of the Americans at this day, they keep their idol in a dark part of the hut, which is consecrated to his worship. For this purpose too the druids performed their ceremonies in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks.”

Edmund Burke, *Enquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*

“Thus lonely and oppressed with thought, Abraham retired amidst the solemn oaks; but from his conflicted mind powerfully shook off the load of gloomy thoughts, and his sensations cleared from perplexity...”

C. M. Wieland, “The Trial of Abraham” (trans. John Trumbull)

“The Christian God is a being of terrific character – cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust.”

Thomas Jefferson

“...as regards the theistic miracles, reason can at least have a negative criterion at its disposal, namely, if something is represented as commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one [...] to want to perceive heavenly influences is a kind of madness in which, no doubt, there can also be method [...] but which nonetheless always remains a self-deception detrimental to religion”

Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within The Bounds of Mere Reason*

“There are instances in which the impressions retained after a paroxysm of ecstasy are so connected with external events or objects, and so blended with realities, as to make a most singular and puzzling combination, and this is perhaps the true rationale of many a strange and mysterious tale”

James Cowles Prichard, *Treatise On Mental Illness*

Charles Brockden Brown began writing fiction in the wake of revolutionary shocks first in his own nation, and then in Europe; revolutions which, in terms of their violent physical conflicts, coincided with and seemed to reflect a cultural and epistemological *transformation* much less visible, but far vaster in scope. Brown's frenetic burst of novel-writing between 1798 and 1801 marks the cusp of the period that Michel Foucault identifies as the Modern episteme, and Brown's early fiction darkly reflects a pervasive affect of cultural anxiety and intellectual upheaval. I will read Brown's novel *Wieland* (1798) as a carefully crafted and highly critical expression of this epistemic trauma, disturbingly presented through the language of an encounter with the sublime.

In Foucault's formulation, "classical discourse, in which being and representation found their common locus," is eclipsed "in the archaeological mutation which is the emergence of the Modern episteme" (312). The term "eclipsed" is apposite for describing the complex interplay of enlightenment and obscuration that informs *Wieland's* narration. In Foucault's terms, it is the source of light (Enlightenment) which is also the source of what Foucault terms the *unthought*, the "unconscious of science," a dark density that cannot be known, yet which is the ground for what we can know. *Wieland* gives expression to this paradoxical element of Modern subjectivity. In so doing, the novel extends the traditional Gothic trope of forbidden knowledge from Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (as Mary W. Shelley will do subsequently with *Frankenstein*) by deploying this contrastive figuration of enlightenment or revelation *as* darkness.

It is in this respect that *Wieland* anticipates and influences the fictions of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. The primary difference between the American Gothic mode pioneered by Brown and Poe and the rationalist Gothic of Godwin and Radcliffe is that,

where the European precursors frame their sublime objects in a way that restores the transcendent moral order by reasserting the dominance of reason and a *sensus communis*, *Wieland*, like *Edgar Huntly* and many of Poe's tales, itself becomes an aesthetic presentation of sublimity. It forces the reader to remain in a state of frustrated uncertainty, unable to unify imaginatively the overdetermined narrations of fractious events it presents.

This uncertainty is reflected in the difficulties presented by the novel's structure. As Eric Savoy notes, "*Wieland* is an awkward novel, a catachresis writ large, marked by a disproportionate relationship between sensational scenic effects and inadequate causal explanation or resolution. Yet it has attracted intelligent commentary from generations of literary scholars, and not simply because of its historical status" (172). This disproportionate relationship, which has led many critics to condemn the novel for its unwieldy structure, is informed in part by *Wieland*'s incorporation and interrogation of issues derived from the discourse on the sublime; specifically, the novel illustrates the discursive proximity between the religious sublime and contemporaneous conceptions of madness. In fictively framing this relationship, *Wieland* offers its audience an encounter with the sublime through the experience of reading, by its challenge to the reader's rational and imaginative limits.

The roots of Brown's fictional method are explained in an essay, appearing in his *Monthly Magazine* for April, 1800, which "explores the difference between history and romance, and it is particularly the inquiry into motives and causes that defines the latter. The definition is grounded in the *moral mystery of human actions*" (Berthoff xi; my italics). Brown's essay explicitly echoes Godwin's "On History and Romance" (1794), which was included as an appendix to *Caleb Williams*. As Clery and Miles explain, Godwin's "essay's apparent polemical purpose is to argue for the superiority of 'fable' over 'history: In a

nutshell, that in plumbing the depths of individual motivation, fiction is a more complex and truer kind of narrative, than conventional history with its flimsy generalizations” (259).

Godwin concludes that “[t]he writer of romance, then, is to be considered as the writer of real history; while he who was formerly called the historian, must be contented to step down into the place of his rival, with this disadvantage, that he is a romance writer, without the arduous, the enthusiastic and the sublime license of imagination, that belongs to that species of composition” (264). It is the *enthusiastic* and *sublime* license allowed the romancer that both inspired Brown, and ultimately troubled him, and it is this element of romance writing, with its manifold subjective and epistemological consequences, that Brown’s fictions themselves subject to intensive scrutiny.

As Brown conceived it, the role of the romancer is a paradoxical one. He must explore the complexities of human motives and causes, but the attempt that must be made toward an exhaustive and anatomized representation of such is complicated by the irreducible mystery of subjectivity itself. It is the need to convey this “dark element” within human thought and action that distinguishes the romancer from the historian. According to Brown, “the observer or experimentalist [...] who carefully watches, and faithfully enumerates the appearances which occur, may claim the appellation of *historian*. He who adorns these appearances with cause and effect, and traces resemblances between the past, distant, and future, with the present, performs a different part. He is a dealer, not in certainties, but in probabilities, and is therefore a *romancer*” (xii). This passage exemplifies what critic Richard Chase in *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957) recognized as a signature quality in the writings of Brown, Poe and Hawthorne. He wrote that, through the Romance quality of the American novel, “the field of action is conceived not so much as a

place as a state of mind – the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle” (19). The truth of the romance mode for Brown (as subsequently for Hawthorne) was its ability to represent truth in a complex and polyperspectival manner, irreducible to a clear, linear causality. Such a mode is best suited, Brown felt, for the conveyance of the “latent springs” of the mind that the author as “moral painter” must try to represent.

This is because, according to Brown, “a voluntary action is not only connected with cause and effect, but is itself a series of motives and incidents subordinate and successive to each other. Every action differs from every other in the number and complexity of its parts, but the most simple and brief is capable of being analyzed into a thousand subdivisions” (Berthoff xii).⁴ It is this conviction that “the most simple and brief” of actions is “capable of being analyzed into a thousand subdivisions,” and this insistent portrayal of an “indissoluble and well-woven tissue of causes and effects” that underlies *Wieland*’s anxious depiction of the limits of Modern epistemology, and its successfully suggestive and elusive presentation of this that makes it an important contribution to the development of Modern literature. Before proceeding with my reading of *Wieland*, I would like to provide some necessary contextualization. The novel’s general philosophical context, and its more particular historico-political and literary contexts, are relevant to my reading of the novel as a provocative fictional critique which treats human subjectivity as a sublime subject, and I will address them briefly in that order.

A number of critics have noted Brown’s engagement with and subversion of both the psychological idealism of Cartesian thought and the scientific empiricism of Lockean

⁴ There is an anticipation here of Poe’s cosmologico-aesthetic doctrine termed “reciprocity of adaptation.”

and subsequent Scottish Enlightenment thought. Steven Watts points to the relation between this critical dimension of *Wieland* and the broader context of the late eighteenth-century novel. He observes that “the novel appeared as the first great popularizer of issues raised by the sensationalist psychology of the Lockean and Scottish traditions” (17). Brown’s interest in Carwin’s ventriloquism and the congenital delusions of the *Wieland* family is related to the problem these phenomena present for both Cartesian and Lockean conceptions of human subjectivity. According to Edward Cahill, Brown, influenced by his “reading in the progressive philosophy of Priestley, d’Holbach, Godwin, and others whose work challenged the rigid distinctions of Cartesian dualism and the classical tradition”(34-5), was writing fiction which engaged in a complex and critical way with the dominant epistemological and psychological paradigms of his day. It is the expression *Wieland* offers of the limitations of individual reason, imagination and perception that generate its sublimity – and that have led to its startling and powerful effect for readers as various as Hazlitt and Keats, Poe and Mary Shelley, Hawthorne and Godwin.

Brown sought to overcome the schizophrenic condition of knowledge created by the competing Lockean and Cartesian doctrines that dominated eighteenth-century epistemology. Rejecting the Cartesian separation of soul from body, Brown concluded in a journal entry that “Mind and Matter are the two grand divisions of science, but ... in this life mind perhaps can never be considered in any other way than in conjunction with matter” (Cahill 35). Cahill writes that “Brown believed that binary distinctions of mind and matter, like those of reason and passion, history and romance, prose and poetry, inadequately described the intricacies of knowledge, and much of his critical energy was invested in exploring their interrelations. However, Brown discovered that such epistemological

ambitions ultimately rest on a vexed foundation [...] as the gothic elements of Brown's novels would later suggest, the imbrication of mind and matter meant that the articulation of social ideals through the transcendent imagination would always be contingent on the discursive limitations of the material imagination" (35).

An emphasis on the limitations of individual reason and the material imagination inform *Wieland's* critique of Cartesian reason. The novel's elaborately framed plot serves to explode the belief in the self-transparency of the human subject to its own contemplative inquiry, which is the cornerstone of Cartesian thought. The novel's narrator, Clara Wieland, gives voice to the inadequacy of the Cartesian viewpoint when she concludes that "[i]deas exist in our minds that can be accounted for by no established laws" (82). Clara's narration implicitly recognizes the intra-subjective alterity that informs much of the eighteenth-century discourse on the sublime, and that crystallizes contemporaneously with the novel's composition in conceptions of the unconscious.

In terms of this critical engagement with Cartesian subjectivity, *Wieland* parallels key issues raised by post-Leibnizian German philosophy, in which the existence of an "unconscious" was posited as a philosophical rejoinder to Cartesian idealism and Lockean sensationalism (see Ellenberger and Rand.) In particular, Brown's exploration of the limits of human understanding offers a dark reflection of the relationship between sensation, reason, and imagination at the heart of Kant's analytic of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* (a reflection probably informed by the influence of earlier works by Hume and Burke on both the American novelist and the German philosopher.) Kant's Analytic presents the sublime experience as extending from an experiential conflict between the faculties of reason, sensation and imagination. *Wieland's* achievement is related to its

exploration of the limits of subjective knowledge through these faculties, as they are presented through the novel's engagement with both the rhetorical and religious dimensions of sublimity. As Poe's work will more programmatically do a generation later, *Wieland* serves to problematize (whether intentionally or otherwise) Kant's influential and tortuous interpretation of the sublime experience. This is achieved through the novel's aesthetics of complex indeterminacy, which also inform its interrogation of subjectivity, help orchestrate its sublime effects, and ultimately make it an eminently Modern achievement.

It is thus both provocative and appropriate that *Wieland's* theme, the mystery of human subjectivity, and the consequences of this mystery for issues of moral agency, is conveyed through the novel's manifold intimations of sublimity. This is the darkness in the woof and warp of the fiction itself that parallels the unconscious landscape which is the obscure foundation of the Modern subject. Stephen Watts observes that in *Wieland*, "this theme assumed a specific form: a devastating critique of eighteenth-century rationalism based on sensory impressions. From the time of John Locke's [*Essay on Human Understanding*], most enlightened intellectuals in the Atlantic world agreed that human beings were the passive recipients of sensory impressions that became the basis for all thought [...] With its emphasis on the lack of innate ideas and the ordering of sensory signals as the mind's function, this 'sensationalist' psychology placed an enormous stress on human reason. As one of Brown's characters put it, the senses of sight and hearing were 'the most explicit and unerring of those which support the fabric of human knowledge'" (82). *Wieland's* repeated undermining of the reliability of human perception effects a powerful critique of this viewpoint, for Clara's "ideas exist in our minds that can be

accounted for by no established laws” is also an explicit rejection of Locke’s insistence that there are “no ideas but from sensation or reflection” (38).

While Locke proposed that “the mind is fitted to receive the impression made on it; either, through the senses, by outward objects; or by its own operations, when it reflects on them” (39), *Wieland* demonstrates how potentially ill-fitted the human subject is for such operations, precisely because of our periodic inability to differentiate our *sensations* from our *reflections*. The novel thus fictionally embodies the skepticism toward the transparency of human perceptual powers which was formulated by Scottish philosopher David Hume, who observed that “in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of the soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions” (1). The sublime, defined by such a “violent emotion of the soul,” represents an aesthetic encounter wherein our experience of an idea becomes indistinguishable from our perceptual impressions. This confusion informs the subject-object instability central to the discourse on the sublime, and suggests its significance as a discursive reaction to dogmatically Cartesian and Lockean thought.

Similarly, forced by her experiences to reject her faith in the accurate discernment of the senses, Clara tells the reader, “[i]f the senses be depraved, it is impossible to calculate the evils that may flow from the consequent deductions of the understanding” (35). Clara’s words, and the skepticism they presuppose about the relationship between sensory data and epistemological certainty, directly echo those of Hume, who argued that “[a]s to those impressions, which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and ‘twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc’d by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv’d from the author of our being” (61). This is precisely the uncertainty

Clara is faced with, and that she is unable to resolve. The novel's structure turns her inability into an open challenge to the reader, one that is intricately complicated by the novel's overdetermined obscurity.

Peter Kafer has also drawn attention to this critical dimension of Brown's fiction, and suggested its relation to Brown's more immediate political context. He writes that, with *Wieland*, Brown turns "the philosopher John Locke and the Enlightenment itself, on their side by highlighting the disturbing implications of the optimistic epistemology that had influenced many of the Revolutionaries. People like Jefferson and Paine (and Godwin), working from a solid Lockean foundation, maintained that the corruption of the past could be purged from society and that a new political order, grounded entirely upon right reason, could be erected from a fresh foundation, a *tabula rasa*" (126). Following a similar line of reasoning, Frank Shuffelton suggests that the unstable political context of the new Republic informed Brown's fascination with and challenges to his readers' powers of both aesthetic and forensic discernment. Brown began to publish his novels "against the background of the political ferment surrounding the Alien and Sedition Acts that brought to public consciousness legal and juridical questions about judgment and the dangers of texts. Brown responded in his imaginative writing by confronting his readers with problems of judgment that paralleled those faced by citizens trying to interpret Citizen Genet, the XYZ Affair, and the real intentions of Joseph Priestley" (96).

The widespread xenophobia of the period surrounding the Alien and Sedition acts also informs the novel's paradoxical engagement with European rationalism and political radicalism as expressed by the interlinked figures of William Godwin and Immanuel Kant. While Brown was probably familiar with Kant's *Critiques* by reputation and only in very

general terms, I read Kant as part of the pervasive influence of German thought and writing that gloomily overshadows *Wieland's* narrative. The novel's depiction of a cultural insanity, imported from Germany but infecting America, has complex origins in the cultural context in which the novel was produced. *Wieland's* acute phobia of all things German is expressive of not only Brown's cultural anxiety over the large German presence in Philadelphia and the influence of German Protestant sectarianism (see Sydney Krause's "Brown and the Philadelphia Germans"), but more importantly, over the simultaneous influence of sensationalist and Gothic fiction inspired by the *Sturm und Drang* movement and of Idealist philosophy inspired by the Kantian *Critiques*. Both these epidemically influential "German" forces lurk at the heart of Brown's early novels, but particularly at the heart of *Wieland*.⁵

⁵ As Terry Pinkard explains in *German Philosophy: The Legacy of Idealism*, "the word, 'German,' sometimes was used to connote depth, sometimes to connote simply obscurity, and sometimes to accuse the author of attempting speciously to give 'depth' to his works by burying it [sic] in obscurantist language⁵" (2). Sublimity was thus frequently conflated – both derogatorily and approvingly – with Germany, and it was also in Germany that the philosophical intimations of the unconscious which came to be so definitive of Modern epistemology were first articulated. The association between Germany, sublimity, and the fiction of terror was noted by critics of the British Gothic fictions of the 1790's (Mathew Lewis accelerated this perception by his literary investment in *Sturm und Drang* writing, and his influential adoption of its exaggeration in early *Schauerromane* such as Schiller's *Der Geisterseher*), and was also frequently employed in critical assessments of the works of Brown and Poe. John Keats, for example, apparently recognizing the connection between the *Wieland* family's German genealogy, and *Wieland's* literary genealogy, described it as "a strange American scion of the German trunk." The same term would be reiteratively applied to Poe, who finally felt compelled to defend himself against accusations of "Germanism" by writing in his introduction to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* that "if terror has been my thesis, it is not of Germany, but of the soul." Through a contagious logic of association, the sublime came, in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, to be associated with the German character in popular parlance; a consideration relevant to Brown's use of a German pre-text for *Wieland's* narrative. The novel's phobic preoccupation with German influence reflects an almost epidemic cultural anxiety. Starting in 1781 (the year of the publication of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*), "German" philosophy came for a while to dominate European philosophy and to change the shape of how not only Europeans but practically the whole world conceived of knowledge, of politics, and of the structure of the human mind in general" (Pinkard 2). This influence was perceived

Indeed, in the popular imagination, Kant, like Godwin, was often viewed as a virtual Jacobin⁶ terrorist. Terry Pinkard writes that “Kant himself sided with the Revolution (although he was hardly an enthusiastic polemicist for it), and the possible connections between his own thoughts about spontaneity and autonomy and the events of the Revolution were quickly drawn by younger intellectuals if not by the master himself. Moses Mendelssohn had already taken to calling him the ‘all destroying’ Kant, who demolished classical metaphysics and all that was tied to it; Heinrich Heine, long after Kant’s death, described him as the Jacobin of philosophy who had effected a revolution that executed the philosophical and religious past with a kind of ruthlessness characteristic of the revolutionary Terror in France” (83).

This underlines the association between German literature and Godwin’s views throughout the novel. Handwerk and Markley indicate “Godwin’s affinity with contemporary German thought, specifically with the idea of *Bildung* (education or cultivation) that was central to the reformist agenda of both German Classicism and German Romanticism” which “opposes itself most explicitly to the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and other prominent liberal or romantic philosophers” (24). It is through these associations that both Godwin and Kant serve as paradoxical metonyms in *Wieland*, associated equally with a relentless Modernist revolution in thought, and with a radical individualism which is pathologized as a kind of acute religious mania.

by many as pernicious, and Kant was often portrayed by opponents of his philosophy (who frequently – and unsurprisingly - misunderstood the *Critiques* altogether) as the Gothic villain of the philosophical world; the nihilistic scourge of Königsberg.

⁶ As Handwerk and Markley explain, ‘Jacobin’ is “the term used by British conservatives to discredit expressions of political critique by associating them with the most radical strand of French revolutionary politics” (Handwerk and Markley 9)

In Godwin's case, this is also informed by a more direct association with the religious enthusiasm of Theodor and the elder Wieland. "Godwin's stress upon the primacy of private judgment in moral deliberation has obvious affinities with the radical Protestant assertion of the primacy of personal conscience in one's relation to God. Godwin's own upbringing brought him for a considerable portion of his education under the direct influence of Sandemanianism, a particularly rationalist strand of Calvinism that retained the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, while emphasizing the importance of rational understanding over faith and works alike in determining one's suitability for salvation" (Handwerk and Markley 24). Brown's uneasy relationship with Godwin's writing also suggests that an anxiety of influence was operant during the writing of the novel. Brown was certainly aware that his adoption of a Godwinian fictional form was occurring at a time when association with Godwin's name alone was shorthand for dangerous radicalism. This association was so extreme that "de Quincey spoke of the 1790's as a period when 'most people felt of Mr. Godwin with the same alienation and horror as a ghoul, or a bloodless vampire, or the monster created by Frankenstein'" (Mishra 198). However, in spite of their phobic figurations within the novel, the Kantian critiques and Godwin's writings share a great deal of common ground with Brown's themes, a paradox which lends itself to the hermeneutic challenges offered by the novel.

In keeping with Brown's political and philosophical rejection of optimistic Enlightenment ideals, *Wieland* constantly entices the reader into attempts to decipher and judge, but simultaneously evades and frustrates such attempts. The novel demands that the reader, like Clara herself, attempt to *comprehend* these occurrences through an imaginative representation that "fills in the gaps" to reach a conclusive judgment about the events the

novel describes. In this respect, *Wieland*, like Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, is an important precursor to detective fiction. While a number of critics have written on this dimension of the novel, I agree with those critics who assert that the novel also ultimately *precludes* the possibility of such a determinate or comprehensive judgment. It has baffled attempts at exhaustive explanation by readers for over two centuries now, and continues to do so in our own time. This is a reflection of *Wieland*'s sublimity, inherent in the complexity and moral involution of the novel; a complexity which implies a vast multiplicity of interpretive possibilities, all partially obscure. In this way, the novel's invitation to and evasion of the reader's power of judgment forces her to challenge her own imaginative and rational limits. In its presentation of the sublime Modern subject, the novel thus precipitates a sublime encounter in the reader herself.

The intersection between madness and sublimity that *Wieland* explores is suggested by Brown's "Advertisement" to the novel. Here, Brown states his interest in the exploration of "the latent springs and occasional perversions of the human mind." While Brown elsewhere suggests that his reiterative troping of abnormal psychology is only a means of framing his conceptions as a 'moral painter,' a position which Laura Korobkin's reading of *Wieland* as primarily a juridical novel of detection extends, I contend that Brown's very understanding of the human moral condition is deeply implicated in his interest in strange psychic states. His fictional investigations of phenomena such as religious enthusiasm, delusions and hallucinations, mesmeric ventriloquism, and somnambulism are much more than merely trappings fitted for the production of morally inflected tales of atmospheric terror and ratiocinative detection. These phenomena, their atmospheric effects, and their

obscuration of epistemological and ethical certainties are central to Brown's fictional critique of dominant political, aesthetic and philosophical paradigms.

This represents a further departure from the European Gothic models that influenced Brown's early fictions. In contrast to the supernaturalist Gothic fiction represented by authors like Walpole and Lewis, the more restrained and didactic fictions of Brown's major influences, Radcliffe and Godwin, were productions informed by an optimistic Enlightenment faith in the power of individual reason in opposition to a tyrannical historical order. Brown's Gothic fictions deviate from this rationalism in that they are aesthetic presentations of the instability of precisely the autonomous and rational individual subject upon which Enlightenment thought rests. It is in terms of their intricately ambiguous presentation of a Modern subjectivity, and their indeterminate investigation of the ethical consequences of this sublime subject, that Brown's early fictions anticipate both Poe's tales and Melville's later fictions (particularly *Pierre* and *The Confidence Man*).

In giving literary expression to this sublime subject, Brown exploited a horrific historical event: the James Yates murder case. In this case, Brown found an inspiring concatenation of terror, religious awe, and the sublime adequate to his fictional exploration of Modern subjectivity through the sublime; one which would additionally allow him to fictively diagnose the cultural insanity he identified with Christianity. In adapting this story, Brown subverted a new literary mode, the rationalist and overtly political Gothic novel form pioneered by William Godwin.

Brown's account of his intentions in the 'Advertisement' for *Wieland* echoes that of his greatest literary influence. In Godwin's preface to *Caleb Williams*, he stated that "[w]hat is now presented to the public is no refined and abstract speculation; it is a study and

delineation of things passing in the moral world” (xix). Similarly, Brown suggests that *Wieland*’s cartography is one of *moral* reality. Unlike Poe a generation later, Brown is explicitly didactic in his authorial intentions. The influence of Richardson, Rousseau and especially Godwin on his conception of the novel’s function is made explicit by Brown’s introduction; his “purpose is neither selfish nor temporary, but aims at the illustration of some important branches of the moral constitution of man” (5).

The novel’s narrator echoes and reinforces this intention in her own words. She commends her story to the readers, writing “[m]ake what use of the tale you shall think proper. If it be communicated to the world, it will inculcate the duty of avoiding deceit. It will exemplify the force of early impressions, and show the immeasurable evils that flow from an erroneous or imperfect discipline” (7). As Brown informs his audience with his “Advertisement,” Clara’s intended readers are “a small number of friends, whose curiosity, with regard to it, had been greatly awakened” (6). The novel thus situates the readers in a position of some intimacy with the narrator, but simultaneously sets them at a distance from any firsthand knowledge of the novel’s events. It also explicitly places the onus on the reader to make a determinate judgment about the nature of the events described, to “make what use of the tale” seems proper, depending on the outcome of this judgment.

Clara, whose name is suggestively ironic, given the unclear and uncertain condition of her tale, provides a narrative viewpoint that extends logically from Brown’s adoption of the James Yates murder case as a springboard for his fiction. In the Yates case, the sole survivor of Yates’s attacks on his family was his sister, who forms the basis for Clara’s character. This reinforces her implication in the events she is attempting to narrate, and allows Brown to exploit the possibilities of an emotionally involved and self-reflexively

unreliable narrator, possibilities which prove essential to the novel's epistemological challenges.

Writing of her father's strange death, Clara claims that "the impressions that were then made upon me, can never be effaced. I was ill qualified to judge respecting what was then passing; but as I advanced in age, and became more fully acquainted with these facts, they often became the subject of my thoughts. Their resemblance to recent events revived them with new force in my memory, and made me more anxious to explain them." (20). This statement provides a clue to the reader about the structure of the novel. The first two chapters consist of Clara's recollection of her father's death, a recollection incited by the relationship Clara sees between this event and the events surrounding her brother's homicidal madness. Thus, as Clara herself suggests, she is remembering her father's death through the lens of recent events. Similarly, she frames her narration of recent events through her recollection of the elder Wieland's agonized end. This relationship brackets both these events, and the causal connections between them, in a kind of pregnant obscurity. Is this connection purely a product of coincidence? Is the causal relationship between these events a product of Clara's imagination? Can this be read as the patrilinear passing of some kind of cruel divine Covenant, or as simply a case of bizarre hereditary insanity? Clara's narrative at times explores each of these possibilities.

Clara acknowledges the psychological consequences of this fiery primal scene on her narrative. She also highlights the direct relationship between the claims of her religious belief and her acute awareness of the instability of human knowledge. She asks, "was this the penalty of disobedience? This the stroke of a vindictive and invisible hand? Is it a fresh proof that the divine Ruler interferes in human affairs, meditates an end, selects, and

commissions his agents, and enforces, by unequivocal sanctions, submissions to his will? Or, was it merely the irregular expansion of the fluid that imparts warmth to our heart and blood, caused by the fatigue of the preceding day, or flowing by established laws, from the condition of his thoughts?" (20). The shift in causality from a theological to a physiological explanation provides a locus for the epistemic shift that Foucault sees crystallized throughout the Eighteenth century, a shift which is also particularized in the transformation of discourses on the sublime from religious to psychological investigations.

At this point in the narrative, Brown provides one of many editorial footnotes to the text that clearly nudge the reader in the latter direction. Attempting to establish a credible precedent for the elder Wieland's spontaneous combustion, Brown cites "a case, in its symptoms exactly parallel to this [...] published in one of the journals of Florence. See, likewise, similar cases reported by Messrs. Merille and Muraire in the "Journal de Medecine," for February and May, 1783" (20). While many critics have accepted Brown's crypto-naturalistic explanations as disambiguating the novel's events, I contend that, because of Brown's reliance on the conflicting logic of his multiple pre-texts, these footnotes serve only to further reinforce the reader's uncertainty by providing another set of interpretive strands to an already complexly tangled text.

Clara's self-reflexive assessments of narratorial uncertainty continue throughout the course of the novel. For example, after overhearing inexplicable voices discussing her fate for the second time (a phenomenon not yet revealed as a production of Carwin's insidious vocal trickery), Clara states her expectation that the reader will disbelieve her account of events. She writes, "[w]hat I have related will, no doubt, appear to you as a fable. You will believe that calamity has subverted my reason [...] For, if to me, the immediate witness

[these events] were fertile of perplexity and doubt, how must they affect another to whom they are recommended only by my testimony?" (63). It is its exigent evocation of "perplexity and doubt" from both its sorely vexed protagonist, and its equally vexed reader, that informs *Wieland's* considerable importance as a literary landmark. As the first American fiction to explore the possibilities of limited and unreliable narration with surprising subtlety, *Wieland* places Brown firmly at the forefront of a trajectory of complex aesthetic indeterminacy that continues through Poe, Hawthorne, Melville and James to the Modernist innovators of the early 20th century.

A number of critics have noted the influence of the fictions of Richardson and Radcliffe on *Wieland*, and Clara clearly owes something to the heroines of these authors. She particularly allows Brown to play with and subvert conventions of the Radcliffean Gothic novel, as Matthew Lewis had earlier done with *The Monk*, and as Jane Austen would later do with *Northanger Abbey*. Radcliffe's novels are consistently narrated by quixotic young women who, in their sensational naivete, are all too willing to attribute every strange occurrence through the course of the narrative to some sinister supernatural agency. However, the peculiarly analytic qualities of Clara's narration differentiate her from the typical Radcliffean Gothic heroine. As Laura Korobkin explains, "like Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, Clara Wieland deploys an insistently forensic rhetoric that situates her narrative as both a witness's testimony of what she has seen and heard (with all the biases and limitations implied by such an 'interested' role), and a lawyer's final argument to the jury (assembling and arguing her view of the case)" (723). By the end of a Radcliffean fiction, however, the quixotic narrator is invariably provided with an Enlightenment education that blows away the cobwebs and shades of her misread perceptions with the brisk wind of rational

humanism. The unfortunate Clara, on the other hand, in spite of her healthy skepticism, analytic proclivity, and desperate insistence on the power of rational morality, is left in a state of confused vexation even by the conclusion of her narrative. The only consolation that remains to her is the power to complete her testimony, however indeterminate it might be. As she reminds her readers, “[m]y narrative may be invaded by inaccuracy and confusion; but if I live no longer, I will, at least, live to complete it. What but ambiguities, abruptnesses, and dark transitions, can be expected from the historian who is, at the same time, the sufferer of these disasters?” (141).

Clara’s identification of herself as historian anticipates Brown’s differentiation of the historian from the romancer, in that Clara ultimately recognizes her own inability to provide a determinate explanation of the tragedy undergone by her family. At the times she attempts to do so, then, she implicitly becomes a romancer, one who deals in speculation and probabilities. Similarly, critics who, like the characters Pleyel and Cambridge, seek to provide a determinate judgment on the causality and agency of the novel’s events, place themselves in the position of the romancer. This is a positioning that the novel both invites and finally undermines.

While the novel’s framework demands an informed moral judgment from its readers, it remains far from a Bunyanesque allegory of moral and spiritual growth, whose moral is determinately discernable, or a traditional tale of detection, whose clues can be reliably collected and read. Instead, Clara’s darkly reflected account of her experience, with its overlay of Brown’s editorial comments, renders readerly judgment a highly problematic proposition. As Brown’s ‘Advertisement’ advises the reader, the novel’s subject is “the latent springs and occasional perversions of the human mind.” Brown’s phrase ‘latent

springs' itself implies the role that partially obscured, subconscious forces play in the narration. This suggests that the "moral constitution" of man is a document less clearly legible than most didactic fiction would suggest. The human mind is, in this conception, a sublime subject - rooted in and extending from this latent depth and obscurity. This subject, incapable of complete expression, is represented throughout *Wieland* (and *Edgar Huntly*) in the effects that these unconscious forces have on the characters, and on the narrative in which they are presented – effects which *Wieland* clearly links to the sublime – especially in its religious and rhetorical variations.

Like Godwin, Brown deploys an (allegedly) naturalistic mode to develop a psychologically incisive and politically didactic narrative. However, there are elements in Brown's psychological novel that disrupt its Godwinian didacticism. This is an appropriate formal subversion, since Brown uses this Godwinian Gothic to critique Godwin's philosophy of private judgment itself. As Patricia Clemit observes, "In *Wieland* (1798), rejecting Godwin's early belief in the sanctity of private judgment, Brown turns his first-person narrative technique back upon itself to dramatize the dangers of uncontrolled individualism" (Clemit 7). Brown also dramatizes his subversion of Godwinian thought by inserting Godwin's views into his Gothic narratives directly via fictional *amanuenses*. In *Wieland*, these views are given voice by two characters; Theodor's friend and Clara's love interest, Pleyel, and contrastively, the sinister ventriloquist Carwin. Pleyel's Godwinian tendencies first emerge during his heated discussions with Theodor. Clara explains that "[m]oral necessity, and Calvinistic inspiration, were the props on which my brother thought proper to repose. Pleyel was the champion of intellectual liberty, and rejected all guidance but that of his reason" (26). The novel thus uses these characters to contrast, but more

importantly to compare, religious with rationalist dogmatisms, as both will be led into grievous errors by pursuing their rigid ideological commitments to their logical conclusions.

Carwin's Godwinian tendencies are made clear by Brown's unfinished sequel to *Wieland*, "The Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist." There, Carwin is revealed to have been influenced by an exemplary Jacobin villain named Ludloe while still an impressionable youth. Ludloe's Godwinian perspective is rendered explicit by his explanation of his ethical principles to Carwin. "[G]enerosity had been expunged from his catalogue as having no meaning or a vicious one. It was the scope of his exertions to be just. This was the sum of human duty, and he that fell short, ran beside, or outstripped justice was a criminal" (255). Caleb Crain notes that "like many of Brown's villains, Ludloe is influenced by William Godwin [...] who pursued this line of reasoning in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793)" (371). Later in the *Memoirs*, Ludloe's Godwinian rationality is further elucidated, even as it becomes Carwin's own. "He taught me to ascribe the evils that infest society to the errors of opinion. The absurd and unequal distribution of power and property give birth to poverty and riches, and these were the sources of luxuries and crimes. These positions were readily admitted; but the remedy for these ills, the means of rectifying these errors were not easily discovered [...] Ludloe laboured to prove [...] that man is the creature of circumstances: that he is capable of endless improvement: that his progress has been stopped by the artificial impediment of government: that by the removal of this, the fondest dreams of imagination will be realized" (264).

The Godwinian affinity that links Pleyel to Carwin is further emphasized by their mutual recognition in the novel. Shortly after they are first introduced, Clara writes that Carwin "appeared to have contracted an affection for Pleyel, who was not slow to return it"

(65). In the case of both characters, this shared commitment to a Godwinian ethos leads to dire consequences, as *Wieland*'s narrative systematically undermines these characters' presumptions to private judgment. In Pleyel's case, these views lead him to an erroneous and crushing condemnation of Clara, whom he has been deceived into believing has become Carwin's mistress, and to his misrecognition of the madness that infects her brother, eventually driving Theodor to multiple homicide. In Carwin's case, these views are used to justify his own amoral and inevitably disastrous experiments with ventriloquism.

While most critics have recognized Godwin's direct influence as determinate on *Wieland*'s form, many have missed the degree to which this influence is subverted by the novel itself. Patricia Clemit writes that "Brown's friend Elihu Hubbard Smith thought that Godwin's rationalism had rescued him from his early subjective tendencies, reflected in his fictive explorations of a Rousseauistic sensibility. As Smith wrote to Brown in May 1796: 'you wandered in a world of your own creation. Now and then a ray of truth broke in upon you, but with an influence too feeble to dissipate the phantoms which errors had conjured up around you: *Godwin came & all was light!*'" (107). The composition of *Wieland*, however, transforms this ironic enlightenment into an eclipse by rejecting the tenets of Godwin's early thought. "Brown's dramatization of the fall of the house of Wieland shows a radical departure from Godwin's values, for the qualities of impartiality and independence advocated in *Caleb Williams* prove to be unequivocally destructive" (Clemit 112)⁷. This

⁷ This rejection of Godwin is informed in part by Brown's political disposition. As Clemit concludes, "Brown's mixed allegiance to Godwin should be seen in the light of American conservative reaction against revolutionary ideas" (113). This becomes particularly clear when one recalls the echo of Citizen Genet offered by Carwin, and informs Brown's ambiguous gesture of sending a copy of the novel to Jefferson. As Frank Shuffelton explains, "Brown's presentation of his novel to Jefferson ought to be understood as an assertion of his conception of his fictions not just as reflecting the times but as interventions

element of Clemit's argument is entirely persuasive. However, as I will discuss at length below, her thesis concerning Brown's agonistic relationship to Godwin's philosophy leads her to lose sight of the novel's ultimate indeterminacy, as she makes a positive assertion about Carwin's lack of involvement/responsibility in the death of Theodor's family.

in the public sphere. He apologizes for his unfamiliarity with Jefferson's 'private occupations and modes of judging,' but recommended his 'fictitious narrative' because of its 'artful display of incidents, the powerful delineation of characters and the train of eloquent and judicious reasoning' Appealing thus to Jefferson's judicious reasoning as a private reader and as one known to be opposed to judicial imposition of certainty upon ambiguous life, Brown hoped to interpose his fictional narratives in the American public sphere as an authentic expression of its social imaginary" (109). While Jefferson politely replied to Brown's letter, affirming his belief in the instructive power of fiction, whether he ever actually read the novel is unknown.

While Brown remained hopefully ambivalent about Jefferson and his party at the time of the novel's publication, it offers a good deal of subtext that suggests the Hamiltonian Federalism that would increasingly come to inflect Brown's views. Eric Savoy indicates "the essentially conservative nature of Brown's American Gothic. By raising doubts about the ability of individuals to govern themselves in a full-fledged democracy, Brown participates in Alexander Hamilton's state-oriented Federalist skepticism about the realizability of Thomas Jefferson's confidence in supposedly 'free' individualism" (175).⁷ The novel's parallels between Gothic fiction, German ancestry, and individualist politics reflects the purpose a Gothic/Saxon genealogy had served in Jeffersonian rhetoric. An example of this is the tract by "Demophilus," "The Genuine Principles of the Ancient Saxons, or English Constitution" (1776). As Clery and Miles explain, "[p]ublished in Philadelphia on the eve of the American Revolution [this tract] makes clear how central a Saxon/Gothic genealogy was to revolutionary politics. Pocock notes that 'Thomas Jefferson wanted to place Hengist and Horsa on the Great Seal of the United States, and he argued in *The Rights of British America* (1775) that American settlers held their lands by conquest like the Angles and the Saxons, and therefore held them allodially, under no allegiance to the king" (1987 377) (221). *Wieland's* interrogation of the limits of the individual's powers of discrimination seems to support this political stance.

As Shuffelton points out, there is an irony implicit in this suspicious gesture, since "[t]he motives for the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 were Federalist fears of an untrustworthy, unstable, and seducible people, but in the American polity of the 1790's, Federalists had no alternative but to turn to the judgment of those same people and to appeals in the public sphere with its full range of rhetorical possibilities" (107). This irony is commensurate with that offered by *Wieland*, which simultaneously appeals to the reader's powers of reasoned judgment, and indicates their ultimate inadequacy in definitively laying to rest its mysteries.

Brown was far from the only American writer of his day to link radical individualism and revolutionary philosophy to psychopathology. One of the probable inspirations for *Wieland*'s conflation of Godwinian radicalism and enthusiastic delusion is the writing and lectures of Benjamin Rush. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence (and often considered the founder of American psychiatry), Rush's lectures on medicine and politics had been enthusiastically attended by Brown's friend Smith. In one of these lectures, "On the different species of mania," Rush defines "madness in the present instance to be *a want of perception, or an undue perception of truth, duty or interest*" (214). Among such manias as "The Land Mania" (lust for land ownership), the gaming mania (lust for gambling), and the Love Mania (any marriage contrary to pragmatic interests), is what Rush terms "the Liberty Mania." This politico-clinical condition identifies what Rush saw as the psychopathological roots of the rabidly individualistic and anti-governance sensibility of numerous Americans in the post-Independence milieu.

His definition of this condition is clearly inclusive both of the rationalist anarchism espoused by the early Godwin, as well as the anti-governance politics of radical Protestant sectarianism. "This disease shews itself in visionary ideas of liberty and government. It occupies the time and talents so constantly, as to lead men to neglect their families for the sake of taking care of the state. Such men expect liberty without law – government without power – sovereignty without a head – and wars without expense. They consider industry and its usual consequence, wealth, as the only evils of a state, and ascribe Roman attainments in virtue to those men only, who, by consuming an undue proportion of their time in writing, talking, or debating upon politics, bequeath the maintenance of their families to their country" (214). Rush's suspicion of the "Roman attainments in virtue" ascribed to those

who spend all their time “in writing, talking, or debating upon politics” speaks to the high esteem in which Ciceronian oration was held in the early Republic, an adulation of which *Wieland*, as we shall see, is also mercilessly critical.⁸

However, there is also a more general, but not unrelated, philosophical rationale for Brown’s rejection of Godwinian rationalism: his pervasive skepticism about the limits of subjective knowledge. Just as *Wieland* calls into question the transcendent power of reason inscribed within the Kantian sublime, the Cartesian and Lockean philosophical traditions, and the nature of religious revelation, it also calls into question the power of individual judgment to comprehend the world apprehended by the senses. In expressing this skepticism, Brown performed a transformation of the Godwinian Gothic novel through his strategic adoption of other genres and modes of writing. He worked at making his novel a legal, medical and psychological case study (a method Poe and E.T.A. Hoffmann would later adopt wholesale), and brought these discordant elements together through two primary pre-texts: John Trumbull’s 1777 translation of Christoph Wieland’s poem “The Trial of Abraham,” and the 1796 *New York Weekly* account of the James Yates murder case.

Brown’s combined adoption of these pre-texts for *Wieland* additionally allowed him to use the novel as a means of criticizing some of the fundamental beliefs of Abrahamic faith

⁸ Rush made this connection between the politics of private judgment, dissent and psychopathology even more explicit in his 1789 essay, “The Influence of the American Revolution.” There, Rush claimed that “[t]he termination of the war by the peace in 1783, did not terminate the American Revolution. The minds of the citizens of the United States were wholly unprepared for their new situation. The excess of the passion for liberty, inflamed by the successful issue of the war, produced, in many people, opinions and conduct which could not be removed by reason nor restrained by government. For a while, they threatened to render abortive the goodness of heaven to the United States, in delivering them from the evils of slavery and war. The extensive influence which these opinions had upon the understandings, passions and morals of many of the citizens of the United States, constituted a species of insanity, which I shall take the liberty of distinguishing by the name of **Anarchia**” (333).

itself, and specifically Christian belief, which he at the time viewed as perniciously delusive. Bryan Waterman persuasively points out that this combative skepticism toward Christian doctrine was an important commonality between Brown and a number of other members of the Friendly Club in New York. He writes, “once we recognize that what most united the club’s inner circle – Smith, Brown, Dunlap, and Johnson in particular – was not an antipathy toward Jacobins or Jeffersonians but a shared derision of established Christianity, we can begin to recognize ways in which this scepticism fuels Brown’s *Wieland* and haunts his entire novelistic career in significant ways” (77).

While both Brown and Smith were familiar with, and looked favourably upon, a number of Christoph Martin Wieland’s⁹ novels, it is his epic poem *Der Gephyfte Abraham* that informs his allusive eponymy in the novel. Brown was interested in “Abraham” particularly because of the deconstructive possibilities it offered him of Christian scripture. As Sydney Krause explains, “why Brown should have chosen this work to deal with when he knew others by Wieland is clear enough if one considers the strongly anti-Christian views Brown was asserting in a letter to his friend Joseph Bringhurst a year prior to the story of the Yates murder.” In this letter, Brown “launches a comprehensive attack upon Christianity, mainly from the point of view of moral pragmatism, affirming: ‘I really think Christianity, that is, the belief in the divinity of Christ and future retribution, have been pernicious to

⁹ As A. L. Barbauld explained in “On the Origin and Progress of Novel Writing (1810), “[t]he celebrated Wieland has composed a great number of works of fiction; the scene of most of them laid in ancient Greece. His powers are great, his invention fertile, but his designs insidious. He and some others of the German writers of philosophical romances have used them as a frame to attack received opinions, both in religion and in morals. Two at least of his performances have been translated, Agathon and Peregrine Proteus” (271). It is known from his journals that Elihu Hubbard Smith had read at least the latter of these two works, so the likelihood that Brown was also familiar with it is strong.

mankind' (98).¹⁰ This further extends Brown's thoroughgoing criticism of Lockean epistemology. As James Kirwan writes, "[w]hile for Locke the two infallible sources of proof were 'reason and scripture,' the compatibility of the latter with the former was, famously, cast in doubt by certain influential currents of thought in the eighteenth century" (19). *Wieland* dramatizes precisely this incompatibility.

By aligning the Abraham-Isaac story with his novel's sinister events, Brown effectively deconstructed and defamiliarized the narrative of Genesis 22. As Axelrod explains, "Abraham puts aside the dictates of what James Yates called 'natural feelings' (for Isaac is his only son, whom he loves) in obedience to what he perceives as an absolute truth

¹⁰ Written in the wake of his introduction to Deism via his friend and mentor Elihu Hubbard Smith, who also introduced Brown to Godwin's writings and anarchist philosophy, the novel shares a number of concerns with Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. While its centrality for Judeo-Christian belief overshadows much of the content of *Religion* indirectly, Kant alludes to the Abraham-Isaac story twice in the course of his compendious consideration. First, in keeping with his belief in the transcendence and universality of human moral reasoning as the means of knowing divinity, Kant writes that "as regards the theistic miracles, reason can at least have a negative criterion at its disposal, namely, if something is represented as commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one (e.g. if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally innocent)" (100). Thus, Kant is explicit in his objection to the Biblical *akedah*; because this incident conflicts directly with the categorical imperative which is the *a priori* intimation of the divine in man, it cannot be a revelation of God; it must be seen instead as a delusion produced by *Schwarmerei*.

Kant takes this argument further by criticizing the reliability of Scripture, with its picture of an impossible God-concept who, though totally transcendent and thus not part of space and time, makes periodic appearances to intervene for his chosen people – a notion Kant concludes is preposterous. Elaborating a thought-experiment of an inquisitor who believes he has been instructed by God to kill an unbeliever, Kant writes "that God has ever manifested this awful will is a matter of historical documentation and never apodictically certain. After all, the revelation reached the inquisitor only through the intermediary of human beings and their interpretation, and even if it were to appear to him to have come from God himself (like the command issued to Abraham to slaughter his own son like a sheep), yet it is at least possible that on this point error has prevailed" (180). While Kant maintains God at the center of his philosophy, it is in an ahistorical, transcendent and generalized fashion at odds with the divine of any particular religious tradition; a belief which parallels the Deism of Brown's friend Smith and his circle.

transcending them. It is this leap of faith, of course, that inspired the epistemological fable Soren Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, embroidered upon Genesis” (57) – a fable that Kierkegaard wrote in large part as a response to Kant’s influentially skeptical view of this foundational Biblical event.

Brown, however, transforms the story of Abraham’s *akedah* by explicitly employing the language of Trumbull’s translation of Wieland’s poem, which allowed him to elude the controversy a more directly polemical treatment would inevitably have incited. Matthew Lewis had adopted a similar strategy in his infamous Gothic novel, *The Monk* (1796), where a sensational satiric parody of Christian belief and ritual masquerades as a salubriously Anglican condemnation of Catholic excesses. I will discuss both “The Trial of Abraham” and the *New York Weekly* account of the Yates case at some length, as their language and structure are woven into the text of *Wieland* in a number of significant ways. The novel’s adoption of both the phrasing and the textual logic of these two very different narratives underlines its concerns with issues deriving from the discourse on the sublime, and informs the provocative indeterminacy it ultimately achieves.

The *New York Weekly* account of Yates’ testimony reads “[t]hey had no sooner left us (said he upon his examination) than taking my wife upon my lap, I opened the Bible to read to her – my two boys were in bed – one five years old, the other seven; - my daughter Rebecca, about eleven, was sitting by the fire, and my infant aged about six months, was slumbering at her mother’s bosom – Instantly a new light shone into the room, and upon looking up I beheld two Spirits, one at my right hand and the other at my left; he at the left bade me destroy all my *idols*, and begin by casting the Bible into the fire; - the other spirit dissuaded me, but I obeyed the first, and threw the book into the flames” (362). This account

offers a fantastic exaggeration of the experience of the sublime through the act of reading. Read through the lens of John Dennis's "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry" (1704), this scene becomes a hyperbolized dramatization of the potentially pernicious effects of inspiration. As Clery and Miles explain, "[t]he aim of Dennis's treatise as a whole was to show the necessary interdependence of religion and poetry, and the importance of strong emotions to both" (100). This interdependence had long been of particular interest to Brown, who in a speech to the Belles Lettres club, later reprinted in *The Rhapsodist*, claimed that "[t]he enthusiasm of poetry is no less strong and violent than that of religion; they flow in separate channels, but are derived from the self same fountain" (quoted in Elliot 222). Yates's testimony highlights the confusion of affective and cognitive states with physical objects that Dennis lauds as the primary inspirational effect of sublimity in religious and literary discourse. Dennis claims that "[f]or the spirits being set in a violent emotion, and the imagination being fired by that agitation, and the brain being deeply penetrated by those impressions, the very objects themselves are set as it were before us, and consequently we are sensible of the same passion that we should feel from the things themselves" (104).

Opening the Bible to read a passage (and perhaps the very passage in Genesis cited by Longinus in *Peri Hypsous*), Yates claims that "a new light shone into the room—" which could be taken as merely a figurative expression of the inspirational effects of reading an elevating work of literature. However, in Yates's case, this enlightenment is immediately followed by an account of a positive sensual apprehension of "spirits" which produce auditory instructions. Had this event occurred in the course of a religious narrative, perhaps it could be read as a vision of the divine, an encounter with the *noumenon* as *phenomenon*, much like the Pauline vision on the Damascus road. However, given its context, the textual

logic of the account is clear: Yates's elevation from an encounter with the sublime in the act of reading descends immediately into pathology, dramatizing the indistinct boundary between inspiration and hallucination.

The thinness of this line had been part of the discourse on the sublime since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Dennis, in delineating the difference between inspired passion and delusive enthusiasm in *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), wrote that "I call that *ordinary passion*, whose cause is clearly comprehended by him who feels it, whether it be admiration, terror or joy; and I call the very same passions *enthusiasms*, when their cause is not clearly comprehended by him who feels them" (33). In other words, enthusiasm is passion improperly understood.

Vijay Mishra helpfully contextualizes this claim, explaining that "Eighteenth-century meanings of 'enthusiastic' and 'enthusiasm' were closely aligned to their original Greek root as signifying 'possession by a god, supernatural inspiration, prophetic or poetic frenzy,' or 'pertaining to, or of the nature of, possession by a deity (OED) It is in this light that Dennis's use of "Enthusiastick Terror" should be considered" (Mishra 29-30). And yet Dennis's insistence that enthusiasms are those passions whose causes are not understood by those who experience them comes close to saying that enthusiasts are simply bad critics, incapable of discerning the cause of their inspirations. Dennis's distinction between ordinary passion and enthusiasm loosely parallels the distinction Kant will make between sublime enthusiasm and pathological *Schwarmerei*. In Kantian terms, Yates has been seduced by the subreptive tendencies of a sublime encounter; associating the movement of his mind with an external existent, he has fallen prey to a dangerous delusion.

Yates's motivation for committing murder is immediately situated in the context of a sensually apprehended religious vision which demands an *auto da fe*, an act of iconoclasm as testimony of faith in the form of the destruction of the Bible, followed by the demand to offer up his wife and children as a devotional sacrifice. Peter Kafer explains that "Yates, bidden by a 'spirit' to destroy all his idols, in succession 'dashed out the brains' of his two sleeping sons, killed his baby daughter, and beat his wife to death with 'a stake from a garden fence.' Yates then destroyed his eldest daughter, after making her dance and sing beside her mother's corpse. He then assaulted his sister. She, however, got away. Captured by neighbours, Yates refused to repent for his acts. Instead, he prostrated himself on the ground and exclaimed 'my father, thou knowest that it was in obedience to thy commands, and for thy glory, that I have done this deed.' Taken to jail as a lunatic, Yates twice escaped, both times being recaptured" (113).

The justification of these murders as an expression of inspired iconoclasm presented Brown with an opportunity to explore issues surrounding the religious dimensions of the sublime in a fictional framework. The association between the rhetorical and natural sublimities and the divine had been part of the discourses on the sublime since Longinus, who cited the opening of Genesis as an example of elevated writing. "So likewise the Jewish legislator, no ordinary person, having conceived a just idea of the power of god, has nobly expressed it in the beginning of his law. *And god said – what? – Let there be light, and there was light. Let the earth be, and the earth was*" (Ashfield and de Bolla 25).

The phrase "let there be light," echoed in Yates's confession above, resounds throughout the novel in overdetermined intensity. As *Wieland* connects and critiques both rational/philosophical and religious/inspirational dogma, the complex language of darkness

and light that informs the novel plays on the association between this *fiat lux* and the inspirational effect that Godwin's writing had initially had on Brown himself. While the fictional Theodor Wieland, like the historical James Yates, will offer up the lives of his family in sacrifice to his faith in a God revealed through the senses, Carwin will offer the happiness and wellbeing of Clara and her family in sacrifice to his attitude of experimental curiosity. Both, *Wieland* suggests, are dangerous and delusive sources of *Schwarmerei*. Through this presentation of light performing the obscuring work of darkness, the novel gives expression to Burke's claim that, while "darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light," "[e]xtreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness" (II.vii 80).

Wieland extends its fictional-clinical enterprise to a diagnosis of epidemic cultural delusion by underlining the association between the James Yates murders and the Abrahamic *akedah* of the twenty-second book of Genesis. However, rather than using the passage from Genesis itself as his target, Brown emplots Trumbull's translation of Wieland's "Abraham" directly. Krause writes, "in every borrowing, Brown's reference is not to Genesis, but to Wieland's very considerable embroidery thereof" (99). *Wieland*, in effect, deterritorializes the *akedah* and Christoph Wieland's authorship of it, by interweaving the words of Trumbull's translation with contemporaneous descriptions of madness and melancholy.

Wieland's synthesis emphasizes that Wieland's "Abraham" already features descriptions of a pathological condition: given Wieland's description, Abraham could well be counted among those deluded enthusiasts who, in Richard Baxter's words, "seem to feel something besides themselves [...] speaking in them, and saying this or that to them, and

bidding them do this or that...and they will hardly believe how much of it is the Disease of their imagination. In this case they are exceedingly prone to think they have Revelations, and whatever comes into their Minds, they think some Revelation brought it hither”

(*Preservatives Against Melancholy*, 1713).¹¹ As the Abraham of Wieland’s poem first experiences the call to the mountain and the presence of God, Trumbull’s translation reads “Now, at the call of morning, and a holy *impulse* excited in him by the approach of God, he went up to a grove of cedars which crowned the summit of an adjacent hill; here he had erected an altar for the more solemn worship [...] Thus lonely and *oppressed with thoughts*, Abraham retired amidst the solemn oaks; but from his *conflicted mind* powerfully shook off the load of gloomy thoughts and his sensations gradually cleared from perplexity, thus severally vexed themselves (8; my italics). This description neatly reflects the relationship between the melancholic temperament and the proclivity for sublime experience that numerous commentators, including the pre-Critical Kant, had observed.¹²

Following this description closely, Clara’s narrative describes the elder Wieland as an exemplary melancholiac; “his heart gradually contracted a habit of morose and gloomy reflection” (9). This closely matches Kant’s description of the melancholiac as being predisposed to sublime experience in *Observations*. Clara writes consistently of the roots of her father’s religious experience in his mental disposition, emphasizing the elder Wieland’s susceptible state as determinate over his Scriptural studies; “his understanding had received

¹¹ David Valins points out that this description echoes that of Henry More’s *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*, a text which Coleridge often quoted.

¹² In his pre-Critical *Observations* on the sublime, written before he had read Burke’s *Enquiry* in Garve’s 1773 translation, Kant claimed that “he whose feeling places him among the melancholy is not so named because, robbed of the joys of life, he aggrieves himself into dark dejection [...] He has above all a feeling for the sublime. Even beauty, for which he also has a perception, must not only delight him but move him” (64)

a particular direction” due to his affective condition. She writes, “[h]is mind was in a state peculiarly fitted for the reception of devotional sentiments. The craving which had haunted him was now supplied with an object” (10).

This condition results in the deformation of his hermeneutic skills in service of his obsession. Of his practice as a reader of Scripture, Clara writes, “[h]is constructions of the text were hasty, and formed on a narrow scale. Every thing was viewed in a disconnected position. One action and one precept were not employed to illustrate and restrict the meaning of another” (11). These enthusiastic readings continued to exaggerate the elder Wieland’s emotional instability, until “[h]e was alternately agitated by fear and ecstasy” (11). This violent affective bipolarity is presented as colouring his *lectio divina* as his death would in turn colour Clara’s “reading” of the later events of the novel.

This symptomatic picture of a religious mania accompanied by bouts of melancholic depression was a clinical commonplace of eighteenth and nineteenth century psychological writing. It was so widely recognized that James Cowles Prichard felt it necessary to differentiate its diagnosis from that of the newly defined condition of “moral insanity”, probably the most important clinical concept of the nineteenth century. In 1835, Prichard wrote that “in those instances which form cases of moral insanity, it is beyond the limit that belongs to natural variety of character, and has besides peculiar features [...] in this form of moral derangement the disordered condition of the mind displays itself in a want of self-government, in continual excitement, an unusual expression of strong feelings, in thoughtless and extravagant conduct.” Prichard opposes this condition to “examples of a different description [in which] *the mental excitement which constitutes this disease is connected with religious feelings, and this is often the case when the period of excitement*

has been preceded by one of melancholy, during which the individual affected has laboured under depression and gloom, mixed with apprehensions as to his religious state. A person who has long suffered under a sense of condemnation and abandonment [...] has passed all at once from one extreme to another: his feelings have become of a sudden entirely changed; he has a sense of lively joy in contemplating the designs of Providence towards him, amounting sometimes to rapture and ecstasy” (26; my italics).

This precisely depicts the shift in affective state undergone by the elder Wieland during the opening chapters of the novel, and Theodor Wieland later in the novel. Clara draws the reader’s attention to the resemblance between father and son from her first description of Theodor. While Clara presents herself and Catherine as cheerful Deists whose religion “was the product of lively feelings, excited by reflection on our own happiness, and by the grandeur of external nature” (23), Theodor is contrastively presented as “grave, considerate, and thoughtful.” Clara is unsure “whether he was indebted to sublimer views for this disposition [...] what distinguished him was a propensity to ruminate on these truths” (23).

The association of Clara and Catherine with lively feelings, happiness, and natural beauty clearly aligns them with the domestic pleasures of the beautiful, as opposed to the terrible sublime with which Theodor and the elder Wieland are associated. Thus the novel’s logic echoes Burke’s *Enquiry*’s influential engendering of the beautiful as a feminine quality and the sublime as a masculine quality. This sexualization of the beautiful and sublime are further troped by *Wieland*’s association of sublimity with Carwin’s rhetorical prowess. Dennis’s sexualized expression of the sublime as “a pleasing rape upon the senses” is eventually literalized by the novel’s presentation (as it had earlier been by Ambrosio in

Lewis's *The Monk*), as Carwin invades Clara's bedroom with the expressed intention of taking sexual possession of her, an intention that (Pleyel's belief to the contrary) remains unfulfilled.

Clara further emphasizes the association of her brother with this sublime disposition, writing that his "features and tones" "in general, bespoke a sort of thrilling melancholy" (24) which is part of his paternal legacy. For this "thrilling melancholy" accounts for "an obvious resemblance between him and my father [...] their characters were similar, but the mind of the son was enriched by science, and embellished with literature" (24). Theodor's combination of enthusiastic bipolarity with intelligence and education is also reinforced by Clara's narration. A few pages later, she reminds the reader of this "ardent and melancholy character" of her brother, over whom "[t]hose ideas which, in others, are casual or obscure [...] have obtained an immovable hold [...]. The conclusions which long habit has rendered familiar and, in some sort, palpable to his intellect, are drawn from the *deepest sources* [...]. He is, in some respects, an *enthusiast*, but is fortified in his belief by innumerable arguments and subtilities" (35; my italics). This careful construction of Theodor's character sets up the novel's assault on Lockean beliefs about the mind, as it emphasizes Theodor's rational powers and the advantages of his education, none of which prevent his eventual descent into delusion. Instead, these qualities become subordinated to the service of Theodor's murderous mania.

Clara echoes these early descriptions of the melancholic and manic extremes of her brother's condition after being informed that it was Theodor himself who killed his wife and children. In hindsight, Clara recalls "his preternatural tranquility succeeded by bursts of passion and menacing actions" (167). Both this affective transformation and the

transformation in the elder Wieland it echoes reflect the identical affective shift undergone by Abraham in Christoph Wieland's poem. As *Wieland* emphasizes, there is already an implied clinical picture present in Wieland's poem, one which the novel suggests was also featured in the poem's author himself. This informs Brown's adoption of Christoph Wieland's patronymic for the title of his terror novel. Revealing the propinquity between the Biblical concept of hereditary sins and the influential early Modern belief in hereditary insanity¹³, *Wieland* implies that Theodor inherited his insanity not only from his bio-fictional father (and his father before him – see page 171), but also from his literary-historical father, the German Pietist Christoph Wieland, and even from his primordial precursor, the Biblical patriarch Abraham.

Clara's account of her father also points to the obsessive or monomaniacal quality of his religious devotion; "[h]e laboured to keep alive a sentiment of fear, and a belief of the awe-creating presence of the Deity. Ideas foreign to this were sedulously excluded" (11). Clara is explicit that this affective state preceded the circumstances eventually determinate in his delusions. "In this state of mind he chanced to light upon a book written by one of the teachers of the Albigenses, or French Protestants¹⁴." The elder Wieland was a naïve and

¹³ Concerning the rapid rise to popular and professional acceptance of hereditary explanations of insanity, John Waller persuasively argues that "the idea of hereditary disease arose as a by-product of a prior linkage between, on the one hand, the notion of incurable disease and, on the other, the ancient concept of the relatively unchanging individual constitution. This conceptual suture was formed because of a desire on the part of the medical profession to rationalize, and to some extent to excuse, its inability to treat a range of persistent chronic maladies" (2).

¹⁴ Axelrod writes that "[w]hile Albigensianism, a long-dead schism originating in medieval Toulouse, may at first seem a gratuitously exotic choice for the Wieland religious background, the sect can be seen as a caricature of the more sulphurous aspects of Calvinist doctrine" (67). Ed White, in his article "Carwin the Peasant Rebel," suggests an alternative explanation for Brown's reference to a group of sectarians known as the Camissards. He writes that "[b]y the end of the decade, the 'French Prophets' had followers in cities

susceptible reader, “wholly unconscious of any power [books] possessed to delight or instruct” (10). It is this susceptibility and naivete that inform Dennis’s distinction, quoted above, between inspired passion and delusive enthusiasm. Had the elder Wieland been a more discerning reader, Clara’s account implies, he may not have been as susceptible to the madness that gradually consumes him through the unsettling effects of sublime Scripture, a consumption which foreshadows his eventual physical immolation. This relation of the mind’s *descent* into insanity to its supposed *elevation* during an act of reading emphasizes the connection *Wieland* makes between the dangers of religious enthusiasm, and those of sensational literature, discussed at length below.

Wieland’s choice of appropriated Scripture emphasizes the Gothic trope of forbidden knowledge which it borrows from Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, where it is Caleb’s insatiable curiosity about his benefactor Falkland that catalyzes the novel’s dramatic events. It is the words “seek and ye shall find” which first strike a spark from the elder Wieland’s mind, and lead to his voracious consumption of both the Albigensian text, and the Bible it incessantly references – a promise which the course of ensuing events viciously ironizes. As Louis Gross observes, “[o]minously appropriate for the Gothic quest are the first words Wieland reads [...] For the rest of the novel the characters will seek and attempt to analyze what they find, until the horror of their knowledge destroys them” (6). It is through this logic that *Enlightenment*, in both the sense of a sudden religious revelation and in the sense of a rational inquisition into truth, is troped by *Wieland* as potentially deluding and destructive.

throughout England and Scotland. The long-term impact of the movement is attested by an anonymous 1742 Boston polemic against it, *The Wonderful Narrative: or, a Faithful Account of the French Prophets, their Agitations, Exstasies, and Inspirations*, which argued that the ‘prophets were either Impostors, or under the power of Delusion, or an overheated Imagination’ (46)

The novel thus inverts the textual logic of both *Caleb Williams*, where Caleb's curiosity, while it leads to numerous dangers, is ultimately a quality which proves redemptive, and "The Trial of Abraham," where Abraham's faith in the will of a revealed God (even when that will apparently demands the murder of an innocent human being) similarly proves redemptive.

This inversion of "Abraham"'s logic is re-emphasized by *Wieland*'s use of phrases from Trumbull's translation to describe the elder Wieland's ascent to his solitary temple. In the poem, as Abraham climbs the mountain alone, "now a sudden *effulgence* diffuses itself over the hill, and with increasing radiancy, like a *cloud of light*, moved through the azure sky" (9; my italics). Similarly, Clara's uncle, fleeing toward the elder Wieland's screams, sees "what he could no better describe than by saying that it resembled a cloud impregnated with light. It had the brightness of flame, but without its upper motion" (18). This is one of many instances where *Wieland*, for all Brown's editorial insistence on a naturalistic explanation, retains a continuity with one of its pre-texts that effectively ambiguates its narration. Judged from the standpoint of the Godwinian-Radcliffean tradition of the rationalist Gothic novel, this must be read as a weakness in *Wieland*, but it is ultimately part of the novel's unique power to disturb and unsettle its readers by undermining the palliative possibilities of a determinate explanation of its events.

It is this indeterminacy that is central to the novel's importance as an often unrecognized but influential work of proto-Modernism. In his study of American Gothic fiction, Louis Gross reads Poe as an important Modernist re-inventor of Gothic fiction, but fails to note the degree to which *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly* can be read as effecting the same transformation of the Gothic that he sees performed by Poe. Gross writes that "[p]rior to

Poe, Gothicists felt compelled to decide whether they would freely admit the supernatural into their fiction (Walpole, Lewis, Maturin) or whether they would titillate the audience with the possibility of such experience and then rationalize the uncanny out of the stories' fabric (Radcliffe, Brown, Reeve, Hogg)." Gross thus accepts Brown's own insistence on the "naturalistic" explanation of his novel, one which I read as being belied by the novel's overwhelming reliance on the logic of its pre-texts (in this case, "The Trial of Abraham".) This situates Brown's novel neatly in the tradition of Radcliffe and Godwin, who exclude the possibility of the supernatural, and even the ambiguity of what Tzvetan Todorov would define as the fantastic; it thus obscures the degree to which *Wieland's* ambiguous and multiple causal relations are essential to its effects as a work not only *on* but *of* the sublime.

While Brown's footnotes to and comments on the novel support this naturalistic reading of the text, in many ways the novel itself belies it. While it certainly does not qualify as fiction of the marvelous – as Brown writes in his introduction, "the incidents related are extraordinary and rare [and] approach as nearly to the nature of miracles as can be done by that which is not truly miraculous," (6) the novel's naturalistic explanations are hardly as conclusive as those of Radcliffe, Reeve, or Hogg. Rather, they resemble those of Poe whose "fusion of these narrative strategies changed Gothic fiction (especially in America through Hawthorne, Melville, and James) by inscribing an ironic dissociation between the experience of terror and its meaning" (41). This is an inscription, then, that began with Brown, a quarter-century before Poe's earliest published works.

In spite of the novel's causal ambiguity, Brown clearly intended its deconstruction of Genesis 22 via *Wieland's* poem as a polemical provocation against Christian belief. As Sydney Krause observes, "committed to 'The Trial of Abraham', Brown follows his source

in having intimations from above accompanied by an ‘effulgence;’ however, in the case of Wieland Sr.’s obscure delusion, consumed as he is by the ‘empire of religious duty’, ‘the gleaming illumination and explosion’ that do him in are by false assumption thought to stem from a divine intercession. Brown goes to some pains to make plain in a footnote that what set Wieland aflame had a natural origin, which makes the consequences of Christian belief devilish” (101).

Regardless of whether they were directly familiar with Trumbull’s translation of Wieland’s “Abraham,” readers familiar with the discourse on the sublime couldn’t help but see the connections *Wieland*’s sinister subversions employed between religious revelation and enthusiastic delusion, since the religious dimensions of the sublime, with its ability to affect the mind on an entirely preconscious level, remained a central element of this discourse throughout the century. Dennis emphasized it in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) when he wrote that “the greatest enthusiastic terror then must needs be derived from religious ideas [...] what can produce a greater terror than the idea of an angry god?” (Ashfield and de Bolla 36). This religious dimension in the origins of the discourse on the sublime influenced even its subsequent secularized re-interpretations, including that of Kant, whose account is useful here, as he uses the occasion of a sublime encounter to differentiate inspirational enthusiasm from pathological *Schwarmerei*.

According to Slavoj Žižek, “The Sublime is [...] the paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable. It is a unique point in Kant’s system, a point at which the fissure, the gap between phenomenon and Thing-in-Itself, is abolished in a negative way [...] or, as Kant puts it, ‘even if the Ideas of reason can be in no way adequately represented [in the sensuous-

phenomenal world], they can be revived and evoked in the mind by means of this very inadequacy which can be presented in a sensuous way.' It is this mediation of the inability – this successful presentation by means of failure, of the inadequacy itself – which distinguishes *enthusiasm* evoked by the Sublime from fanciful *fanaticism* [*Schwarmerei*]: fanaticism is an insane visionary delusion that we can immediately see or grasp what lies beyond all bounds of sensibility, while enthusiasm precludes all positive presentation. Enthusiasm is an example of purely negative presentation – that is, the sublime object evokes pleasure in a purely negative way; the place of the Thing is indicated through the very failure of its representation. Kant himself pointed out the connection between such a notion of Sublimity and the Jewish religion” (204). It is precisely this distinction between the negative movement of the Kantian sublime and the delusively positive presentation of fanatical *Schwarmerei* that is dramatized by the Yates case, and by the elaborate reconstruction that *Wieland* performs.

This distinction is directly addressed by the novel during a conversation between Clara and Theodor about the death of their father. The dialogue takes place in the temple where the elder Wieland's immolation occurred, which serves to both relate Theodor's transformation to the elder Wieland's death, and to foreshadow the events of the novel's denouement. Encountering her brother in the ruined temple “by chance”, Clara takes “the opportunity of investigating the state of his thoughts”. Giving voice to her desire to remove the veil of obscurity imposed over her knowledge of both her father's death and her brother's increasingly inscrutable behavior, she exclaims, “[h]ow almost palpable is this dark; yet a ray from above would dispel it.’ ‘Ay,’ said Wieland, with fervor, ‘not only the physical, but moral night would be dispelled.’ ‘But why,’ said I, ‘must the Divine Will address its

precepts to the eye?’ He smiled significantly. ‘True,’ said he, ‘the understanding has other avenues’” (35). While Clara, who has already informed the reader of her Deist sensibilities, is expressing a casually Kantian suspicion of the ability of the *noumenon* to appear sensually as *phenomenon*, she and the reader both soon learn that Theodor’s reply suggests something altogether different, and very much darker. Like Yates, following logically from his Lockean belief in both the transparency of the senses and the historical truth of Biblical revelation¹⁵, he has come to believe that the divine does indeed make itself known to the senses of a select few – and furthermore, like the God of Abraham according to the Biblical account, does so in order to deliver imperatives that transcend the obligations of human moral reason.

At this point in the narrative, though, Clara remains unaware of Theodor’s harrowing hallucinatory experiences. His mind is hidden from her, as she intuits, by the same darkness that hangs over their father’s death. She is separated from both by an abyssal intersubjective schism. As she increasingly comes to understand, she and Theodor no longer share any kind of *sensus communis*. Like the titular “Man of the Crowd” of Poe’s tale, “*Er lasst sich nicht lesen*” – Theodor does not permit himself to be read.

The relationship Kant identifies between *Schwarmerei* as religious enthusiasm and as unsettling effect of genius in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) is also a useful tool for reading *Wieland*. Determined to inscribe both human religious experience and the passionate and destabilizing power of genius within safe limits set by reason, Kant

¹⁵ In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argued that “he has no greater an assurance than that of his senses, that it is writ in the book supposed writ by Moses inspired; but he has not so great an assurance, that Moses writ that book, as if he had seen Moses write it. So that the assurance of its being a revelation, is still less than the assurance of his senses” (IV.xvii.4) (325). Quite logically then, the historical Yates and the fictional *Wieland* both come to trust what they believe to be the evidence of their senses over Biblical revelation alone.

writes that “first, genius is very pleased with its bold flights, since it has cast off the thread by which reason used to steer it. Soon it enchants others with its triumphant pronouncements and great expectations and now seems to have set itself on a throne which was so badly graced by slow and ponderous reason, whose language, however, it always employs – we common human beings call this enthusiasm (*Schwarmerei*), while those favoured by beneficent nature call it illumination” (13). Kant’s ironic use of the term “illumination” is apropos of *Wieland*’s textual logic, which exploits this term’s polysemy in linking religious vision, Enlightenment rationalism (be it Cartesian, Lockean, or Godwinian), and enthusiastic delusion through the image of, in Clara’s words, “a ray of light from above.”

Through the agency of Carwin’s often mesmerically enthralling ventriloquism, this delusive *Schwarmerei* is linked to the unsettling power of rhetoric over an audience, and to the effects of sensationalist literature itself on its readers (an effect Brown would later become increasingly suspicious of, as he eventually disavowed his early Gothic productions as morbid effusions.) In establishing Carwin as a character who produces such an ‘affective jolt’ in those he encounters, Brown once again installs and alters an element of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, as the fictional Burkean, Falkland, exerts just such an effect on the novel’s characters¹⁶.

In *Wieland*, the political subtext of this characterization is subverted by Carwin’s resemblance to Citizen Genet, which links the inspirational power of the sublime to

¹⁶ Falkland’s sublime personality is described both in terms of its effects on the unfortunate and eminently Radcliffian Emily Melville, who “was transported when [Falkland] was present; he was the perpetual subject of her reveries and her dreams; but his image excited no sentiment in her mind beyond that of the immediate pleasure she took in his idea” (102), and more importantly, on Caleb himself, who “had always revered the sublime mind of Mr. Falkland” (212).

revolutionary terror. The novel emphasizes both these connections by figuratively incorporating them in its events. First, the disturbing power of the rhetorical sublime to preconsciously affect the mind is, even before Carwin's appearance in the narrative, foreshadowed by Cicero's pervasive presence. Immediately following her description of the melancholic tendencies shared between father and son, Clara emphasizes Theodor's adoration of Cicero. As Caleb Crain explains, "the great orator of the Roman Republic haunts" *Wieland* (xx), as he does much of Brown's fiction. Cicero was a highly esteemed cultural hero to many Americans in Brown's day, especially those (like Brown) with legal or political aspirations. According to Crain, "[t]o American politicians, he represented the power that words could lend virtue in a republic - the power that rhetoric could oppose to rule by force. He represented, in other words, rule by voice" (xvi). Cicero becomes, in Brown's hands, a figure who represents the power of rhetoric to alter the realities of those under its influence.

Reinforcing this connection, Clara's description emphasizes Theodor's almost idolatrous adoration of that Roman *figura* of rhetorical force; "my brother had purchased a bust of Cicero." As befits such an idol, "we hired the same artist to hew a simple pedestal from a neighbouring quarry. This was placed in the temple, and the bust rested upon it" (24). Thus, the confluence between sublimes religious and rhetorical that will prove so central to the novel's unfolding events is illustrated by Cicero's occupation of the altar reserved for the worship of the elder Wieland's iconoclastic God. That Cicero's bust was more than mere ornament for Theodor, Clara makes explicit. She writes that "the authors whom [Theodor] read were numerous, but the chief object of his veneration was Cicero" (25). In a complexly ironic use of foreshadowing, Theodor's veneration, and Cicero's sacramental centrality,

anticipates the intersection of verbal persuasion and fanatical delusion that the novel will exploit in attaining its macabre denouement with Theodor's murder of his family.

The Cicero-Carwin connection is clear from Clara's first account of the sublime effects of Carwin's speech shortly after his first appearance in the novel. Upon hearing Carwin speak at length for the first time, she writes that this man's voice was "not only mellifluent and clear, but the emphasis was so just, and the modulation so impassioned, that it seemed as if an heart of stone could not fail of being moved by it" (51). Clara's description echoes numerous accounts of rhetorical prowess from the discourse on the sublime. Carwin's elocutionary powers may even offer an ironic echo of Godwin's well-known description of William Pitt (1783): "Sublimity, upon his tongue, sat, so enveloped in beauty, that it seemed, unconscious of itself. It fell upon unexpected. It took us by surprise, and, like the fearful whirlpool, it drew every understanding, and every heart, into its vortex" (Ashfield and de Bolla 279).

Godwin's account, with its characteristic figuration of the whirlpool to represent the sense of self-loss common to a sublime encounter, emphasizes the power of the rhetorical sublime to affect the mind on a subliminal and entirely preconscious level. The novel then subtly reinforces the connection between the religious and rhetorical sublime and that enthusiasm induced by the literature of sensation which *Wieland* attempts to subvert via imitation. Clara writes that, "the temple was no longer assigned to its ancient use" (24). Instead, "here we sung, and talked, and read [...] here, the performances of our musical and poetical ancestor were rehearsed" (25). Since, as Frederika J. Teute explains, "[b]elieving with Shaftesbury that all 'voluntary actions of men... originate in their opinions,' Godwin advocated individual-to-individual communication as a means of correcting misguided

beliefs, propagating truth, and achieving disinterested benevolence” (153), this conversion of the elder Wieland’s temple to a space of open conversational exchange allows Brown to offer an additional criticism of liberal, and particularly Godwinian, ideals.

Godwin’s faith in open exchange is ironized by the novel in that, while opinions are certainly exchanged in the temple, they never lead any of the characters to a discovery or expression of the truth; conversation serves instead as a vector for misapprehension. As though still tainted by its previous occupations, the elder Wieland’s temple is the site of interpersonal communication and exchange infected by a kind of cognitive and affective contagion. It is here that Theodor has his first “divine visions,” that the central miscommunication between him and Clara occurs, that Carwin will sway the company with his eloquent and well-reasoned half-truths, and here also that the company’s imaginations are inflamed by the German Romances they rehearse. The latter emphasizes Christoph Martin Wieland’s centrality to the association between *Schwarmerei* and the literature of sensation, and is emphasized by a later passage in *Wieland*, which further informs Brown’s adoption of his titular patronymic.

This is further emphasized as Clara listens to her brother Theodor recite a tragic tale freshly imported from Germany, commenting that, “[a]ccording to German custom, it was minute and diffuse, and dictated by an adventurous and lawless fancy. It was a chain of audacious acts, and unheard of disasters. The moated fortress, and the thicket; the ambush and the battle; and the conflict of headlong passions were portrayed in wild numbers, and with terrific energy” (78). This reference to a tale from the German, with its Gothic geography and emphasis on the sublime powers of passion, situates Brown’s own literary production for his readers. Edward Cahill writes that, “although Brown’s German poet

suggests the gothic sensibility of Goethe, Schiller, or Christoph Wieland, the story itself is of no significance; any that represented genteel romance reading and stirred the delicate passions of educated Americans like the Wielands would have sufficed. On the other hand, the story's content and form prefigure both the events and the narrative style of the story Clara is about to tell [which is] a plot barely held together by the 'adventurous and lawless fancy' of the tale's narrator: an associative imagination whose train of ideas is as 'wild' as the 'headlong passions' it seeks to represent" (31)¹⁷.

Cahill's recognition that this framed narration serves as a commentary on *Wieland* itself is apt. The reading of this "adventurous and lawless fancy" foregrounds the ambivalence toward the imagination's power which is a central preoccupation throughout Brown's fiction. Cahill explains that this view is reflective of a more pervasive epistemological concern at the time; he maintains that "the chief problem in the theory of the imagination in the eighteenth century is not so much a distinction between the real and the ideal as it is a confusion of them: *a confusion of perceiving things and imagining ideas*" (32;

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Brown's use of the term fancy, here and throughout the novel, seems to anticipate the distinction S. T. Coleridge would influentially make in his *Biographia Literaria* between imagination and fancy, a distinction to which I will return in Chapter 4. Vijay Mishra reads this as an implicit distinction between the ideals of Romantic and Gothic writing. According to his reading, Coleridge distinguished between Romantic writing, which always produced a unifying synthesis of its materials by reconciling opposites through an act of imagination, and Gothic writing, which through a wild fancy brought together opposites, but allowed them to remain in an uneasy (or dis-eased) state of conflict. Brown's novel, with its refusal to offer a satisfactory unification of the conflicting interpretations it involves, is a paradigmatic case of the Gothic; but one which calls into question the Coleridgean privileging distinction itself. It is this complex and conflicting indeterminacy which also makes the novel a major influence on the development of subsequent Modernist fiction. As Brown's opening "Advertisement" (both to *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly*) makes clear, he was aware of the perceived connection between the Gothic or novel of sensation and the dangers of *Schwarmerei* he was trying to criticize. This is one of many infecundating conundrums that inform *Wieland* and Brown's other early novels; he was writing in a mode which he understood as linked inextricably to the tendencies he was trying to criticize.

my italics). Nowhere is this endemic subject-object ambiguation more prominent than in the discourse on the sublime. While this dimension of Cahill's reading is strong and I will return to it below, his claim that "the story itself is of no significance" is debatable. In fact, while the poem itself may be fictional, the specificity of its subject matter serves as a clue to the perspicacious reader that links Christoph Wieland to the novel's later events.

Referring to the passage cited above, Sydney J. Krause notes that "none of the writers who at the time indicated might be associated with Saxony – namely, Gottsched, Lessing, Klopstock, Gellert, Weisse, or J. E. Schlegel – had written such a tragedy". Why, then, he goes on to ask, the reference to Zizka? "Is there something behind his being written up according to German custom?" (94). Following a complex thread of historical associations, Krause concludes that the connection leads the inquisitive reader back to Christoph Wieland. He asserts that "Zizka's employing military ferocity on behalf of a peaceable religious movement parallels Wieland's demonic tenacity in embracing the Pietist principle of the individual communicant's availing himself of direct access to God". Brown would have been unable to miss the resemblance between C. M. Wieland's Pietism and his own starkly rejected Quaker upbringing. Krause continues, "[o]ne is perplexed with all the seemingly peripheral Germanifying, until one probes for a common thread, already apparent in the insinuation of a negative equation for anything German; however, by extension, what one also comes up with negatively is religion (explicitly fundamentalist oriented Protestantism), that being what Brown wanted *Wieland* to be very much about" (94).

This also informs *Wieland*'s association between the politics of dissent, as characterized by radical Protestantism (whether it be German Pietist or Pennsylvania Quaker) and Benjamin's Rush's politico-psychiatric condition of "liberty mania." After all,

it is the pathological concatenation of staunch individualism and severe religious conviction that renders the elder Wieland a grim personification of Protestant dissent. Anticipating Hawthorne's "Man of Adamant," "he allied himself with no sect, because he perfectly agreed with none" (13). According to Brown's Rush-inflected perspective, the elder Wieland's (and Christoph Wieland's) religious belief, like the insistent individualism endemic to post-Independence America had become *schizoid*; an extreme extension of the liberal ideal of autonomous individualism, and one which would be visited disastrously upon his son.

Krause thus makes explicit the subtle clues Brown leaves for the readers, but he neglects the connection this suggests between the religious *Schwarmerei* of "The Trial of Abraham" and the Romantic *Schwarmerei* of *Wieland*'s textual ancestors in the sensational *Sturm und Drang* school, and its partial inheritor, the British Gothic novel, especially as practiced by Brown's one-time guru Godwin. Clara's comment on this "new book from Germany" as something "dictated by an adventurous and lawless fancy," in addition to linking *Wieland*'s plot with both the disharmonic capacity of the gothic sublime and reinforcing the novel's connection to the "pernicious" beliefs of the Christian religion, situates the novel's relation to these progenitorial fictions. Brown is even more explicit in his re-situation of *Edgar Huntly*, where he takes up the relationship between the burgeoning school of "Terrorist" writing in Europe and his own fiction in the novel's preface, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

The events that occur around Clara Wieland's closet reinforce the associations the temple scenes establish between the unreliability of sensory information, the deceptive possibilities of inspirational texts, and the dangerous ravishment associated with the effects

of the sublime. *Wieland* establishes a link between the enclosed space of the temple, shrouded in figurative darkness, and the literal dark room of Clara's closet, where she has concealed her father's manuscript. Both settings are suggestive of Locke's description of the human mind as a *camera obscura*. According to Locke, "the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little opening left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without" (65). The only "light" that can be admitted into this closet comes from either external sensation, or internal sensation (reflection.) Both of these are undermined by the novel's closet episodes; *sensation*, by Carwin's ventriloquism, and *reflection*, by the indeterminate influence the elder Wieland's manuscript has on Clara's awareness of her own mind. Brown's emphasis on these paternal documents overturns Locke's view of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, as the manuscript embodies Clara's "ideas that can be accounted for by no established laws." The manuscript, like the temple itself, becomes an expression of Brown's quasi-Calvinist rejection of Enlightenment optimism by figuring the influence of the father's delusions over the minds of the children. If the mind is a slate, then, it is one that comes impressed with characters which are both ineradicable, and illegible to our conscious awareness.

In addition, Clara's closet offers another reflection of *Caleb Williams*. First, "Clara re-enacts Caleb's curiosity about his master's secret, and becomes obsessed with the origins of the voices and with Carwin. But Falkland's chest is replaced by her private closet, which yields psychological rather than political secrets" (Clemit 111) – a trope that will be further transformed by Brown in *Edgar Huntly*, as the next chapter will explore. Second, the "rape upon the senses," echoing Dennis's description of sublime *ekstasis*, that is associated with the reading of the elder Wieland's manuscript becomes literalized by the threat of sexual

violation represented by Carwin's invasion of Clara's closet, as he deceives her senses once again through his ventriloquism.

Recognizing *Wieland's* novelistic achievement as related to its sublime effects allows for two interpretive possibilities. One could see the novel as expressive of the Kantian sublime – in which case, the novel reinforces the power of reason, allowing the reader to banish its agonizing ambiguity by forming a judgment about the causes informing the novel's dark events, overcoming its obscurity by a return to transcendental rationality. Or, one could read the novel, as Mishra does, as a case of the Gothic sublime, which transforms a dis-easing phase into an interminable condition by retaining its pregnant obscurity.

Arguments like Laura Korobkin's are in keeping with the former possibility. She claims that, while the novel presents a fragmented and confused account of events, it also provides the reader with the contextual and judicial keys necessary to render a conclusive ethical judgment on the novel's events. While this reading is intriguing and generative to a point, I have already suggested a number of things it cannot satisfactorily account for. Furthermore, if Korobkin's reading is correct, this undermines the very obscurity and uncertainty on which a reading of the novel as a work not just *on*, but *of*, the sublime depends.

While Korobkin argues that "*Wieland* ultimately shifts the focus of inquiry away from the link between act and motive to the link between act and effect, away from psychological states preceding and permeating the act to the discernible results that follow and flow from it," (722) I think that the centrality of these psychological states to the novel's construction, and their constitutive role in its sublimity, effectively obscure the reader's comprehension of these "discernible results." Korobkin explains that "[c]riminal law and

evidence are key concepts in *Wieland*, a highly forensic novel in which every reader and every character is cast as a juror at whose ‘bar’ evidence of crime is presented for judgment” (723). Therefore, she continues, “[t]he novel invites us to do a better job than [Clara] did at sorting out the credible from the incredible – in short, to accept responsibility for judgment despite its extraordinary difficulties and thus to make possible an ethical, if not perfectly coherent, world.” (724)

Korobkin believes the novel calls the reader to condemn Carwin as the culpable agent in the murders of Theodor’s family. In making this argument, she points to another probable inspirational pre-text for Brown’s conception of the novel. Having studied law for years only to leave it for a ‘literary career’ (something practically unheard in America at the time), Brown was familiar with the legal issues surrounding insanity. Korobkin suggests that he drew “on provocative examples and maxims from two prominent legal works, Sir William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1769) and Sir Geoffrey Gilbert’s *The Law of Evidence* (1754). By transforming what were meant as theoretical examples into fully realized situations, Brown relied on Blackstone and Gilbert while using the resources of fiction to pull the rug out from under their complacent analyses” (724-5). This suggestion is both plausible and productive, but I find the conclusions that Korobkin uses it to draw to be far less convincing. She claims that, “though Brown used the novel to mock the law’s procedural effectiveness, he also carefully designed a plot that demonstrates how key principles of law and evidence can supply the conceptual links that restore accountability in a fragmented world” (725). These conceptual links, according to Korobkin, are sufficient to allow the reader to implicate Carwin for the killings.

Korobkin's argument is based particularly on a passage from Blackstone's *Commentaries*. "As by laying a trap or pitfall for another, whereby he is killed, letting out a wild beast, with an intent to do mischief, or inciting a madman to commit murder, so that death thereupon ensues; in every [one] of these cases the party offending is guilty of being a principal, in the first degree. For he cannot be called an accessory [sic], that necessarily presupposing a principal; and the poison, the pitfall, the beast or the madman cannot be held principals, being only the instruments of death" (726). That Theodor is a madman in the legal sense, the novel leaves little doubt. At first understandably resistant to this possibility, Clara asks Cambridge, "[b]ut how can we suppose it to be madness? Did insanity ever before assume this form?" His response is certain, and allows Brown another opportunity to provide a psycho-medical case study to support the novel's verisimilitude. Cambridge replies 'Frequently. The illusion, in this case, was more dreadful in its consequences, than any that has come to my knowledge, but, I repeat, that similar illusions are not rare' (170-1).

Cambridge goes on to explain that "[i]n the course of my practice in the German army, many cases, equally remarkable, have occurred. Unquestionably the illusions were maniacal, though the vulgar thought otherwise. They are all reducible to one class, and are not more difficult of explication and cure than most affections of our frame" (172). Note, once again, the novel's unsubtle underlining of the connection between "maniacal illusions" and Germany, home of such luminaries as the deluded enthusiast Wieland and the subjectivizing nihilist, Kant. In his footnote to this passage, Brown cites a classification from Darwin's *Zoonomia*, "Mania Mutabilis," as the cause of such cases (a clinical concept that in many ways anticipates the modern concept of schizophrenia, but one which never came into common clinical parlance.)

As Theodor himself declares, “[i]f I erred, it was not my judgment that deceived me, but my senses” (214). This represents a stark rejection of the Lockean conception of a madman as someone who can be cured by education, as he has simply wrongly combined ideas. Theodor’s condition reflects the unique juridical issues that grew up around questions of insanity. For, as Blackstone’s text states, the actions of the insane cannot be judged by the court, as their intentions are completely divorced from their consequences. On this point, Korobkin’s analysis is entirely accurate. This is recognized by Clara, who asks, “[h]is wife and children were destroyed; they had expired in agony and fear; yet was it indisputably certain that their murderer was a criminal?” (174). This is a question which the novel forces the reader to ask, while simultaneously rendering a singular and satisfying answer impossible. As James Cowles Prichard writes in his influential 1835 study of insanity, “[i]n relation to the insane, the ruling idea or illusive opinion characteristic of their disease, considered with respect to the imputability of their actions, ought not to be regarded as an error, but as a truth; or, in other words, their actions ought to be considered as if they had been committed under the circumstances in which the patient believed himself to be” (265). In other words, so far as Theodor’s experience of reality is concerned, he really was performing the will of God by resisting his ‘stubborn human passions’ and slaughtering his family. Thus, he cannot be, in the eyes of society’s laws, considered a murderer. Nevertheless, Korobkin’s analysis seeks to answer Clara’s question with a resounding *yes*; their murderer was a criminal, *but this man was not the one who wielded the knife*. It is rather Carwin who must be judged the murderer of Theodor’s family.

That Clara herself is aware of the weakness of her ‘case’ against Carwin is something Korobkin fails to adequately consider. Considering the consolation of emotional release she

finds in her righteous rage against Carwin, Clara writes that “[s]ome relief is afforded in the midst of suffering, when its author is discovered or imagined; and an object is found on which we may pour out our indignation and our vengeance. I ran over the events that had taken place since the origins of our intercourse with him, and reflected on the tenor of that description which was received from Ludloe. Mixed up with notions of supernatural agency, were the vehement suspicions which I entertained, that Carwin was the enemy whose machinations had destroyed us” (182).

Clara herself recognizes that her desire to attribute the murders to Carwin is as much a desperate emotional bid to make sense of a tragically absurd situation by laying blame on a palpable agent as it is an objective assessment of culpability from evidentiary proofs. It is significant that the novel’s phrasing at this point aligns Clara’s insistence on Carwin’s complete culpability with the temptation to attribute all of the novel’s events to some supernatural agency. Both explanations, this suggests, represent a denial of the unbearable indeterminacy at the novel’s heart, the frustration associated with our inability to imaginatively comprehend the mystery of a sublime encounter.

Similarly, Korobkin’s argument requires that she ignore the novel’s adoption of the phraseology and textual logic of both Wieland’s “Trial of Abraham” and the *New York Weekly* account of the Yates murders. Failing to account for the first, she is forced to ignore the first two chapters of the novel, which occur in the absence of Carwin’s interference, and which ironically adopt the narrative associations of Wieland’s religious poem. Similarly, she understates the degree to which Theodor’s madness (inherited from both his bio-fictional and literary-scriptural fathers) drives him to murder independently of Carwin’s machinations. This lack of acknowledgement results in her careless reading of the novel’s

denouement, where Theodor insists on his continued visual and auditory instructions from his God, totally independent of Carwin's ventriloquistic trickery.

Consider Theodor's account of his religious vision (which, of course, parallels the illumination that preceded his father's immolation): "How shall I describe the lustre, which, at that moment, burst upon my vision! [...] I was dazzled. My organs were bereaved of their activity [...] a nameless fear chilled my veins, and I stood motionless. The irradiation did not retire or lessen. It seemed as if some powerful effulgence covered me like a mantle" (160). Once again, this light is described as an *effulgence*, as *Wieland* insistently tropes Trumbull's translation of "Abraham," returning to the novel's central interplay of enlightenment and obscuration, literalizing the "illumination" of an inspirational act of reading by echoing Burke's terrifying sublime, and horrifically parodying the pre-existent association between sublime terror and an awe-inspiring God. Theodor's experience cannot readily be accounted for by Carwin's ventriloquism. Even if one assumes the vision is brought about by Theodor's enthusiastic reaction to Carwin's trickery, this renders the relationship between Carwin's words and Theodor's actions unknowable.

In addition, Theodor's reaction to Carwin's confession tends to undermine Korobkin's case for Carwin's agency in the murders of Catherine and the children. While he accepts that Carwin's biloquism may have been the source of the voices, Theodor claims he can receive divine instruction independently of them. Having driven Carwin away after hearing his confession, Theodor tells Clara that "I must not leave you in doubt.... [Carwin] left us at my bidding, and I put up a prayer that my doubts should be removed. Thy eyes were shut, and thy ears sealed to the vision that answered my prayer [...] I was indeed deceived. The form thou hast seen was the incarnation of a daemon" (215). Theodor then

makes painfully clear his intention to carry out the rest of his divine instructions by killing Clara herself.

Thus, Theodor simply slots Carwin neatly into the interpretative schema provided by his religiously inspired delusion. In light of this, if his patrilinearly inherited religious psychosis provides the visual contents of Theodor's hallucinatory *Schwarmerei*, might it not also plausibly have provided the semantic contents? While it is true that, according to Blackstone's *Commentaries*, one who purposefully employs a madman to kill another human being is guilty of primary agency in an act of murder, *Wieland* simply provides no certainty that this is the case with Carwin and Theodor.

Pamela Clemit argued that "the voices ordering him to kill his wife and children do not come from Carwin, but are purely imaginary. Theodor's defence of his crimes shows a mind that has become logical to the point of automatism; and his account of his murder of his wife in defiance of 'the stubbornness of human passions' brings to mind Godwin's notorious example of the workings of impartial justice in the first edition of *Political Justice*" (Clemit 132). While I have similar reservations about Clemit's certainty that the voices are "purely imaginary" – again, this remains undecidable, given the unreliability of Carwin's testimony - Clemit's claim is reinforced by the resemblance between Theodor's monomaniacal obsession with a divine injunction for sacrificial homicide, and Ludloe's monomaniacal commitment to a Godwinian ethic of dispassionate justice in "Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist." Nevertheless, the novel carefully avoids the providence of determinate evidence one way or the other.

This fact is immediately recognized by Clara's uncle Cambridge. As Clara's consciousness is restored after her initial discovery of Catherine's murder, Cambridge

answers her queries by stating that “the instrument is known. Carwin may have plotted, but the execution was another’s. That other is found, and his deed is ascertained” (154). As Korobkin observes, the word “instrument” echoes Blackstone’s phrasing. What she fails to acknowledge, however, is the significance of the phrase “Carwin *may have* plotted.” The novel avoids the provenance of this evidence; far from an accidental oversight, I read this as key to its literary achievement. So Clara’s uncertain conclusion, in spite of Korobkin’s demand that the reader reject it, remains as a haunting echo of the novel’s indeterminacy; “whether Wieland was a maniac, a faithful servant of his God, the victim of hellish delusions, or the dupe of human imposture, was by no means certain” (180). In other words, as Theodor Wieland says of his father’s death, “there is no determinate way in which the subject can be viewed.” Through its elaborate presentation of this unsettling indeterminacy, *Wieland* turns not only Descartes and Locke, Abraham and Cicero, Jefferson and Blackstone, but also Godwin, Burke and Kant on their heads – and in doing so, provides a blackly ironic commentary on the proximity of the discourse on the sublime to that on madness.

Thus, while Korobkin is clearly correct in observing that the novel demands an act of judgment from the reader, she is mistaken in thinking that it also provides an adequate framework for this judgment. On the contrary, *Wieland* effects a fictive critique of precisely this power of judgment. This, according to my reading, is central to the novel’s literary achievement; by involving the reader’s imaginative and rational powers, exposing them to a complex and irreconcilable cluster of contradictions, *Wieland* simulates a sublime encounter *ala* Kant, but one which undermines the Kantian conception of the sublime itself.

Recall that in the Kantian sublime, the faculties of sensation and imagination are thrown into conflict with the reason which provides the intuition of the infinite related to the sublime response, and the lesser faculties of sensation and imagination are subdued by the subjective recognition of reason's dominion over them. In Lyotard's words, "[t]he powerlessness of the imagination becomes the sign of the omnipotence of reason" (94). In other words, the imagination is subordinated to reason by the recognition of its limits, which reason's intimations of infinity imply. Similarly, as the sublime object in Kant's conception is subordinated to the recognition of transcendental reason it precipitates, the senses too are subordinated in order to elevate reason; as Lyotard writes, "[b]y sacrificing itself, the imagination sacrifices nature, which is aesthetically sacred, in order to exalt holy law" (189). Thus, one could say that both the senses and imagination are offered up in the process of a Kantian sublime experience as facultative sacrifices on the altar of moral reason's categorical law; they become an abstract Isaac. *Wieland's* narrative, with its deconstructed *akedah*, ironizes and disrupts this relationship. While the limitations of the narrator/reader's senses and imagination are revealed, their sacrifice serves only to reveal the delusive vacuity of the transcendental power of reason that the Kantian sublime attempted to establish. Korobkin's reading boldly attempts to reassert this transcendental moral reason by offering Carwin the Biloquist up as a sacrifice upon the altar of this holy law.

In the vertiginous encounter with sublime subjectivity presented by *Wieland*, however, this is an attempt which is ultimately doomed to fail; for the novel's reader, like Clara, is left precipitously on the abyssal edge of a dis-easing encounter with the sublime. As Clemit points out, this is the key difference between Brown's *Wieland* and Godwin's *Caleb Williams*. "Although Brown also invites the reader to piece together contradictory bits of

information, he turns the provisional quality of the narrative to a radically different end, aiming to shock the reader by successive revelations of the limits of rational knowledge” (Clemit 113).

The novel nudges the reader toward recognition of this irresolute encounter through Clara’s narration of a dream she experiences near the end of the novel. While fitfully convalescing from the ordeal of her brother’s death, Clara has a feverish vision that serves to suggest to the reader, in characteristic visual terms, the novel’s engagement with the discourse on the sublime, and its own status as a work of the sublime. Clara writes, “[s]ometimes I was swallowed up by the whirlpools, or caught up in the air by half-seen and gigantic forms, and thrown upon pointed rocks, or cast among the billows. Sometimes gleams of light were shot in a dark abyss, on the verge of which I was standing and enabled me to discover, for a moment, its enormous depth and hideous precipices” (226). As this dream sequence suggests, what Clara’s account offers is a starkly sketched cartography of the abyss; a necessary, but necessarily failed, attempt to map out the obscure ground of her own, of our own, sublime subjectivity.

Here is the *maelstrom*, the abyss that will become such a signature indication of an encounter with the sublime’s intra-subjective alterity throughout Poe’s tales. This passage presents a lyrical figuration of the darkness at the heart of modern subjectivity, as the brief flashes of light serve only to reveal the black depths of the abyss, just as in Foucauldian terms, Enlightenment thought uncovers only a deeper darkness in the unthought. This is the novel’s intuited allusion to the vast unconscious terrain upon which we as thinking subjects are founded – a terrain which the next chapter will explore in Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*.

**“Awaking in the Pit:” the Sublime Disease of Sympathy in
Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly***

“[The Understanding’s] searches after truth, are a sort of hawking and hunting, wherein the very pursuit makes a great part of the pleasure.”

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

“There cannot be two passions more nearly resembling each other, than those of hunting and philosophy, whatever disproportion may at first sight appear betwixt them.”

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

“If you tell me that you are one of those who would rather travel into the mind of a ploughman than the interior of Africa, I confess myself of your way of thinking”

Charles Brockden Brown

“We regard the rich expanse of the ego all too narrowly when we leave out the enormous realm of the unconscious, this genuine inner Africa.”

Jean Paul Richter, *The Horn of Oberon*

“The ideal self! Oh, but I have a strange and fugitive self shut out and howling like a wolf or a coyote under the ideal windows. See his red eyes in the dark? This is the self who is coming into his own”

D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*

“Madness is not simply a bodily disease. It is the sleep of the spirit with certain conditions of wakefulness; that is to say, lucid intervals. During this sleep, or recession of the spirit, the lower or bestial states of life rise up into action or prominence.”

S.T. Coleridge, “Table Talk”

I had not invented my own thoughts,
When I was sleeping, nor by day,
So that thinking was a madness, and is:

It was to be as mad as everyone was,
And is. Perhaps I had been moved
By feeling the like of thought in sleep,

So that feeling was a madness, and is.
Wallace Stevens, “Desire and the Object”

On March 17, 1798, a few months before *Wieland*'s publication, Charles Brockden Brown published a letter in the *Weekly Magazine* signed "Speratus." This epistle contained Brown's earliest public statement of his ideals as an author of fiction. In this statement, intended as a preface to his abortive first novel, he wrote of the need for native American romances, explaining that "to the story-telling moralist, the United States is a new and untrodden field." In an apologetic gesture, Brown defended the importance of novels and romances due to "their moral tendency". Couching his statement in the language of the sublime, he claimed that only by presenting characters "of soaring passions and intellectual energy" could an author hope "to enchain the attention and ravish the souls" of his readers (quoted in Clark 160). Brown's use of the word *ravish* offers an obvious echo of John Dennis's seminal formulation of the power of the rhetorical sublime in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), where he claimed that sublimity "gives a noble vigour to a discourse, an invincible force, which commits a pleasing rape upon the very soul of the reader" (37).

Building on the Longinian concept of *Ekstasis*, Dennis's formulation decisively shifted the trope through which the sympathy enabled by the aesthetics of the sublime would be figured; it became that of a sexual seduction. Brown's invocation of this trope informs his continued ambivalence toward the interlinked concepts of sublimity and sympathy that so powerfully pervaded the aesthetic and intellectual climate of the new nation in which, and to which, he wrote. While his call for native romances suggests that Brown felt strongly about the morally instructive possibilities of the 'affective jolt' offered by literary sublimity, the belief in the didactic applications of this ravishment is interrogated as relentlessly in what would become Brown's second complete and published novel as it was in *Wieland*.

This early novel was to have been entitled *Sky-Walk, or The Man Unknown to Himself: An American Tale*; a subtitle which suggests the continuity envisioned between it and *Wieland*. While it was never published, many of its key themes would reoccur in *Edgar Huntly*, which would be completed and published in 1799, shortly after the publication of *Wieland* and the first section of *Arthur Mervyn* and after the contemporaneous death of Brown's friend Elihu Hubbard Smith during an outbreak of yellow fever. This novel continues to develop Brown's troubled fascination with the irrational power of the sublime by approaching it through the psychology of sympathy. Brown's interrogation of sublimity, continued from *Wieland*, is here subject to a tropological transformation that reflects two major shifts in the new nation's intellectual climate. The first of these is the shift in the discourse on the sublime from a rhetorical to a physical or geographical trope. *Edgar Huntly* moves from *Wieland's* interrogation of the sublime in its rhetorical form to explore the psycho-geography of the natural sublime.

Describing the discursive migration of the sublime from rhetorical to natural phenomenon, Elizabeth McKinsey explains that "[f]or most Americans, the sublime meant oratory, not nature, until after the French and Indian War [with] [t]he naturalist William Bartram, who began his extensive travels through America in 1773 and whose journals were published in 1791," since Bartram "was the first American writer to depict nature extensively in sublime terms" (40). *Edgar Huntly*, written shortly after the discursive shift initiated by Bartram's influence, responds to a newly perceived relationship between the American environment and concepts of the sublime, using the psycho-spatial conflation of the natural sublime to generate novel fictional effects.

The second shift concerns the increasing centrality of notions of sympathy for the republican politics of the new nation. In *American Sympathy*, Caleb Crain writes that “[a]s a political force and cultural ideal, sympathy was vital to the United States as it emerged [...] The relationship that seemed to sustain sympathy best was friendship, and friendship in America became charged with new meaning. The colonies’ bond to England had been imagined as that of a child to a parent, or a wife to a husband. But as the metaphor and model for citizenly love, romantic friendship was more congenial to republican ideology than either filial or marital relationships” (5).

Appropriately, then, *Edgar Huntly* moves from *Wieland*’s emphasis on the patrilinear relationship of consanguinity, to the different affective intensities of the homosocial romance, as it is the murder of the eponymous narrator’s closest friend that springboards the novel’s entangled events. Bryan Waterman explores the importance of such friendships for Brown and other members of the Friendly Club extensively in *Republic of Intellect*, where he writes that “[t]oward the turn of the century, new notions of ‘romantic friendship’ – disinterested emotional relationships based on elective affinity – took the Enlightenment’s idealization of friendship and added a crucial dimension: an emotional economy in which true friendship was nearly as scarce as discussion of it was abundant” [...] An emphasis on sympathy, affinity, and likeness made this form of romantic friendship predominantly (though not exclusively) a same-sex affair. To one male correspondent early in the decade, Charles Brockden Brown wrote ‘Friendship is, perhaps, more pure but certainly not less violent than love. Between friends there must exist a perfect and entire similarity of disposition... Soul must be knit unto Soul’ (32). It is the apparent power of sympathy to (sometimes disastrously) perform such an interweaving of souls that informs *Edgar Huntly*,

as with his movement away from a critique of the delusive power of the religious sublime, Brown turns to a critique of the “contagion of the passions” that, in Burke’s phrase, is caused by the sublime.

Brown uses this affective contagion to provide a fictional interrogation of the doctrine of sympathy. Crain explains that “[s]ocial philosophers such as Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith had brought forward sympathy as the antidote to Hobbes’s cynical and Locke’s amoral views of human nature. Spontaneous, irrational, and nearly automatic, sympathy prompted men to do good almost in spite of themselves” (120). However, the eighteenth century’s fascination with the phenomenon of sympathy was hardly exclusively optimistic. Crain writes that “if the eighteenth century’s faith in sympathy was fresher than our own, so was its sense of the dangers. Once duty yielded to sympathy, a young woman in a sentimental novel was invariably ruined” (120). This suspicion toward the power of sympathy was particularly powerful in Brown’s imagination. Again according to Crain, “[a]s an ambitious literary artist, Brown coveted the aesthetic power of sympathy, but as an American, he worried that it could compromise a citizen’s autonomy” (14). While Crain’s study is devoted primarily to *Wieland* and *Arthur Mervyn*, he accurately observes that “*Edgar Huntly* explores a deformation of sympathy – of the fictional transposition that relates spectator to sufferer.” I would like to develop this claim further by reading the novel’s treatment of sympathy in the wider context of Brown’s sustained fictional engagement with the discourse on the sublime. Indeed, it is with *Edgar Huntly* that Brown pushes furthest in his exploration of sympathy’s wildest and most dangerous extremes, extremes aptly figured by the sublime American wilderness in which the novel itself is set.

This signals a further shift in Brown's philosophical trajectory away from his earlier Godwinian "radicalism" and toward the highly conservative, pro-Christian, and practically Federalist views espoused by his final novels and political pamphlets. By underlining the connection between the narrator's affective and cognitive movements and his passage through a rugged natural space, and by linking these to the potent but dubious sympathy between the novel's protagonist and antagonist, Brown produces a fictional cartography of a pathological, and particularly American, state.

The novel's setting is chiefly the thinly inhabited wilderness of Norwalk, a romantically sketched, heavily wooded and mountainous area that has been Edgar's both literal and figurative "hunting ground" since childhood. Its scenery is repeatedly described in terms of a thorough psycho-spatial conflation, allowing Brown to develop the connection between geographical and psychological exploration extensively¹⁸. The labile distinction between perceiving subject and perceived object on which this device depends had long been a key theme of the discourse on the sublime, and one of the central provocations to Cartesian and Lockean epistemology.¹⁹ *Edgar Huntly* develops this recognition by linking descriptions of sublime landscapes with the affective and cognitive states of the narrator, and by representing the latter as often preceding and determining the former, reinforcing the roots of the sublime experience not in the external world, but in the perceiving subject.

¹⁸ In this respect, the novel deploys the spatially-figured concept of the unconscious earlier imagined by Kant. Published in the year following *Anthropology* and well before that work was first translated into English, *Edgar Huntly* offers a striking dramatization of the unconscious as a vast, obscure landscape.

¹⁹ This was a confusion Kant had attempted to resolve in the *Critique of Judgment* through his differentiation of the beautiful from the sublime. He classified the former as a characteristic of experienced objects, and the latter as a process that occurs in the experiencer, writing that, "for the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground external to ourselves, but for the sublime one merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature" (CJ 93).

Similarly, with its lengthy descriptions of the Norwalk wilderness as a stark, savage environment, *Edgar Huntly* aptly expresses Kant's conception (drawn in part from Addison and Burke) of the sublime in nature, which "is mostly rather in its chaos or in its wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation, if only it allows a glimpse of magnitude and might, that it excites the ideas of the sublime" (CJ 130). While Kant's consideration of a sublime encounter in *The Critique of Judgment* presents this perceived chaos and disorder as catalytic for a restoration of moral reason, *Edgar Huntly* presents the "craggy and obscure" wilderness paths that the narrator walks as ultimately expressive of the state of the narrator's mind, and by extension human subjectivity generally. Much as Huntly may perceive and describe his eminently sublime experiences as revelatory of moral truths, his sublimely inspired insights are relentlessly undermined by the narrative.

Edgar Huntly's complex but desultory plot is woven around the resemblance between a pit (actually a plot in itself) unconsciously dug by the eponymous narrator's sleepwalking double, Clithero Edny, and a pit at the bottom of a subterranean cavern wherein Huntly himself later awakens, having taken leave of his senses. Like *Wieland*, the novel explores the shifting borderlands of subjectivity and knowledge, figuring the obscure dimensions of the mind through both hidden, concealed compartments (the altar in the elder Wieland's temple and Clara's closet, Huntly's locked cabinet and Clithero's hidden trunk) and vast, abyssal landscapes.²⁰ Given the centrality of this image of the abyss to the novel's figuration of subjectivity, it is perhaps not so surprising that its fictive map is often difficult to read. In fact, *Edgar Huntly* has been considered by many critics to be a failed novel due to

²⁰ In light of this, it is tempting to 'read' the image of the abyss in Clara's dream toward the conclusion of *Wieland* as a directional cue for Brown's readers, especially as Brown was already in the process of writing both *Arthur Mervyn* and the manuscript that would eventually become *Edgar Huntly* by the time he completed *Wieland*.

its structural awkwardness, and, it must be admitted, it lacks the sustained suspense of *Wieland* and suffers a similar difficulty in terms of the dragging effect the framed narrations have on the impetus of the developing plot. Critics are obviously correct in noting the novel's skewed narration and loosely episodic structure. It is, like the American frontier-dreamscape through which its protagonist moves, a "wild and labyrinthine" affair. This, in part, accounts for the novel's difficulty, and helps to explain its lack of popular reception²¹. However, this "craggy and obscure" arrangement, echoing the novel's setting, is central to its achievement, as it pushes Brown's skepticism about human knowledge and identity, alongside his fascination with sublime effects, to a greater depth than any of his other fictions. Similarly, it is with *Edgar Huntly* that Brown ventures furthest into the territory which will subsequently be explored by early Modern fictional innovation, as in many respects, the novel's psycho-spatial conflation is a direct anticipation of works such as Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

An understanding of the novel requires recognition of the associations it suggests between sublime writing, sympathy, and the somnambulism which is both its major theme and narrative device. The relationship between the novel's plot and the intersection of sublimity and sympathy so often troped by earlier Gothic and sentimental fictions is rendered explicit by Brown's "Apology," where he claims that "[o]ne 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 superstition and exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The

²¹ While *Edgar Huntly* was esteemed by a few contemporaneous critics, and not surprisingly held in high esteem by Poe, who would decades later praise it in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, it failed to achieve *Wieland*'s primarily European popularity.

incident of Indian hostility and the perils of the western wilderness are far more suitable; and for a native of America to overlook these would admit of no apology” (29). With his reference to the generic conventions of Gothic fiction, Brown situates the novel for his readers by both aligning it with and distancing it from the European Gothics which were still at a point of epidemic popularity both in Britain and in the new Republic.

While the “castles and chimeras” that had become mainstays of European Gothic fiction figured a conflict between the liberating power of Enlightenment rationalism and the “crumbling piles” of religious superstition and a tyrannical historical order²², Brown was self-consciously exploiting the implicit tensions of Gothic fiction to a very different end. According to Leslie Fiedler, “[i]n the American gothic [...] the heathen, unredeemed wilderness and not the decaying monuments of a dying class, nature and not society becomes the symbol of evil. Similarly, not the aristocrat but the Indian, not the dandified courtier but the savage coloured man is postulated as the embodiment of villainy. Our novel of terror, that is to say (even before its founder has consciously shifted his political allegiances), is

²² While the differences between the Gothic productions of Walpole, Reeve, Radcliffe, Godwin and Lewis are numerous, they all employ this trope. A passage from Anne Radcliffe’s early novel, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), serves as an apt exemplification thereof. Describing the Abbey of St. Augustin, Radcliffe writes that “[t]he rude manners, the boisterous passions, the daring ambition, and the gross indulgences which formerly characterized the priest, the nobleman, and the sovereign, had now begun to yield to learning – the charms of refined conversation – political intrigue and private artifices. The dark clouds of prejudice break away before the sun of science, and gradually dissolving, leave the brightening hemisphere to the influence of his beams. But through the present scene appeared only a few scattered rays, which served to shew more forcibly the vast and heavy masses that concealed the forms of truth. Here prejudice, not reason, suspended the influence of the passions; and scholastic learning, mysterious philosophy, and crafty sanctity, supplied the place of wisdom, simplicity and pure devotion” (236). The contrast between this image and the darkness of Enlightenment figured by Brown’s early novels creates a striking chiaroscuro.

well on the way to becoming a Calvinist expose of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition” (128).

This difference aside, Brown’s preface also points to the continuity between *Edgar Huntly* and these European fictions. Both attempt to elicit a sublime response, by “calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader” in a fashion which informs the novel’s ambivalent critique of both Huntly’s “inspired” condition, and that of the Gothic romance itself. The shift in emphasis from the “castles and chimeras” of most Gothic fiction to the wilderness of the frontier, and the shift from the interrogation of the rhetorical and religious dimensions of the sublime in *Wieland* to the natural sublime represented by this wilderness setting, allows this ficto-critical exploration to pursue the confusion of imagination and perception central to the discourse on the sublime to radical lengths.

This transformation of European Gothic pre-texts through an anxious and particularly American combination of sympathy and natural sublimity also informed Brown’s creation of his eponymous narrator; a young man, who, in keeping with Brown’s admiration for and persistent imitation of *Caleb Williams*, is governed by an overweening curiosity.²³ Caleb informs Huntly’s characterization, just as he informs his readers, in that “[t]he *spring of action* which, perhaps more than any other, characterized the whole train of my life, was curiosity. It was this that gave me my mechanical turn; I was desirous of tracing the variety

²³ This presentation of curiosity as an almost compulsive power, comparable to the (sometimes dangerous) effects of enthusiasm, had become a particularly popular theme with Scottish Enlightenment thought, which exerted a tremendous influence both on Godwin and on Brown. James Beattie, for example, in his 1783 *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, would explain that “It may seem strange, that horror of any kind should give pleasure. But the fact is certain [...] It must be, because a sort of gloomy satisfaction, or terrific pleasure, accompanies the gratification of that curiosity which events of this nature are apt to raise in minds of a certain frame” (Ashfield and de Bolla 185)

of effects which might be produced from given causes” (60; my italics). Godwin’s phrasing here, with its self-conscious echoes of Hume’s *Treatise*²⁴, provides a link between Caleb and the ideals of Enlightenment philosophy that will be played upon throughout the novel. As Scott Bradfield suggests, “Caleb represents the exemplary Enlightenment philosopher” (3).

It is the same committed (or perhaps compulsive) curiosity that is the informing force for Huntly’s relentless quest for Edny across the Norwalk wilderness. What Huntly hunts, and what he consistently fails to attain, is a self-knowledge which becomes perpetually obscured through projection and personification. He explains his incurable *libido sciendi* in terms evocative of the inspirational power of the sublime, writing that “[k]nowledge is of value for its own sake, and pleasure is annexed to the acquisition, without regard to anything beyond. It is precious even when disconnected with moral inducements²⁵ and heartfelt sympathies; but the knowledge which I sought by its union with these was calculated to

²⁴ Hume claims that “[e]verything is conducted by springs and principles, which are not peculiar to man, or any one species of animal,” (282) and his critical methods are suggested by the relentless curiosity of both Caleb Williams and Edgar Huntly.

²⁵ Huntly’s claim could also be read as an acerbic commentary on the Kantian insistence that a certain degree of moral awareness is required in order for a subject to be capable of a sublime experience. This was frequently a correlative to sublime experience in European Gothic fictions. In *Caleb Williams*, Caleb’s affective volatility and sensitivity to sublime experience is explicitly linked to his moral principles. Caleb claims that “[h]e who is tintured with principles of moral discrimination is apt upon occasion to be run away with by feelings in that respect, and to forget the immediate interest of the moment” (341). Similarly, in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, as James Kirwan observes, “[w]hen it is reported that the heroine Emily’s fear of precipices is mixed with ‘admiration, astonishment and awe,’ while the facile Madame Montoni ‘only shuddered,’ it might almost be a direct gloss on Kant’s assertion that is a capacity for moral ideas that separates a perception of sublimity from a feeling of mere horror” (38). In both *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly*, Brown employs narrators who display the sensitivity to sublime effects the reader often associates with ethical and aesthetic cultivation. In both cases, however, this sensitivity leads to deception and disaster. While Clara and her company are easily swayed by Carwin’s sublime rhetorical effects, Huntly is himself swayed by the sublime effect of his own traumatic past and the wilderness with which he associates it.

excite the most complex and fiery sentiments in my bosom” (40). These “complex and fiery sentiments” are evocative both of the sublime experience, and its embodiment in the attraction-repulsion that Caleb-Huntly feels toward Falkland-Edny.

Huntly’s curiosity offers an even more specific echo of Caleb’s in that it leads him, early in the novel, to believe Edny to be guilty of murder. Having become falsely convinced of Edny’s role in his friend Waldegrave’s death, Huntly explains that “I was to accuse my companion of nothing less than murder [...] In doing this, I was principally stimulated by an ungovernable curiosity [...] I persuaded myself that I was able to exclude from my bosom all sanguinary or vengeful impulses, and that, whatever should be the issue of this conversation, my equanimity would be unsubdued” (50). Huntly’s claim to have excluded “sanguinary” impulses is particularly ironized, as his attachment to Edny, an intensification of which is the “issue” of the conversation in question, eventually leads to his engagement in a number of violent conflicts. Unsettlingly echoing Hume’s assertion that “reason itself is a sort of sensation,” the novel presents Huntly’s misguided desire for truth and justice as the expression not of a benevolently disinterested reason, but of an overpowering passion, whose figurative violence is inevitably literalized by the novel’s projective progression.

As though to both reinforce *Edgar Huntly*’s connection to Godwin’s novel, and to justify his departures from it, Brown writes in his “Apology” that “America has opened new views to the naturalist and politician, but has seldom furnished themes to the moral painter. That new *springs of action* and new motives to curiosity should operate – that the field of investigation, opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe, - may be readily conceived” (28). The echo of Godwin’s words offered by Brown’s phrase “springs of action” is obvious. Brown’s authorial self-portrait as

a “moral painter,” emphasizing his insistence on the didactic function of his fiction, suggests the use he will make of picturesque and sublime landscapes in exploring the psyche of his characters. Similarly, the link the phrase “field of investigation” establishes between the condition of the frontier landscape, the newly established Constitutional Republic, and the figurative space of subjectivity, which Huntly will refer to as the “capricious constitution of the human mind” (186), informs the novel’s presentation of identity as a Protean, mysterious and multiplicitous phenomenon.

In connection with the subjective-spatial connotation of this phrase, Huntly’s identity echoes his literary precursor Caleb Williams, but is also influenced by the novel’s investment in the psychological case study. Just as Brown’s alterations to Godwin’s fictional model in *Wieland* were informed by his incorporation of contemporaneous clinical writings, Huntly’s age, sex and personality are also informed by Brown’s familiarity with medical and philosophical writings on sleepwalking. As James Cowles Prichard observed, many early nineteenth-century psychologists considered “somnambulism [as] chiefly incident to the male sex and to the early period of manhood” (324)²⁶. Once again, Brown stands in this respect at the forefront of a number of nineteenth-century authors who would exploit the intersection of “scientific” case study with fictionalization. Anticipating writers like E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain, who “consciously imitated scientist’s styles

²⁶ As Laura Otis reminds us, “[l]ike literary texts, scientific studies achieved credibility through consistency, vivid description, and narrative force. James Cowles Prichard’s detailed portraits of morally insane individuals offered histories, personal idiosyncrasies, and detailed narratives similar to those associated with fictional characters, so that readers got to ‘know’ Prichard’s patients as they knew *Oliver Twist*. Not surprisingly, physicians who wrote compelling case studies – Oliver Wendell Holmes and S. Weir Mitchell, for instance – often wrote very readable fiction. When they wanted to offer unsubstantiated ideas too speculative for scientific journals, some physicians turned to literature, where they could create imaginary case histories and suggest appropriate therapies” (326)

and use of evidence, exploiting their own writing techniques to play with scientist's ideas and encourage readers to rethink them" (Otis xxiv), Brown wove information gleaned from his readings of physicians and philosophers with his characterization of the novel's protagonist, whose condition in turn informs the structure and development of the novel itself²⁷.

As the last chapter described, Brown had already accomplished something similar with *Wieland*. However, while his fascination with the James Yates case in that novel is explored via the narrating intermediary of Clara, Theodor's sister, Huntly's is written as a first-person account. The novel reads confessionally, in a way which anticipates the unreliably self-explanatory narrators of Poe's and Hoffmann's tales. The novel's effects are mediated by Huntly's status as both object and subject of the novel's psychological inquiry. This explains the degree to which the novel's narrative is devoted to a thorough description of Huntly's sensational, cognitive, and affective experiences. Huntly seeks to authorize his experiences, both in the sense of understanding them through a narrative description, and in the sense of justifying them to his reader/fiancée. This struggle for authorization is emphasized by the narrative structure of the novel.

This structure, much like *Wieland*'s, presents Huntly retrospectively attempting to explain a series of bizarre events to his narratee Mary, who is the deceased Waldegrave's sister and (Huntly hopes) his future wife. The rhetorical performance his narration represents

²⁷ This two-way influence is clearly exemplified by the relationship between Brown's fictions and the periodical *The Medical Repository* co-founded and edited by Elihu Hubbard Smith. According to Bryan Waterman, *The Medical Repository* shared with Brown's fictions "an assumption that great nations are built on exemplary writing that explores in minute detail the unmapped terrains – cultural, geographical, geological – that confirm their distinction in novelty. Its creation of a national audience of medical readers depended, the editors believed, on a balance between imaginative form and informational content that Elihu Smith captured in the striking term 'medical eloquence'" (7).

is thus highlighted, as Huntly constantly tries to present himself in a moral and rational light for the benefit of his beloved reader, while his actions at times offer a stark contrast with this self-representation. This structure also accounts for part of the novel's difficulty, as Huntly's authority is constantly called into question.

The challenges of the novel's epistolary-episodic logic are compounded by the fact that, as Leslie Fiedler aptly pointed out, "the boundaries between person and person are abrogated; people are always turning into each other" (145). Huntly and Edny are portrayed as individual characters, but at times the narrative suggests they are divided expressions of the same mind. This intersubjective lability is made even more unsettling by the instability of subject/object distinctions which reoccur throughout the novel. Not only do characters seem to merge eerily with one another, they are also presented as strangely entangled with the landscape through which they move. Similarly, language itself is deployed throughout the novel in a Protean fashion, as the formal characteristics of words are used to form linkages between otherwise disparate characters and events.

This narrative engine suggests the importance that Associationist thinking had for Brown. McKinsey explains that this relationship between physical space and mental movement that informs the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century American fascination with the natural sublime was partly a consequence of Associationist thinking. "Popularized by Archibald Alison in his *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, published first in 1790 and issued in a widely influential second edition of 1810, associationist psychology held that perception of an object does not stop with a simple sensory apprehension (as the old Lockean psychology did), but rather that the object sets off a sequence of related ideas in the imagination; 'trains of pleasing or solemn thought arise

spontaneously within our minds. Only when the imagination is stimulated can an object affect the mind” (48). The oneiric passages between events and use of polysemous phrases that constitutes much of Edgar Huntly’s narrative are both suggestive of associationism run amok, just as its mesmeric commingling and doubling of characters presents the doctrine of sympathy taken to a practically parodic, pathological extreme.

This use of language is apt, given that with its dissolution of discernible boundaries, psychic or geographic, the novel (perhaps influenced by Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*²⁸) offers an anxious critique of the forensic and metaphysical conceit of the individual soul. The challenge that Brown’s novel, like Hume’s *Treatise*, offered to the singular and semi-autonomous conception of self advocated by Locke is conveyed via the exploration of a phenomenon that had long haunted the attempt to understand the human subject as an individual soul: that of the intrasubjective alterity experienced while dreaming, particularly for those who physically act out their dreams by sleepwalking²⁹.

²⁸ In which Hume infamously concludes that “self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos’d to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro’ the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never exist all at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv’d; and consequently there is no such idea” (180), and therefore we “are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (180).

²⁹ As Ian Hacking points out, “[t]he spiritual force of Locke’s forensic concept of the person takes us at least as far back as the High Middle Ages, the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The French historian Alain Bourreau has recently argued that ‘sleepers’ were a significant phenomenon during that period. These appear to be individuals who went into some sort of trance state, analogous to what was later called somnambulism. The sleepers were significant not because they were plentiful (we do not know) but because they created an intellectual, metaphysical, and virtually theological problem” (147).

Based on surviving accounts of the no-longer extant *Sky-Walk*, Krause observes that it is the trope of the sleepwalker which informs both novels; “Sky-walk, Norwalk, Sleep-Walk. *Edgar Huntly* would seem to have germinated from one controlling image: a walk in the wild of the unknown Self” (317). Susan Manning aptly adds that “[t]he projected title encapsulates the self-estrangement characteristic of discussions of the separation of consciousness from the unconscious in dreaming [...] this now-lost first novel was described by Brown’s friend Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith as ‘an extraordinary thing. The basis of it is Somnambulism’” (3).

In both the earlier *Sky-Walk* and *Edgar Huntly*, this narration of the experiences of a somnambulist allowed Brown to bring forth a second continuous theme; the notion of doubling, both as a structural device within the fiction, and as a way of describing the divided nature of human subjectivity itself, as particularized by the unconscious effects of inspiration on the author (and, by extension, on his readers, via the medium of fiction.) In a manner which anticipates the centrality of the double in later fictions, including Hoffmann’s *The Devil’s Elixir*, Poe’s “William Wilson,” Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Dostoevsky’s *The Double*, the novel plays extensively on resemblances between its two primary characters, who are portrayed as sharing an inexplicable interpsychic link.³⁰ This theme is adapted once again from Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, where Caleb, recognizing his

³⁰ In his book *Multiple Personalities and the Sciences of Memory*, Ian Hacking writes that “[t]he prototype of the double in romantic fiction was furnished by E.T.W. Hoffmann, James Hogg, and Robert Louis Stevenson, all of whom wrote about men, but all of whom were also well acquainted with the relevant medical literature and with experts who knew that women, not men, were the doubles” (72). Hacking draws attention to the fact that virtually all of the early clinical cases exhibiting apparently multiple personalities were women, while these notable fictional explorations of similar phenomena featured male protagonists. While literary and cultural convention can account for much of this, in the case of Brown’s prototypical novel of doubling, the author’s attempt at clinical verisimilitude in terms of studies of somnambulism may have informed his decision to make his narrator a young man.

own imbrication with Falkland, eventually exclaims, “[t]here was a magnetical sympathy between me and my patron” (186). Adopting this casual allusion to the mesmeric relationship as the basis for a dipsychic link between characters, Brown’s novel develops it much more extensively than Godwin’s novel had done.³¹

Sydney Krause has explored this theme insightfully in his historical essay on *Edgar Huntly*. He observes “that Brown was actually merging – or barely separating – the characters of Huntly and Edny. The name *Edny* is, after all, anagrammatically submerged in *Edgar Huntly*” (321). Krause further suggests that this doubling can be doubly read as both a fictional and metafictional theme. He explains that, “[g]iven to writing by immersion, Brown spoke of his consciousness of a ‘double mental existence’ – the imaginative/creative and the social – and regarding the former, he observed, ‘When I am sufficiently excited to write, all my ideas flow naturally and irresistibly through the medium of sympathies which steep them in shade’” (295-6).

Thus, the dipsychism³² displayed between the novel’s narrator and his antagonist serves as a commentary on Brown’s proto-Stevensonian experience of the act of writing as darkly reflected through a “medium of sympathies.” This is reinforced by Brown’s statement

³¹ While Caleb Williams’ eponymous narrator is pursued across a primarily urban English environment by Falkland, a fictional personification of the Irish statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke, Edgar Huntly pursues an older, Irish immigrant named Clithero Edny through a primarily natural American landscape, described in terms of its trackless wilderness and savagery (thus Brown’s novel offers a virtual inversion of *Caleb Williams*)

³² Ellenberger explains that “[t]he study and practice of magnetism and hypnotism had led to reflections about the constitution of the human mind. Two models evolved: First, a concept of the duality of the human mind (dipsychism) and later, a notion of the human mind as a cluster of subpersonalities (polypsychism)” (145). Taking Caleb Williams as his starting point, Charles Brockden Brown created, with Edgar Huntly, one of the earliest and most compelling fictional accounts of this conception of dipsychic subjectivity – he thus, in many respects, anticipates the views of key 19th and 20th c. psychoanalytic thinkers..

in a letter to William Wood Wilkins. Referring to his “inspired” presumptions during his earlier period of “Rousseauistic sensibility” as author of *The Rhapsodist*, Brown writes “[l]et me not therefore be accused of arrogance and presumption, because my arrogance was a dream and my presumption a shadow, and because, now that I am awake, I declare myself of a different opinion” (quoted in Manning 9).

Recall that Smith had described an earlier Brown as wandering through life as one who is dreaming, and who had been awakened by his introduction to Godwin and radical, rationalist thought, an introduction that Smith himself had been instrumental in. There is thus reason to suspect that Brown’s portrayal of the relationship between Waldegrave (like Smith at the time of the novel’s composition, recently deceased) and Huntly was meant, to some extent, to reflect Brown’s relationship with both Godwinian rationalism, and with his recently lost friend. In Caleb Crain’s words, “In *Edgar Huntly*, Brown mourned both his friend Elihu Hubbard Smith and the fiction he had written for Smith – in particular, ‘Sky-walk.’” (133)³³

Huntly repeatedly refers to the influence of Waldegrave’s thought on his own. He explains to his reader that “Waldegrave, like other men early devoted to meditation and books, had adopted, at different periods, different systems of opinion on topics connected with religion and morals. His earliest creeds tended to efface the impressions of his education; to deify necessity and universalize matter; to destroy the popular distinctions between body and soul, and to dissolve the supposed connections between the moral

³³ For a more developed biographical discussion of the Smith/Waldegrave connections, see Bryan Waterman’s study of the Friendly Club, *Republic of Intellect*, which explores how “Brown revises Smith’s story in crucial ways.” (90)

condition of man anterior and subsequent to death” (132). The parallel between Waldegrave’s philosophical tendencies and Brown’s introduction through Smith to Godwin, D’Holbach, and Scottish Enlightenment philosophers suggests that the novel offers a fictive look backward to a time when its author “came under the influence of two strong personalities, Elihu Hubbard Smith and William Godwin” (Crain 132). Crain also persuasively suggest that the cause of Smith’s death, the yellow fever epidemic, gave Brown vital “details and story lines for a new major rhetorical figure for representing sympathy between men: infection” (79). This is reinforced by Waldegrave’s description of his influence over Huntly as the action of a “poison.” Reflecting Brown’s shift away from Godwinian radicalism, Huntly explains that Waldegrave repudiated these early beliefs, and sought to undo their influence over Huntly, whom he felt had become misled by them. He thus sought Huntly’s assurance that their correspondence, with its infectious ideas and dangerous inspirations, would be destroyed. Huntly explains that “[w]ith regard to me, the poison had been followed by its antidote; but with respect to others, these letters would communicate the poison when the antidote could not be administered” (133).

Moved by Waldegrave’s request, but unable to eliminate these contagious communications due to his affection for his friend, Huntly elects to conceal, rather than destroy, these dangerous inspirational writings. Much as Clara concealed the elder Wieland’s troubling records of religious inspiration in her closet, Huntly locks Waldegrave’s letters in a secret compartment within a locked cabinet. As Donald Ringe explains in his reading of *Wieland*, “Brown’s use of the Gothic mode provides yet another means for estimating the significance of his book for later fiction. Adapting the devices he found in contemporary British and German novels to his own psychological purposes, he made the enclosures in

Wieland symbols of his characters' minds and so projected their mental states into the external world that the space they inhabit and their mental states became one" (28). This reading can also be readily applied to *Edgar Huntly*, whose purloined letters reinforce the connection between the *camera obscura* of the human mind and the questionable impressions that the "light" of elevated writings can make upon it.

The contagious effect that these letters had on Huntly is paralleled by the contagious effect that Edny's confession and somnambulant condition will have on him. This parallel is extended by the purloining of both Waldegrave's and Edny's letters later in the novel. The dangerous inspirational quality of these writings is paralleled both by Huntly's warning to his narratee that those epistles, like his own, may have a disturbing effect, and by the disturbing effect that Edny's confessions will have on Huntly himself. They reinforce the narrative logic that links the psychic *Nekyia* Huntly/Edny undergoes below Solebury to the deep impressions left by the missing letters themselves; the letters are thus figurations of the obscure and irrational elements of the human mind, as well as the power of sublime writing to stir these elements. In addition, these duplicative incidents reinforce the relationship between infectious passion and the inspirational power of the written word as common sources of both communication and contagion.

This is mirrored by Huntly's ambivalent view of his own somnambulant condition, which is inflected by intimations of both supernatural prescience and delusive disease. As the diaries of both Brown and Smith reveal, somnambulism was a phenomenon that had fascinated the members of the Friendly circle, and Brown in particular, for some time prior to his writing of both *Sky-Walk* and *Edgar Huntly*. The novel's portrayal of somnambulism

is heavily influenced by Mesmerism³⁴, which, with its supposedly therapeutic dyad of magnetizer/magnetized, also informs the novel's reliance on doubling. This doubling is additionally mediated by the double signification central to the discourse on the sublime, whereby objects in the world and contents of consciousness, literary representations and the things they represent, are conflated. As Sydney Krause has shown, this confusion of ideas (or words) with things was at the heart of the somnambulator's experience, as Brown understood it. "[A]ccording to the two sources [...] Brown most probably consulted, the *Britannica* Article and [Erasmus] Darwin[*'s Zoonomia*], objects the sleepwalker deals with are imprinted on his imagination in so lively a fashion that he behaves as if they were physically perceived" (341). This is identical to the Kantian process of "subreption" that underlies the psycho-spatial conflation of the natural sublime, whereby the subjective state

³⁴ In terms of the influence of Mesmerism on Brown's conception of somnambulism, Krause observes that "Brown could not have easily avoided knowing about animal magnetism [...] But Brown would likewise have known that the Royal Commission had discredited mesmerism, that Jefferson heartily denounced it, and that, in spite of its former support in high circles, it was commonly regarded as quackery" (353). Krause refers to one of the two commissions which were formed in 1785 to determine the validity of animal magnetism. Hacking reports that "[o]ne commission was established by the Academy of Medicine in Paris, while the other was a royal commission over which Lavoisier presided, and which numbered Benjamin Franklin among its five commissioners. Mesmer had proposed a new theoretical entity, the magnetic fluid: he had laboratory practice; he had cures. He had all the trappings of science. But it was determined that there was no substance to his claims. Mesmerism was consigned to the level of the popular marvel, where it played a significant role in underground antiestablishment movements leading up to 1789" (144).

It is the significance of mesmerism as a "popular marvel," associated with Jacobinism and pre-Revolutionary antiestablishment movements, that link it to the Gothic novel, and that Krause's otherwise excellent analysis overlooks. This connection suggests that the revolutionary associations that linked Carwin's biloquism and Theodor's religious mania with radical politics also inform Brown's ficto-critique of Huntly's "curiosity mania," as he constantly pushes further and further toward his abyssal and infinite, if perpetually receding, destination. The connection between Theodor and Huntly is further reinforced by the belief that had begun to gain prominence at the beginning of the 19th century and that would be formalized by Prichard in his 1835 study, that "maniacal ecstasy" and "ecstatic visions" were actually conditions linked to magnetic disease (see Ellenberger 123).

which is catalyzed by a sublime object is projected outwards and experienced as an attribute of this object. The somnambulator, then, can be viewed as one who, in a very particularly intensified fashion, embodies the imaginative process associated with an encounter with the sublime. This logic further informs the association described above, between the sublime landscape of Norwalk, the sublime texts of Waldegrave's/Edny's purloined letters, and of Huntly's narration itself.

The association between Brown's earlier Rhapsodic-Romantic persona and the magnetical sympathy portrayed by *Edgar Huntly* is further informed by the significance of Mesmerism to the German Romantic movement. As Ellenberger explains, "[t]he German Romanticists were interested in animal magnetism for two reasons: the first being the attraction of Mesmer's theory of a universal, physical 'fluid.' Romantic philosophers visualized the universe as a living organism endowed with a soul pervading the whole and connecting its parts. Mesmer's physical fluid – had its existence been demonstrated – would have furnished evidence of the Romantic conception. The second reason was Puysegur's discovery of magnetic somnambulism with its extra-lucid manifestations. Mesmer had already spoken of a 'sixth sense' revealed in the sensitivity to the fluid; Puysegur had added that this sixth sense provided humans the ability of describing distant events and predicting future happenings. The Romanticists now assumed that somnambulatory lucidity would enable the human mind to establish communication with the World Soul" (78).

This belief, which would later exert a tremendous influence on Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller, and to a lesser extent Ralph Waldo Emerson, informs many of Huntly's ecstatic passages about the powers conferred upon him by his strange condition, which will be further discussed below. It also suggests that, much as the reading of German Romances

is interwoven with the disastrous events of *Wieland*'s plot, Huntly's plot is dug from the *Urgrund* of a German Romantic *Weltanschauung* – one which is revealed by the novel to be, at base, both fascinating vision and delusive dream.

In light of the supernatural prescience associated with somnambulism through its relation to Mesmerism, it becomes possible to read *Edgar Huntly* as a play on Godwin's suggestion in "Of History and Romance" (echoed in Brown's own essay on romance and history) that "[t]he romance writer [...] is continually straining at a foresight to which his faculties are incompetent, and continually fails." The connection between the psychic exigencies of romance writing and the perceived prescience of the somnambulist could not have been lost on Brown. As Krause explains, "[o]ne of the central ideas in the 'philosophic' literature on somnambulism (that based on observation) is that, illness notwithstanding, it takes us beyond our normal capacities; we outperform our waking selves" (347).³⁵

³⁵ James Cowles Prichard's study reinforces the connection between mesmerism, somnambulism and such heightened faculties explicitly. He claims that "somnambulists, as well as persons who have been brought into a state resembling that of sleep-walking by the process of animal magnetism, have the ordinary channels of sensation entirely closed [...] but are endowed with a peculiar mode of sensation, which, in its highest degree, constitutes what is termed *clairvoyance* [...] it is not exactly sight or hearing, but fulfills all the functions of both these modes of perception" (290). In fact, as Ian Hacking explains, the term *clairvoyance* itself originates with the study of mesmeric somnambulism – a fact which may have informed Godwin's incorporation of the phrase "magnetical sympathy" into his visionary novel of political reality.

According to Hacking, "[t]he French literature of somnambulism, being so intimately linked to mesmerism and then on to the occult, had many stories of abnormal perception. It began innocently enough, with the observation that somnambules got around just fine in the dark, and in no time at all could see at a distance, or into the future. That is the origin of our word '*clairvoyance*' for psychic abilities to tell the future. The British physicians, mostly products of the Edinburgh medical school with its strong tradition of Scottish empirical and so-called commonsense philosophy, did not believe such ideas for a moment" (154). However, as Susan Manning's essay illustrates, this is something of an oversimplification. She explains that "[i]n the course of the eighteenth century, the current

Particularly aware of both the powers and limitations of Gothic romance as a literary mode, Brown used *Edgar Huntly* to highlight the connection between the supposedly inspired vision of the somnambulist, and the waking dreams of the romancer, exploring the oneiric element of literary production that will become central to the “Romantic Triumvirate” of Poe, Melville and Hawthorne in the next generation of American authors. Huntly refers repeatedly to his perception of his sleepwalking experiences as having visionary qualities, and he does so in phrasing redolent of sublimity. His description of his condition echoes the Longinian language of sublime *ekstasis*, as he claims that “[f]ew, perhaps, among mankind, have undergone vicissitudes of peril and wonder equal to mine. The miracles of poetry, the transitions of enchantment, are beggarly and mean compared with those which I had experienced. Passage into new forms, overleaping the bars of time and space, reversal of the laws of inanimate and intelligent existence, had been mine to perform and to witness” (218). The reference here to “the miracles of poetry” and the “transitions of enchantment,” reiterating the echo of Longinus and Dennis that Brown’s earlier apology for *Sky-Walk* offered, situates Huntly’s double consciousness as a sleepwalker as an extension of the ‘split-mindedness’ characteristic of a sublime experience, whether for the inspired creator of a sublime text, or the reader who is in turn inspired (or infected) through the text by the author’s contagious passions.

of Scottish thinking about the nature and provenance of dreams moved away from a demonological proclivity that explained them as the creations of spirits acting externally on the sleeping mind, toward the expanding compass of sense-based psychology and physiology” (1). Since, then, the sleeper’s dreams were seen as a kind of madness, it made sense that madness must be a kind of waking dream. This informed the invention of the clinical term *oneirophrenia* (a term that would fit Huntly’s condition aptly) at the end of the 19th c., as a way of describing certain types of insanity (see Sass 1992 268-300).

Following Brown's "Apology," the narrative begins with a direct address from Huntly to his narratee. "I sit down, my friend, to comply with thy request. At length does the impetuosity of my fear, the transports of my wonder, permit me to recollect my promise and perform it" (31). The sublime concerns of Huntly's account are highlighted immediately in Longinian phraseology with his reference to "the transports of [his] wonder". Huntly continues, writing that "the series of events that absorbed my faculties [...] has terminated in repose" (31). Once again, the phrase "absorbed my faculties," echoing Burke's and Kant's descriptions of a sublime experience in which the senses and imagination of the subject are swallowed up by the object, points the reader toward the novel's sublime preoccupations.

Huntly goes on to caution his impressionable narratee (in a manner which once again dramatizes Burke's famous engendering of beauty and sublimity, and which emphasizes the centrality of Huntly's own rhetorical performance to the telling of the tale) that the story he is about to recount retains an intensity that makes it both difficult and potentially dangerous to relate, ostensibly the primary reason it has taken him so long to write it. Huntly asks "am I sure even now that my perturbations are sufficiently stilled for an employment like this? That the incidents I am going to relate can be recalled and arranged without indistinctness and confusion? That emotions will not be reawakened by my narrative, incompatible with order and coherence?" (31). Indeed, the novel's subsequent events clearly establish that Huntly has good reason to fear that something uncontrollable within him will be "reawakened" by the inspired/inspiring medium of his narration.

Echoing the narrative uncertainty reiteratively noted by *Wieland's* Clara, this signals for the reader Huntly's potential unreliability as narrator. He implies both that he is too involved in this story to tell it with dispassionate objectivity, and that the nature of the events

themselves render a necessary “indistinctness and confusion” to the tale, which is by nature “incompatible with order and coherence.” Huntly’s narration thus highlights from the outset the paradoxical nature of his (and Brown’s) enterprise of rationalizing unreasonable experience through narrative, at the risk of turning narrative into a contagious vector for unreason. In this respect, Brown’s work can once again be read as in critical dialogue with philosophical attempts to subsume the irrational power of sublimity under the aegis of moral reason.

Huntly’s continuing epistolary apologetic evokes the power of language to produce unpredictable and potent preconscious effects in a reader or audience. Huntly claims that “[i]n proportion as I gain power over words, shall I lose dominion over sentiments” (31). Conscious of the unsettling effects that his exposure to contagious texts has had on him, Huntly fears his own narration may produce a similar effect. This concern for the effects of his narrative on both his reader and himself is apropos of the tale itself, since much of it is centered on Huntly’s elicitation of a confession from Clithero Edny, which seems to infect Huntly himself through a strange contagion of the passions made possible by his own sympathetic implication in Edny’s diseased condition. There is an inextricable connection between Huntly’s (and Edny’s) delirium and their ability to narratize; thus, the infectious role that rhetorical performance plays in *Wieland* is paralleled by the role storytelling plays in *Edgar Huntly*.

Aware of this connection, at least implicitly, Huntly continues his caveat, cautioning his reader, that “[t]hou wilt catch from my story every horror and every sympathy which it paints” (32). The use of the term *catch*, with its suggestion of both communicative receptivity and communicable infection, highlights the analogy the novel develops between

sublime sympathy and contagious disease. This deploys, in a dramatized fashion, a view which was already prominent within the discourse on the sublime. As Crain explains, “It was a commonplace in the eighteenth century to compare the spread of sympathy to the spread of disease. ‘All our affections and passions,’ Francis Hutcheson wrote, ‘seem naturally contagious’” (121). Similarly, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume claimed that “[t]he passions are so contagious, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts” (431). Following a similar line of reasoning In the *Enquiry*, Burke described the effects of sublime language by writing that “by the contagion of our passions, we catch a fire already kindled in another” (175), an idea that Godwin would incorporate and ironize through the relationship between Caleb Williams and the Burkean Falkland. With *Edgar Huntly*, Brown merges this concept of affective contagion³⁶ with his interest in somnambulism.

While Krause casually notes the “modish Burkeyan notion of sublime terror, wherewith abhorrence becomes a property of exaltation and repulsion attracts,” (320) which informs the novel, he fails to note how central this is, both to Huntly’s relationship with Edny, and to its mirroring in Huntly/Edny’s relationship to the Norwalk landscape. This attraction-repulsion, characteristic of Huntly’s relationship with Edny, is an almost parodic hyperbolization of the “magnetical sympathy” that characterizes Caleb’s relationship with

³⁶ Brown also explores this concept in *Arthur Mervyn*, where it is explicitly linked to the yellow fever epidemic described by the first section of the novel. In his preface to this novel, Brown writes that “the evils of pestilence by which this city has lately been afflicted [...] have already supplied new and copious materials for reflection to the physician and the political economist. They have not been less fertile of instruction to the moral observer, to whom they have furnished new displays of the influence of human passions and motives” (1). Brown goes on to deploy figures of pestilential contagion to describe the affective results of language, relating the anxious rumours of plague to the plague itself. See, for a discussion of this, Waterman’s article.

Falkland. As Handwerk and Markley explain, “[i]n the deeply ambivalent mixture of love and hatred that Caleb feels for his tormentor Falkland, *Caleb Williams* also reflects an important trend of the Gothic novel as it became more concerned with psychological analysis. Caleb and Falkland can readily be interpreted as doubles or alter-egos, with their relationship exhibiting a strong degree of homoerotic or homosocial desire” (Handwerk and Markley 34). *Edgar Huntly*’s anxious refiguration of this homosocial affective bond is informed by Brown’s fear that “sympathy with a male equal might cause the self to disintegrate, corrupted by either market forces or infectious agents” (Crain 129).

Edgar Huntly incorporates and amplifies *Caleb William*’s energizing ambivalence, and suggestively develops its origins in a Burkean sublime psychology, as a mixture of pleasure and pain, in such a way as to link Huntly’s relationship with Edny to their interconnection with the wilderness environment through which they wander for most of the narrative. For it is precisely this intensive mixture of attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain, that was held by Addison, Burke, and Kant to characterize our subjective reaction to the natural sublime. According to Kant, while there is a purity and simplicity to the experience of beauty in the natural world, sublimity is a very different state of affairs. “The mind feels itself moved in the representation of the sublime in nature, while in the aesthetic judgment on the beautiful in nature it is in calm contemplation. This movement (especially in its inception) may be compared to a vibration, i.e. to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object. What is excessive for the imagination (to which it is driven in the apprehension of an intuition) is as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself” (*CJ* 141). Similarly, the abyssal drive that Huntly and Edny share literalizes this

image of the sublime encounter as an abyss, first in terms of the pit which draws Huntly to Edny, and then in terms of the pit into which both will leap.

These linkages are reiteratively reinforced by the descriptive application of an “oscillating intensity” to both the Huntly-Edny relationship, and to the Huntly/Edny-Norwalk/Solebury relationship. According to Norman Grabo in *The Coincidental Art of Charles Brockden Brown*, “reciprocity between [Huntly’s] mental states and external conditions [...] is such that each seems to inform and symbolize the other,” (100) and it is this reciprocity that links events, settings, episodes and characters throughout the novel, creating a strange dreamscape of mobile boundaries and associations gone awry.³⁷

It is partly this that makes *Edgar Huntly*, for all its structural and stylistic difficulties, a pioneering and seminal work of fiction. As Sydney Krause has observed, “[i]n no other novel of Brown’s, or, for that matter, of any American author before the great Romantic triumvirate of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, are physical phenomena so thoroughly interpenetrated by their psycho-physical counterparts” (318). The novel is rife with explicit references to this psycho-spatial conflation, which begins in the first pages of the narrative, as Huntly first describes his desperate search for clues to Waldegrave’s death.

Huntly writes that he is driven “by some unseen concurrence of reflections” (33) to return to the scene of the killing, in order to “seek the elm³⁸” at which he was slain and

³⁷ Grabo’s use of the term reciprocity here echoes Poe’s statement that “reciprocity of adaptation” is one of the highest aesthetic goals of his art. Poe’s phrase aptly describes both the relationship between geographic and psychic space in *Edgar Huntly*, a relationship which much of Poe’s fiction continues to develop, and the relationship between the objects associated with the sublime experience, and the later figuration of that experience itself as a stimulating irruption of unconscious forces.

³⁸ As further evidence of the connections between Waldegrave and Elihu Smith, Waterman writes that “[o]ne morning, after reading an edition of the *London Monthly Review*, Smith

“scrutinize its trunk” (33). This phrase lends itself to a structural pun later in the novel, as Huntly is driven by a similar impulse to scrutinize a “trunk” which belongs to Edny in the hopes of finding some insight into the latter’s obscure past.³⁹ The scene’s uncertainty and dimness, then, is appropriate, as Huntly approaches the elm. He acknowledges that “the time of night, the glimmering of the stars, the obscurity in which external objects were wrapped, and which, consequently, did not draw my attention from the images of fancy, may in some degree account for the revival of those sentiments and resolutions which immediately succeeded the death of Waldegrave” (34), thus emphasizing the projective, rather than receptive, tendency of his experience. Huntly witnesses Edny’s ritualistic plot-digging (while failing to recognize the parallel it offers to the plot he is narrating) and takes this as evidence of the veracity of his intuition that Edny was responsible for Waldegrave’s murder.

Huntly’s attention to affective and conceptual impressions explicitly shifts the narrative inward, so that the appearance of external events he describes is constantly called into question. Huntly points to this subjective co-relative of his experience; seeing a figure

joined [Brown and Dunlap] for a country walk. They searched out a ‘three-partile Tree, emblem of our friendship, which we discovered, & made our own, last year.’ Here the impulse to transpose natural history onto their friendship comes through vividly” (86)

³⁹ In returning to the elm a few pages later, Huntly observes that “[t]his object had somewhat of a mechanical influence upon me” (51), a phrase which he will echo in describing his compulsive curiosity concerning Edny’s trunk. This scene, in turn, is an echo of Caleb’s statement upon violating Falkland’s trunk, that “[m]y act was in some sort an act of insanity; but how undescribable are the feelings with which I look back upon it! It was an instantaneous impulse, a short-lived and passing alienation of mind” (211). Godwin’s phrase “alienation of mind” is apt to describing the divisive doubling that Brown develops between Edny and Huntly. Similarly, Brown’s phrase “mechanical influence” strongly suggests the monomaniacal character of Caleb-Huntly. James Cowles Prichard described “monomania, or partial insanity, [as a condition] in which the understanding is partially disordered or under the influence of some particular illusion, referring to one subject and involving one train of ideas, while the intellectual powers appear, when exercised on other subjects, to be in a great measure unimpaired.” (16) This precisely describes the effect that Edny and everything associated with him produces on Huntly.

by the tree, he explains that “[t]o a casual observer this appearance would have been unnoticed. To me, it could not but possess a powerful significance. All my surmises and suspicions instantly returned. This apparition was human, it was connected with the fate of Waldegrave, it led to a disclosure of the author of that fate” (35). The *a priori* quality of Huntly’s assumptions is emphasized; the sight triggers a mechanical series of associations, and Huntly effectively subrepts his affective response to the sublime scene of Waldegrave’s death by attributing his feelings to Clithero’s culpability in that crime.

Huntly recognizes the automatic quality of Edny’s actions, but not their resemblance to the “mechanical” quality of his own, and explains that his thoughts, although “rapid and incongruous,” “could not fail to terminate in one conjecture, that this person was asleep. Such instances were not unknown to me, through the medium of conversation and books” (36). His phrasing seems to anticipate the “medium of conversation” (ie, Clithero’s confession) through which he will be sympathetically introduced into the same condition later in the novel. Huntly realizes that the man “was a sleeper; but what was the cause of this morbid activity? [...] the incapacity of sound sleep denotes a mind sorely wounded. It is thus that atrocious criminals denote the possession of some dreadful secret. The thoughts, which considerations of safety enable them to suppress or disguise during wakefulness, operate without impediment and exhibit their genuine effects, when the notices of sense are partly excluded and they are shut out from a knowledge of their entire condition” (38). While he recognizes that “the incapacity of sound sleep denotes a mind sorely wounded,” Huntly fails to recognize the relevance of this fact for his own state, although he acknowledges that “my slumbers were imperfect” (40). The circumstantial concatenation between the man’s disordered sleep and the site of his noctambulation are sufficient for Huntly to conclude,

“[w]ho but the murderer of Waldegrave could direct his steps hither? His employment was part of some fantastic drama in which his mind was busy. To comprehend it demands penetration into the recesses of his soul” (38).

From this point on, it is Huntly’s attempts to penetrate the recesses of Edny’s soul that drive the novel further into its abyssal reaches, in a manner which anticipates Nietzsche’s oft-quoted aphorism, “he who stares into the abyss should beware, for the abyss stares also into him.” Huntly’s desire for penetration is palpably projected during the next section of the novel, as it becomes a physical descent into the caves below Solebury; a process of monstrous literalization which governs the structure of the rest of the novel, as ideas and impressions which first arise within Huntly then become features of “external” reality.

Upon Huntly’s identification and re-discovery of Edny a few pages later, the somnambulant suspect rushes off on a tortuous route through the “trackless and intricate,” “craggy and obscure” (34) wilderness, “perpetually changing his direction,” until “we at last arrived at the verge of a considerable precipice,” (42) anticipating the abyss into which both Edny and Huntly will throw themselves slightly later. Exemplary of the novel’s psychospacial conflation, the next section of the text is a veritable catalogue of the sublime qualities of the wilderness through which the characters rush. Huntly himself makes note of this conflation, exclaiming that “this scene reminded me of my situation. The desert tract called Norwalk [...] was in the highest degree rugged, picturesque, and wild” (43).

Edny leads him to a location which Huntly remembers from his childhood, where “[a] mountain cave and the rumbling of an unseen torrent are appendages of this scene, dear to my youthful imagination. Many of romantic structures were found within the precincts of

Norwalk" (45). Brown's use of the phrase "romantic structure", anticipating Vijay Mishra's description of the sublime as "a structure for the determination of subjectivity," serves to remind the reader of the confusion of objects in the world and processes of subjective experience which are indicative both of much of the discourse on the sublime and the power of the novel itself to shake up or stir its readers through its relentless ambiguations of action and imagination. Similarly, Huntly's acknowledgement of the landscape's significance to his childhood anticipates both the representation of temporal movement with which the narrative will continue to play, and the associative powers of formative trauma which will be revealed in the following sections - particularly once Huntly has made his descent into the caverns below Solebury.

Huntly is drawn into this abyssal drive through his mysterious sympathy with Edny. He claims that "I plunged into obscurities, and clambered over obstacles, from which, in a different state of mind, and with a different object of pursuit, I should have recoiled with invincible timidity" (46). Even before his doubling with Edny is reinforced by his becoming somnambulant, the boundaries between Huntly's mind and Edny's are unstable and unclear. Similarly, the inextricable intimacy of Solebury as both geographic space and as figuration of the unconscious *Urgrund* of his subjectivity is hammered home by the resemblance between the terms in which the landscape, Huntly's mental state, and his relationship with Edny are evoked.

Huntly writes that their route pursues "a maze, oblique, circuitous, upward and downward, in a degree which only could take place in a region so remarkably irregular in surface, so abounding with hillocks and steeps and pits and brooks, as Solebury. It seemed to be the sole end of [Edny's] labours to bewilder or fatigue his pursuer, to pierce into the

deepest thickets, to plunge into the darkest cavities, to ascend the most difficult heights, and approach the slippery and tremulous verge of the dizziest precipices” (46). This passage particularly captures the linkages between the landscape, the labyrinthine conditions of Huntly’s own divided mind, and the psychic entanglement he shares with his co-somnambulant quarry. Krause has observed that Brown’s use of the actual place-name Solebury also suggests a place where the soul, or subject, is buried or submerged, and indeed, in another of the novel’s many structural puns, this becomes expressive of Huntly’s *Nekyia*, as he sleepwalks into the pit in the bowels of the caverns below.

Huntly loses the somnambulant Edny in the wilderness, only to locate him again later, this time in his waking state, and demand an explanation for his actions. Edny agrees to make a full confession, but at a later date, and only if Huntly will accompany him into the wilds of Norwalk. Huntly’s account belies his supposedly altruistic motivations, and throws into high relief his compulsive quest for a sublime object of knowledge that will remain, throughout the novel, unattainable. He writes that “my condition was not destitute of enjoyment. My stormy passions had subsided into a calm, portentous and awful. My soul was big with expectation. It seemed as if I were on the eve of being ushered into a world whose scenes were tremendous but sublime” (53).

Their eventual return to Norwalk signals the novel’s shift into a lengthy framed narration as Edny tells his tale. It is this additional level of narration that represents one of the novel’s chief structural difficulties, a problem that Brown attempted to overcome by the numerous parallels between Edny’s misadventures and those of Huntly. Chief among these is Edny’s killing of Mrs. Lorimer’s brother, Arthur Wiatte, since both she and Edny believe that, upon Wiatte’s death, “[a] fatal sympathy will seize her. She will shrink, and swoon, and

perish at the news” (89). This fatal sympathy, echoed by that seemingly shared by Huntly and Edny, offers yet another manifestation of doubling, once again mediated through narrative as an infectious vector. It is his mistaken belief that he has caused the death of Mrs. Lorimer, and turned the heart of his beloved Clarice against him, that forced Edny to seize upon “[t]he idea of abjuring my country and flying forever from the hateful scene [which] partook, to my apprehension, of the vast, the boundless, and strange; of plunging from the height of fortune to obscurity and indigence, corresponded with my present state of mind” (98). Driven to the brink by his guilt over his own actions, Edny was compelled to lose himself in the sublime landscape of the American frontier – a desire which will be literalized by his becoming-landscape through the medium of Huntly’s narrative.

In addition to parodying Caleb’s presumptions to “help” Falkland by forcing his confession, Huntly’s elicitation of Edny’s lengthy narration also offers a fascinating parallel to the “magnetic crisis” which was the major therapeutic method of Puysegur and other turn of the nineteenth-century medico-magnetizers, a relationship which Ellenberger sees as being a prototype of the psychoanalytic analyst-analysand relationship. As Ellenberger explains, “[a] magnetizer, Mesmer proclaimed, is the therapeutic agent of his cures: his power lies in himself. To make healing possible, he must first establish a rapport, that is a kind of ‘tuning in’, with his patient. Healing occurs through crises – manifestations of latent diseases produced artificially by the magnetizer so that he may control them” (69).

Something similar is suggested by Brown’s description of the physiological effects Edny endures during his confession. As he re-enacts his tale, Edny’s “countenance betokened a violent internal struggle” (54), implying that he relives the experiences even as he relates them, in a manner commensurate with Huntly’s earlier expressed fear that as he

“gains dominion over words,” he will lose it over sentiments. This crisis intensifies as he reaches the denouement of his tale (the death of Wiatte), where “Clithero stopped. His complexion varied from one degree of paleness to another. His brain appeared to suffer some severe constriction” (79). This confession, unfortunately, rather than precipitating a “cure” for either Edny’s somnambulant psychosis or Huntly’s monomaniacal curiosity, seems instead to incite a pathological “transference” between the two characters.

In keeping with the Royal Commission and Benjamin Franklin’s suspicion of mesmeric cures, Brown’s narrative suggestively undermines the therapeutic efficacy of such a crisis. As Krause affirms, “Huntly may be the doctor sicker than his patient, but much of our difficulty in understanding him subsides once we see that his neurotic contradictions are symptomatic of autoscopy: he hallucinates his own being in Edny” (321). Huntly’s persistent therapeutic delusions toward Edny continue until their disastrous consequences are driven home to him by the novel’s conclusion. As Krause observes, “[w]ell beyond the time he should have learned not to meddle with Edny’s pathetic madness, Huntly compulsively insists he must ‘relieve him.’ He will not ‘admit the belief that [Edny’s] misery is without a cure” (319). This is further ironized by the fact that Huntly is not only incapable of curing Edny of his delusions, he also clearly shares in them to some degree; much like Edny’s somnambulism itself, they have been contagiously transmitted between the two characters.

The seemingly incorrigible delusions of both characters can be read as providing a sharp criticism of the influential Lockean view, that “[m]admen do not appear to have lost the faculty of reasoning: but having joined together some ideas very wrongly, they mistake them for truths, and they err as men do that argue right from wrong principles.”

As Roy Porter explains, “Lockean thinking, so highly esteemed in the Enlightenment, would form the basis of new secular and psychological approaches to understanding insanity. The implied equation he drew between delusion and faulty education instilled optimism: the mad could be retrained to think correctly’ (2002 60).

A view comparable to Locke’s is articulated by Huntly when, having heard Edny’s tale, he concludes that his “crime originated in those limitations which nature has imposed upon human faculties. Proofs of a just intention are all that are requisite to exempt us from blame; he is thus in consequence of a double mistake. The light in which he views this event is erroneous. He judges wrong, and is therefore miserable” (101). Brown’s increasingly Calvinistic pessimism about the perfectibility of the human mind is in violent opposition to this optimistic view, and Huntly’s ostensibly good intentions are cruelly undercut by the course of the narrative.

Although Edny, whose mania does not prevent him from recognizing the same delusive tendencies in Huntly that exist in himself, explicitly warns Huntly that “[y]ou, like others, are blind to the most momentous consequences of your own actions” (55), Huntly persists in his mistaken belief in his own benevolent rationality. It is only, Huntly concludes in a Lockean fashion, proper instruction that is wanting in correcting Edny’s deluded views. However, while Huntly maintains that “[r]eason was no less an antidote to the illusions of insanity like his, than to the illusions of error” (104), his (mis)use of reason is fundamentally incapable of overcoming either Edny’s madness, or his own errors in the matter, as Sarsefield will eventually point out.

Thus, contrary to the Lockean view that madness extends from “wrong principles,” both Edny and Huntly continually display a “strong but perverted reason,” suggesting a

Humean conception of reason as a (potentially misleading) mode of sensation in itself. Particularly in light of the “magnetic sympathy” they share, it is not surprising that Huntly refuses to believe in the incorrigibility of Edny’s madness, as this would point directly to the failure of his own conceptions and rational powers. Like *Wieland*’s Theodor, who insists on the stability of his reason and the rightness of his actions even after he is faced with an explanation of their error, Edny persists in his belief that he must be, against his will, the agent of Mrs. Lorrimer’s destruction. As he had early on warned Huntly, “[t]ill consciousness itself be extinct, the worm that gnaws me will never perish” (56).

Having absorbed Edny’s diseasing narrative, Huntly exclaims “[h]ow imperfect are the grounds of all our decisions!” (100). This statement once again suggests the novel’s conflation of psychic and geographic space by emphasizing the resemblance between the treacherous ground of our subjectivity, as revealed by Edny’s confession, and that of Norwalk’s environs, to which these events have driven him. This anticlimactic revelation does nothing to alleviate Huntly’s compulsive desire to penetrate Edny’s gloomy interior, however. Lamenting the continuous recession of the sublime revelation he seeks, Huntly exclaims “[t]he secret which I imagined was about to be disclosed was as inscrutable as ever. Not a circumstance, from the moment when Clithero’s character became the subject of my meditations, till the conclusion of his tale, but served to confirm my suspicion. Was this error to be imputed to credulity? Would not anyone, from similar appearances, have drawn similar conclusions? Or is there a criterion by which truth can always be distinguished?” (100).

In spite of this continued suspicion, as the narrative progresses, Huntly’s obsession begins to shift gradually from a forensic to a therapeutic fixation on Edny; a shift already

foreshadowed by the resemblance between Edny's confession and the "magnetic crisis". Seemingly anticipating his status as a prototypical analyst to Edny's analysand, Huntly writes, "[m]y mind was full of the images unavoidably suggested by this tale, but they existed in a kind of chaos, and not otherwise than gradually was I able to reduce them to distinct particulars, and subject them to a deliberate and methodical inspection" (100). Like most of Huntly's "deliberate" and "methodical" attempts, these are eventually ironized by his inability to understand the depths of Edny's delusions, or of his own.

After the traumatic effects of his narration, Edny retreats again into the wilds of Norwalk. Once again, Huntly pursues him, in a passage which uncannily echoes the previous, but which further intensifies the apparent psycho-spatial conflation. Both Huntly and Edny continually return to the same scenes in a strange literary intimation of the Freudian repetition-compulsion. Speaking of his strange affinity for this landscape, Huntly writes, "[t]hou knowest my devotion to the spirit that breathes its inspiration in the gloom of forests and on the verge of streams. I love to immerse myself in shades and dells, and hold converse with the solemnities and secrecies of nature in the rude retreats of Norwalk" (103). This echoes the identical affinity expressed a few pages earlier by Edny, who stated that "[t]he wilderness, the cave to which you followed me, were familiar to my Sunday rambles [...] the scene is adapted to my temper" (99). Given that it is on such a "rude retreat" that Huntly again encounters Edny, this reinforces the link between their sublime dispositions, their relation to the landscape, and their "magnetical sympathy".

No longer convinced of Edny's involvement in Waldegrave's death, but nevertheless irresistibly drawn to him, Huntly vows to track Edny down once more, this time ostensibly for his own safety, and from a desire to alleviate his suffering. Huntly expresses his surprise

that Edny has been able to lose him in these surroundings in a fashion that reflects their psychic imbrication, writing that “[p]erhaps no one was more acquainted with this wilderness than I, but my knowledge was extremely imperfect” (105) – which also serves to suggest the absolute lack of self-knowledge which characterizes Huntly throughout the novel.

Predictably enough, this pursuit ends in a literal act of penetration, as both characters, passing through a quintessentially sublime “perpetual and intricate variety of craggy eminences and deep dells” (104), “obscured by the melancholy umbrage of pines, whose eternal murmurs are in unison with vacancy and solitude,” (105) come once again across the cavernous entrance into Solebury’s subterranean network. Momentarily debating following Edny in his descent, Huntly decides that the cave “might at least conceal some token of his past existence. It might lead into spaces hitherto unvisited, and to summits from which wider landscapes might be seen” (106). Given that Huntly will lose Edny (and later, himself) in this cave, this scene is echoed when Huntly similarly violates Edny’s locked trunk, only to discover it empty. It also intimates the “wider landscapes” to which Huntly will believe himself to be introduced by his own somnambulism.

Huntly emphasizes the exploratory excitement of this descent, writing that “I was probably the first who had deviated thus remotely from the customary paths of men” (110), which again anticipates his description of his somnambulant condition and also suggests his imbrication with Edny, who obviously precedes him in this descent. The cavern’s landscape, seemingly punning on the spatial connotations of sublimity as suggesting both depth and height, is described as a plateau of sublime intensity. Gazing about, in awe at the sublimity of these passages of “desolate and solitary grandeur” (110), of “sanctity and awe [...] owing

to the consciousness of absolute and utter loneliness” (110), Huntly is nearly overcome by the scenery. Suddenly, the connection between Huntly-Edny’s inter-penetration and their penetration of the lightless maze they practically personify is underlined, as Huntly, in awe of the rocks, writes “I admired their fantastic shapes, and endless irregularities. Passing from one to the other of these, my attention lighted, as if by some magical transition, on – a human countenance!” (110).

The emergence of a human face from these fantastic, stony excrescences will be echoed slightly later, as Huntly encounters the Indians who, with their “fantastic shapes and ornaments” and “tawny and terrific visages,” serve as frightening extensions of this sublime landscape. In this case, the face belongs to a tangle-haired and heavily bearded Clithero, who with “an air of melancholy wildness” (111) that echoes Huntly’s description of the wilderness above, throws himself into the chasm, and is presumed dead. Again, the sublime language Huntly employs and his use of the phrase “magical transition” – echoed later in his description of his somnambulant state, which in turn echoes the phraseology of sublime transport – highlights the sublime sources of the scene.

Upon returning from his unsuccessful pursuit, Huntly decides to search Clithero’s lodgings for clues to the veracity of his tale and the origins of his condition. Locating his room at Inglefield’s, Huntly learns that Edny has not been seen for some time. “I inquired what this man had left behind, and found that it consisted of a square box, put together by himself with uncommon strength, but of rugged workmanship” (118). Huntly resolves to somehow open the box and investigate the contents to satisfy his curiosity. This he justifies by stating that, “[i]n spite of the testimony of my own feelings, the miseries of Clithero appeared in some degree fantastic and groundless. A thousand conceivable motives might

induce him to pervert or conceal the truth [...] I desired to restore him to peace; but a thorough knowledge of his actions is necessary [...] it was possible that this box contained the means of this knowledge” (120).

Apparently punning on the use of the term *spring* by Hume, Godwin, and his own “Apology” to *Edgar Huntly* to denote the principle motivation of human actions, Brown has Huntly speculate as he struggles to open the trunk that “[s]ome spring, therefore, secretly existed, which might forever elude the senses” (121). The mechanical device which renders the trunk inaccessible doubles as the impossible- to-uncover subterranean source from which human motivation springs. Of course, as Huntly realizes, this source truly is impossible to uncover, as, opening the trunk, he discovers that not only is it devoid of useful information, it has also been designed to break if tampered with, ensuring Clithero’s knowledge of its penetration. Alluding to the obvious resemblance between this scene and Caleb William’s penetration of Falkland’s secret trunk, Scott Bradfield writes that “[w]hile Falkland’s padlocked trunk ultimately discloses the conspiracy of government, Clithero’s trunk (like Brown’s narrative) is ‘divided into numerous compartments’ but betrays nothing ‘of moment’” (30).

Subsequently, Edny returns, driving Huntly into hiding. Waiting until he sees an enraged Edny leaving the house, Huntly returns to his room where he finds the cabinet shattered. Shortly thereafter, Huntly returns outside, and breaks open the box he had earlier seen a somnambulant Edny bury beneath a tree. Discovering a manuscript within, he exclaims “[n]o object in the circle of nature was more adapted than this to rouse up all my

faculties⁴⁰” (123). This scene offers a tableau that figures the enthusiastic sublimation of knowledge troped by the novel as a whole. It dramatizes a “new category within the sublime: the sublime of knowledge. Just as the experience of landscape or literature produces moments of ravishment and transport which lead on to an enhanced sense of self and personal freedom, so too the experience of knowledge leads on to a similar enhanced sense of self and political freedom” (Ashfield and de Bolla 265).

The language of this passage renders the connection between the sublime landscape of Norwalk, with its physical evocations of the wild depths and heights of the unconscious mind, and the sublime knowledge of this shadowy and obscure source explicit. This association is further reinforced by the narrative’s quintessentially Gothic usage of a pathetic fallacy, which dramatizes Huntly’s encounter with this purloined letter further. After reading, Huntly rushes off as “torrents of rain poured from above [...] instead of lamenting the prevalence of this tempest, I now began to regard it with pleasure. It conferred new forms of sublimity and grandeur on the scene” (125), gesturing once more to the correlated effects of nature’s with knowledge’s sublimity as intoxicating agents, with their dangerous power to arouse the passions.

Returning to his home, Huntly discovers that a number of disastrous domestic events have coincided with his trek through the wilderness, most importantly the duplicative purloining of the hidden letters from Waldegrave. Huntly emphasizes the destabilizing effect the loss of the letters has on him, writing, “[t]hou canst not imagine my confusion and

⁴⁰ The contents of the letter itself are treated anti-climactically, and are only of minor significance to the remainder of the novel. As Huntly explains, “Clithero had mentioned that his lady had composed a vindication of her conduct towards her brothers when her intercession in his favour was solicited and refused. This performance had never been published, but had been read by many, and was preserved by her friends as a precious monument of her genius and her virtue. This was the manuscript now before me” (124)

astonishment when, on opening the drawer, I perceived that the packet was gone [...] Whither had it gone, and by whom was it purloined?" (134) After finding his cabinet violated and the letters missing, and learning that his uncle had heard footsteps upstairs the night before, Huntly quite logically hypothesizes that the intruder his uncle heard (and whom his uncle had assumed to be Huntly himself) and the thief of the letters must be the same person. "This intrusion and the pillage of my cabinet were contemporary events. Was there no more connection between them than that which results from time? Was not the purloiner of my treasure and the wanderer the same person?" (137)

What Huntly refuses to realize until near the novel's conclusion is that both his assumption and his uncle's are correct. Ellenberger describes two basic types of trance possession, the lucid and the somnambolic, and Huntly epitomizes the latter, in which the individual "suddenly loses consciousness of his self and speaks with the 'I' of the supposed intruder; after regaining consciousness, he remembers nothing of what 'the other one' has said or done" (13). Ironically, it is in part his refusal to recognize his own somnambulism (although he was quick to diagnose Edny's) that leads to his accelerated psychological deterioration. The narrative suggests that the shock of this discovery, combined with Huntly's panic at Weyland's arrival, with its disastrous consequences for his future with Mary and his badly repressed guilt at the effects of his curiosity on Edny, combine to produce pressure that his already unstable identity cannot bear.

This finally culminates in his collapse into delirium, from which he awakens, disoriented, alone and in the dark. Ignorant of his surroundings or how he came to occupy them, he is both literally and figuratively "wrapped in the most insensible gloom" (154) and "immersed in palpable obscurity" (155). Brown's description of darkness as a solid object

of sense, which echoes Theodor Wieland's exclamation of "how almost palpable is this dark," serves as a metonym for the method by which both novels figuratively embody epistemological aporia as physical presences, further underlining the thematic continuity between them.

Huntly's awaking in the pit⁴¹ elaborately invokes the Burkean-Kantian depiction of a sublime encounter as causing a momentary paralysis of the senses and imagination, which then opens into a wider awareness – an awareness that, in this case, is eventually revealed to be delusive. Upon regaining consciousness, Huntly recalls the fit that preceded his awaking in the pit as an "instant when [his] thoughts ceased to flow and [his] senses were arrested" (154). He employs the same terms he uses to describe the landscape above in describing his mental state. His thoughts are "wilderer and mazy," and he experiences a paralysis caused by a facultative severance, for "though consciousness was present, it was disconnected from the locomotive or voluntary power" (154). This severance between consciousness and action, here manifested as Huntly's wakeful awareness but inability to move, anticipates the facultative severance that will evolve in the following pages, as Huntly finds himself acting of a will not his own, as though possessed. Throughout the next section of the novel, the Huntly who narrates is often portrayed as a different being than the one who performs the actions narrated.

The narrative emphasizes the temporal disruption this period of interment precipitates, presenting a maddening parallel to the Kantian conception of a sublime encounter as an occasion in which the sequential movement of time is radically disrupted. In

⁴¹ Which Poe, who wrote highly of the novel, would repeatedly adopt and alter in a number of his tales. The next chapter will discuss its parodic extension in *Arthur Gordon Pym*; for a discussion of its importance to "The Pit and the Pendulum" see Axelrod (35).

phrasing that indicates the radical discontinuity between the Huntly who earlier lost consciousness, and the Huntly who now awakes, he writes “I endeavoured to recall the past; but the past was too much in contradiction to the present, and my intellect was too much shattered by external violence, to allow me accurately to review it” (155). This discontinuity is further emphasized by his description of this submersion as a literal death, as Huntly states “sometimes I imagined myself buried alive” (156).

During this immeasurable season in the abyss, Huntly emphasizes his inability to differentiate between dream and waking reality. The infectiously projective imaginative tendencies he had already displayed are intensified, as “I existed, as it were, in a wakeful dream. With nothing to correct my erroneous perceptions, the images of the past occurred in capricious combinations and vivid hues” (156). This scene amplifies the already oneiric quality of the narrative, and casts Huntly’s subsequent actions and impressions beneath a veil of uncertainty. As he explains, it is impossible to tell whether “I was still asleep, and this was merely a tormenting vision; or madness had seized me, and the darkness that environed and the hunger that afflicted me existed only in my own distempered imagination” (156-157).

While he drifts and struggles to make some sense of this obscure state, Huntly stumbles across a tomahawk, noting that “this incident afforded me no hint from which I might conjecture my state” (155). The tomahawk is, of course, Huntly’s own, but he takes its presence as evidence of the proximity of dangerous Indians. Brown’s inclusion of this metonym of sinister savagery serves to place the Indians encountered later in the novel proximate to the pit of its sublime subject, hinting at their projective origins in Huntly’s own delirious imagination. As will be further explored below, they are unapologetically

portrayed as denizens of his anxious unconscious, and formations in the submerged landscape of his subjectivity.

Huntly provides a full five pages of detailed description devoted entirely to his complex interaction of sensational, affective and imaginary states, noting that “[m]y excruciating sensations for a time occupied my attention. These, in combination with other causes, gradually produced a species of delirium... [m]y state was full of tumult and confusion, and my attention was incessantly divided between my painful sensations and my feverish dreams” (156). Gradually, Huntly comes to realize that he is now immured in the same pit that he witnessed Edny hurl himself into “on the former day” (157) while he was tracking him through the caverns. Thus, his vertiginous encounter with his double is again linked to his literal descent into the pit. Huntly asks “[h]ad I reached the brink of the same precipice and been thrown headlong into that vacuity?” (157). This section of the narrative establishes a connection between Huntly’s double, the Indians who will appear in person later in the novel, and the sublime experience of intrasubjective alterity.

One further figure is worked into this abyssal series of associations by the narrative; this is the panther Huntly is forced to face upon finally being able to climb from the pit. This creature is introduced in a manner that makes its double role as physical existent and mental projection clear, as the panther’s physical presence is preceded by Huntly’s own desire to become carnivorous. Huntly confesses that “I felt a strong propensity to bite the flesh from 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 fibers between my teeth” (158). Just as, before Huntly battles the “savages,” he has become savage himself (as his adoption of the tomahawk suggests), before Huntly faces

off against the panther, he has already become-animal himself. This metamorphosis literalizes the contemporaneously popular view of madness as a surfacing of “lower or bestial states,” to borrow Coleridge’s phrase.

This becoming-animal is externalized as Huntly emerges from the pit, where he writes that “[t]he darkness was no less intense than in the pit below, and yet two objects were distinctly seen [...] They resembled a fixed and obscure flame [...] These were the eyes of a panther” (159). Just as Huntly’s desire for an opportunity for revenge against Waldegrave’s killer preceded his encounter with his double Edny, just as his and Edny’s sublime dispositions precede Huntly’s sublime depictions of the Norwalk landscape, so his assumption of a predatory subjective state germinates into the palpable presence of the panther.⁴²

The panther appears first as a pair of eyes, locked with Huntly’s own. This luminescent gaze also figures the mesmeric relationship that underlies so much of the narrative structure. In keeping with contemporaneous beliefs about the seemingly supernatural powers of the somnambulist, Huntly finds himself animated by a wild invigoration. Huntly notes that “[n]o one knows the powers that are latent in his constitution. Called forth by imminent dangers, our efforts frequently exceed our most sanguine belief”

⁴² This is described in a fashion which uncannily anticipates Lawrence’s description, quoted in this chapter’s epigraphs, of the “strange and fugitive self” which characterizes the Nineteenth century American writing he holds in such high esteem. As Eric Savoy explains, “Lawrence asserted that European modernists ‘had not yet reached the pitch of extreme consciousness’ that animated the American nineteenth century; whereas the modernists were ‘trying to be extreme,’ many nineteenth-century Americans ‘just were it.’ Lawrence accounts for this essential American modernity – the status of the ‘extreme’ in the literary mainstream – by contrasting nineteenth-century European realism, which was ‘explicit’ and ‘hate[d] eloquence and symbols, seeing in them only subterfuge,’ to the Americans who ‘refuse everything explicit and always put up a sort of double meaning, who reel in subterfuge’” (170).

(160). After a dramatic battle of Burkean virility,⁴³ Huntly manages to kill and devour the panther. Brown's suggestively polysemous use of sanguine in this passage is apt, as it suggests the relationship between the astounding powers Huntly has, through his psychic *Nekyia* and violent rebirth, acquired, and the bloodthirsty bent the new force that governs his actions has taken on. It additionally ironizes Huntly's earlier assurance that he was devoid of "sanguinary"⁴⁴ impulses toward Edny (50) by dramatizing the eventual violent results of his compulsive inquiry.

This violent episode is shortly echoed by Huntly's first encounter with the band of Indians who, like the landscape, Edny, and the panther, are presented as much as projections of Huntly's troubled mind as physical existents. Upon his ascent from the caves, Huntly

⁴³ This also evokes the Burkean belief that the sublime encounter was a method of rejuvenating and masculinizing the subject. As James Kirwan explains, "[i]n Burke and Kant the emphasis is definitely on the 'manliness' of the sublime – Kant cites the waging of war (providing civilians are respected), as exemplary of manly sublimity of soul and decries the 'degrading' softness that comes from prolonged peace" (44). Burke's conception of sublimity had been early used (although certainly not by Burke himself) as a physiological justification for the widening popularity of the Gothic and sensational novel forms, as the affective jolts they provided in a contained, aestheticized fashion were thought to serve a parallel purpose in strengthening, masculinizing, those who experienced them. Of course, by the time of Brown's novel, this physiological explanation for the effects of Gothic fiction had begun to wane in popularity, most often supplanted by its critical counterpoint, made famous by Coleridge's depiction of such fictions as "powerful stimulants," which viewed consumers of Gothic fiction analogically to drug addicts, suffering from a nervous enervation brought about by stimulant-habituating. Brown's novel seems to invoke both critical tropes.

⁴⁴ The link between Huntly's "sanguinary impulses" and "sanguine beliefs", echoing the ambivalent view of somnambulism in the novel as both disease and source of inspiration, also evokes the common 18th-19th century belief that madness was a disorder of the blood – see, for example, Skultans (13-14). Such a view influenced, among others, Hume, who claimed that "when the imagination, from any extraordinary ferment of the blood and spirits, acquires such a vivacity as disorders all its powers and faculties, there is no means of distinguishing betwixt truth and falsehood; but every loose fiction or idea, having the same influence as the impressions of the memory, or the conclusions of the judgment, is reciev'd on the same footing, and operates with equal force on the passions" (89).

sights a fire in the distance, and exclaims that “[n]o spectacle was more adapted than this to excite wonder and alarm. Had some mysterious power snatched me from the earth, and cast me, in a moment, into the heart of the wilderness? Was I still in the vicinity of my parental habitation, or was I thousands of miles distant?” (164). Drawing closer, he recognizes the figures seated around the fire as a band of armed Indians.

His reaction to this sight is as reflexive and “mechanical” as his reaction to the elm tree had been. He explains that “[m]ost men are haunted by some species of terror or antipathy, which they are, for the most part, able to trace to some incident which befell them in their early years. You will not be surprised that the fate of my parents, and the sight of the body of one of this savage band, who, in the pursuit that was made after them, was overtaken and killed, should produce lasting and terrific images in my fancy. I never looked upon or called up the image of a savage without shuddering” (165). Echoing the concern with formative trauma evidenced by the Brown’s treatment of the “early impressions” of the elder Wieland’s death upon his children, Huntly’s admission ambiguate his subsequent insistence that he tried his best to avoid a violent confrontation with these figures, whose “gigantic form and fantastic ornaments” (167) link them suggestively to the “gigantic” rocks of the “fantastic” subterranean landscape from which he has just emerged.

As Krause observes, “there are shadings of antipathy in Edgar Huntly which suggest that Brown’s depiction of the Indian was slanted in ways that go beyond the needs of characterization” (367). Critics from Brown’s time to our own have variously condemned and attempted to defend *Edgar Huntly*’s unpleasant demonization of Native People. Such attacks and defences seem to miss the point, as Brown himself explains the role these figures are to play in his apology to the novel. He is interested in “calling forth the passions and

engaging the sympathy of the reader [...]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” (29). In other words, the wilderness setting and its Native inhabitants are treated as both expressions of the narrator’s subjectivity, and conveyances for the production of sublime effects – but not as realistic or fully dimensioned characters.

Edgar Huntly’s Indians are portrayed as such monstrous creatures, spectral in their lack of development and detail, that it is quite difficult to take them seriously as realistic representations. Stineback writes that, “[a]s Brown’s more astute critics have pointed out, the perversity of nature and the chilling speechlessness of its ‘dusky’ inhabitants are fearful projections of Huntly’s own mind” (20). Brown deploys the figure of the (ig)noble savage⁴⁵ as an extension of the autochthonous realm of the unconscious.

Huntly’s conflict with the Indians can be read as a projection of the intrasubjective conflict which characterizes the experience of the sublime. This, as Scott Bradfield writes, results from *Edgar Huntly*’s “translation of political tropes into psychological ones. The domain of class interests and political landscapes becomes interiorized as a battle between the uncivilized Indian and the civilized European. A division of races becomes remetaphorized as a division of self” (Bradfield xiii). Nevertheless, the form this remetaphorization takes is important for an understanding of the novel, as the violent uprising of the Indians in *Edgar Huntly* can be read as yet another associative pun, as they

⁴⁵ Krause notes that “[i]t has been seen that eighteenth-century views of the Indian were fairly dichotomized between the Rousseauists, with their ideal of a natural morality in the innocence of the Forest, and those in the opposing camp, who suggested that life among the natives led to degeneracy” (387). These two views could be taken to roughly correspond to the liberal/Lockean representation of the “natural state” of subjectivity, and the quasi-Calvinist suspicion that pervades so much of Brown’s fiction.

represent a conflation of “Indian” with the West Indies, which were the site of widely publicized slave rebellions nearly contemporaneous with *Edgar Huntly*’s authorship.

In his essay “On the Origin of American Specie(s),” Sean X. Goudie explains that “for Jefferson and Anglo-Americans who believed blacks to be naturally inferior, the Haitian revolution was a trauma of seismic proportions [...] the rash of rebellions, and the attendant flow of West Indian creoles, their slaves and commodities into the United States, caused many US citizens to become anxious about possible slave rebellions in the United States, and about the cohesion of their national culture and character” (62). The racialized revolutionary anxiety given expression by Huntly’s “savages” is informed by the fact that, “by the time Jefferson became president in 1800, many of the nation’s citizens had come to perceive themselves, their culture, their government, and their identities through and against the democratic upheavals and proliferating identities in the West Indies” (63). The “capricious constitution” of the human mind is thus suggestively compared to the fragile Constitution that binds together American identity, constantly at risk, like Huntly’s tenuous personality, from the irruption of barely repressed forces.

The novel’s associative logic also links Waldegrave’s murder to these disavowed embodiments of alterity, as Huntly ultimately learns that Waldegrave was murdered not by Edny, but by an Indian assassin acting under the influence of the sinister Old Deb/Queen Mab. This association is further reinforced by Huntly’s description of Old Deb’s hut; a description which is both minimal and eminently sublime, as “[a]ll within was darkness and silence.” This description echoes Burke’s allusion to the sublimely pagan Indian in the *Enquiry*, where he writes of “the barbarous temples of the Americans,” who “keep their idol in a dark part of the hut, which is consecrated to his worship.” In deploying the image of the

Indian as a terrific embodiment of the natural sublime, Brown was performing what would become a practically generic gesture in subsequent treatments of the American sublime. Following Burke, Kant declared the Indian himself to be an apt figuration of sublimity, and this logic would inform, for example, Fuller's evocative description of Niagara Falls (discussed further in the next chapter,) in which Fuller imagines the dangerous presence of hostile Indians at her back, an association triggered by the terrific magnificence of the Falls themselves. As McKinsey reports, "[s]ince the Indian was himself sublime, as Kant pointed out, his very mention augments Niagara's awesomeness by association" (48).

Old Deb/Queen Mab nominally reinforces the association *Edgar Huntly* makes between the dangers of excessive sympathy, literary inspiration, and popular enthusiasm, as her name evokes both the mob or masses, and the notional power of folk superstitions as contagious delusions. Brown's suspicion of popular enthusiasm extends to the popular enthusiasm for the sanguine concept of sympathy advocated by Hume, Smith and American thinkers like Benjamin Rush. According to Krause, "[f]or liberal Philadelphians like Benjamin Rush, the power of sympathy (Huntly's forte) was appreciable. Regarded as the most cogent moral agent in the human arsenal, it was the 'viceregent of...divine benevolence in our world'" (346). Aware of the "respect that Rush had for mesmerism" (Krause 353), Brown exploited the mesmeric relationship as a means of criticizing the doctrine of sympathy itself. Further, *Edgar Huntly's* utterly unsympathetic portrayal of these demonized Indians rather starkly presents a point about the limits of this "viceregent" of "divine benevolence," which, as it was conceived by Jefferson or Rush, failed to extend its embrace to include America's subaltern Native or black population.

The association between the novel's production of sublime effects and its narrativization of anxieties about revolutionary violence, as figured both by the wild American landscape and its autochthonic personifications, represents both an alarming innovation in American literature, and a tropic migration from the European Gothic novels of the 1790's, with their historical and discursive proximity to the Terror of the French revolution. This trajectory will continue with Poe's virtual reinscription of *Edgar Huntly* in *Arthur Gordon Pym*. The fantastic savages in both these novels embody a generalized anxiety that links revolutionary violence to the disruptive affectivity of both the power of sympathy and the power of sublime texts. This racialized figuration of the irrational dangers of excessive affect in the linked forms of sympathy/sublimity will be echoed not only by American Gothic texts like Poe's *Pym* and Lovecraft's *Mountains of Madness*, but also more canonical early Modern texts such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

**“The Vast Depth Yet to Be Descended”:
The Sublime Cataract of *Arthur Gordon Pym***

“’Tis of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean.”

John Locke, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

“Methinks I am like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap’d ship-wreck in passing a small frith, has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe under these disadvantageous conditions.”

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

“...gods, demons, hell, spirits and souls of men, miracles, prodigies, enchantments, witchcrafts, thunder, tempests, raging seas, inundations, torrents, earthquakes, volcanoes, monsters, serpents, lions, tigers, fire, war, pestilence, famine [...] Now of all these ideas none are so terrible as those which show the wrath and vengeance of an angry god”

John Dennis, *Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*

“The ways of God in Nature, as in Providence, are not as our ways; nor are the models that we frame any way commensurate to the vastness, profundity, and unsearchableness⁴⁶ of His works, which have a depth in them greater than the well of Democritus”

Joseph Glanville (epigraph to Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelstrom”)

“Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial.”

Inspector Dupin (in Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue”)

“Deeper than any other ground is the surface and the skin. A new type of esoteric language is formed here which is its own model and reality.”

Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*

⁴⁶ In “Poe’s Word Coinages”, a supplement to his book *Poe, Creator of Words* included in *Poe Studies*, v. 16, Burton Pollin notes, “the third word of the set is added by Poe to the other two in the ‘Motto,’ ascribed to one of Joseph Glanville’s essays.” Poe’s addition of this word to the “Motto” suggests a thematic displacement, as “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” like *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, is a narrative of exploration predicated on the paradoxical search for the unsearchable.

Many of the themes central to Brown's *Edgar Huntly* are subsequently taken up and developed by Edgar Allan Poe's fictions. While Poe makes somnambulism the basis for a number of his tales⁴⁷, it is his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

⁴⁷ Echoing Fiedler's half-serious suggestion that Brown "invented" Poe, Peter Kafer notes that "Edgar Allan Poe paid Brown the high Poeian compliment of plagiarizing from him, directly in 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains,' and indirectly in numerous wilderness scenes and perhaps in selective renditions of the insane imagination" (198). Kafer's statement refers specifically to Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, which is the only one of his early novels to involve extended "wilderness scenes," and which is certainly the most important of Brown's novels for the development of Poe's fiction.

Indeed, there are a number of striking similarities between *Edgar Huntly* and "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains." The tale's protagonist, a Mr. Augustus Bedloe (whose name suggests that his descent into a sublime cataract can be read as echoing that of his nominal confrere in *Pym*), is, like Pym himself, a melancholiac who suffers from "a phaseless and unceasing gloom" (395). Bedloe's friend and "doctor, Templeton had been a traveler in his younger days, and, at Paris, had become a convert, in a great measure, to the doctrines of Mesmer" (395). Templeton turns to Mesmerism to try to help his patient, and "between Doctor Templeton and Bedloe there had grown up, little by little, a very distinct and strongly marked rapport, or magnetic relation" (396).

The resemblance to *Edgar Huntly*, with its intimations of a pseudo-therapeutic magnetic sympathy between Huntly and Edny, is obvious. The resemblance continues to grow as Bedloe wanders off into a wild area, described in terms that echo the stark sublimity of Huntly's Norwalk. He states "I entered a gorge which was entirely new to me. I followed the windings of this pass with much interest.- The scenery which presented itself on all sides, although scarcely entitled to be called grand, had about it an indescribable, and to me, a delicious aspect of dreary desolation." Like Huntly, Bedloe eventually stumbles upon the mouth of a labyrinthine ravine. He explains, "[s]o entirely secluded, and in fact inaccessible, except through a series of accidents, is the entrance of the ravine, that it's by no means impossible that I was indeed the first adventurer – the very first and sole adventurer who had ever penetrated its recesses" (397). The echo of Huntly's exclamation on his descent into the caverns (not to mention the respective exclamations of Pym and "MS"'s narrator) is obvious, as is the echo in Bedloe's exclamation, after witnessing a panoramic scene from lands distant in both space and time, that "I had perfect command of my senses – and these senses now brought to my soul a world of novel and singular sensation" (398). Here, the de-sublimated and nameless sublime of "MS found in a Bottle" reappears.

These echoes of *Edgar Huntly* are more than simply plagiarism, however, as nothing in Poe's narrative belies the visionary veracity of Bedloe's mystical experience. Poe appears here to rewrite the basic premise of Brown's novel in order to valorize the Mesmeric revelations that *Edgar Huntly* ultimately both ambiguates and undermines. This is not so surprising, as Poe's interest in Mesmerism was far less skeptical than Brown's. As Bruce

(hereafter *Pym*), which, although it dispenses with the device of somnambulism altogether, develops these “Brownian” themes most extensively. Like *Edgar Huntly*, *Pym* uses a synthesis of psychogeography and imaginative sympathy to provide a sustained critique of theories of the sublime. *Huntly*’s paradoxical critical analysis/ fictive embodiment of the sublime intersection between reader and text is both taken up and intensified through *Pym*’s infamously *misunderstanding*, and often *misunderstood*, eponymous protagonist.

In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and the Abyss of Interpretation*, J. Gerald Kennedy helpfully prefaces his reading of (and reading of previous readings of) Poe’s only novel by discussing the historical and political context in which it was written. In particular, three of the points Kennedy raises are important for understanding the sublime transformations that *Pym* performs. First, following closely in the footsteps of Brown’s phobic early fictions, *Pym* gives expression to anxieties surrounding rhetorical and literary inspiration, the struggle for political freedom (Rush’s “Liberty Mania”), and revolutionary violence. Kennedy writes that “[i]n 1831 William Lloyd Garrison began to publish his provocative newspaper, *the Liberator*, and eight months later the bloody Nat Turner Rebellion in Virginia terrified Southerners and dramatized for them the danger of exciting

Mills’s book *Poe, Fuller and the Mesmeric Arts* explores at length, Mesmerism was an almost obsessive preoccupation of Poe’s, and a phenomenon he explored in a number of other tales, including “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” and “Mesmeric Revelation.” The denouement of Poe’s “Ragged Mountains” reveals that Bedloe’s mesmeric condition has allowed the protagonist to see into the distant past and far side of the world. This contrasts strikingly with Brown’s depiction of Huntly’s quasi-Mesmeric condition. Huntly, while he at times believes himself to have gained some profound insight through his somnambulant possession, is belied by his own narrative, which reveals the delusiveness of these supposed “revelations.” While Huntly’s clairvoyance is presented in terms reminiscent of Theodor Wieland’s enthusiastic delusions, Poe’s representations of Mesmerism are far more fantastic, as he uses them as conveyances to explore supernatural phenomena such as metempsychosis, out of body experience, and time travel. In this respect, Poe’s “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” is light years away from Brown’s earlier narrative of somnambulism.

slaves with the idea of freedom” (4). This means that *Pym*'s engagement with the sublime (which always involves both intense pain and pleasure, fear and desire) is characteristically ambivalent: the sublime is both a desired effect, and an abject condition, within Poe's text. Permeated by the popular anxiety arising in the wake of these events, *Pym* tropes the dangerous freedom of “the lawless sublime” (Mishra) in terms of the enthusiastic dangers of reading texts. *Pym*'s most unsettling depiction of the enthusiastic dangers of “the idea of freedom,” much like *Edgar Huntly*'s, comes through its portrayal of a highly racialized revolutionary violence.

Second, *Pym*, also like *Huntly*, is concerned with geographic exploration, and the psycho-spatial conflation of the natural sublime associated with it. Given Poe's emphasis on the materiality of language, the surfaces of the world *Pym* explores are embodied by the surface of the page on which its words are written, and the affects of its explorer, products of sublime attacks on his individual subjectivity, are ideally reproduced in the reader's exposure to the novel's negative textual sublimity. This is informed by the fact that, in writing *Pym*, Poe drew directly on a number of “true” exploration narratives, especially those of J. M. Reynolds and Benjamin Morrell.⁴⁸ This (con)textual connection suggests that, on one level at least, Poe presented *Pym* (itself a kind of “commercial exploration,” as this hyperbolically “adventurous” novel represents a possible means of appealing to a wider readership) as a narrative advertisement for such commercial and scientific exploration.

⁴⁸ In addition, *Pym* offers a fictional anticipation of a nearly contemporaneous expedition; Kennedy writes that “in August 1838 Commodore Charles Wilkes embarked with a modest fleet on a four-year voyage of discovery to the South Seas [...] Poe's novel of polar adventure, delayed in publication by the bank panic of 1837, thus appeared in July 1838, just as the American expedition prepared to set out for that enticing yet ill-charted region” (9). Scott Bradfield adds that “in an essay published in the same issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger* as the first installment of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe praised J. N. Reynolds's plans to map commercial routes in the Pacific and South Seas” (68).

Particularly in the second half of the novel, in Kennedy's words, "Pym's account begins to read like a propagandistic tract encouraging scientific exploration of the South Seas – which in some sense Poe belatedly contrived it to be" (54). This, however, is a function the narrative's exploratory involution⁴⁹ often undermines, just as it in all probability undermined the tale's popularity, much as Melville's psycho-textual explorations would adversely affect *Moby Dick's* popular reception just over a decade later.

Finally, Kennedy points to the importance of the fact that the completion and publication of *Pym* occurred at the conclusion of Andrew Jackson's presidency. He explains that "[i]n the eight years of Jackson's presidency (1829-1837), the young republic had undergone a dramatic transformation, embracing the democratic populism championed by Jackson, who personified the back-woods, self-made man" (3). Jackson had become practically an avatar of patriotic national sublimity. An almost Emersonian epigone of self-reliance associated with aggressive expansion, Jackson came to personify for many Americans a kind of national-natural egotistical sublimity. It is this trope of sublimity which Pym's narrative effectively erodes. As Donald Pease has observed, "we might read Pym as the critique of the doctrine of self-reliance underwriting the form of the adventure novel" (175). For, while Pym himself intends his narrative to concern conquest and expansion, this

⁴⁹ In "Poe's Word Coinages: Supplement III" in *Poe Studies* v. 27, Pollin provides "involute," word #55, as one of Poe's revivals, as used in 1841's "Murders in the Rue Morgue": "The possible moves [in chess] being not only manifold, but involute, the chances of such oversight are multiplied" (34). In her discussion of Poe's cosmological prose poem, *Eureka*, Barbara Cantalupo writes that "[t]he movement in Poe's essay, then, could be perceived as repetitive involutions. Here the definition of involution would be understood in its mathematical sense, that is 'of or pertaining to a higher power' (*Webster*) rather than its more general definition of complexity or intricacy" (334). I see a very similar pattern operant in *Pym*, which conflates the spatial logic of a movement inward with that of movement upward. *Pym* exploits both senses of the word "involution", in that it simultaneously ironizes sublime elevation, and sublimates ironic negation into a creative act.

fictive intention is consistently undermined by the narrative's textual involution; "Pym does not corroborate the cultural usefulness of the adventurer's narrative, but exposes its cultural limits" (Pease 175). This is a trope apropos of Poe's political skepticism, since democratic populism (or any populism) was a suspicious concept for him. As Poe famously declared in a letter to James Russell Lowell, "I cannot agree to lose sight of man the individual, in man the mass" (quoted in Bradfield 79).

Poe's rejection of democratic consciousness, with its Whitmanic (or in A. R. Ammon's phrase, "whit manic") portrayal of collective identity incarnate in a representative body, is inextricably linked to his view, as expressed in a review of Lowell's "Fable for Critics," that "[e]ach person, in his own estimate, is the pivot on which all the rest of the world spins around" (XII, 166)⁵⁰. It is this view which, in part, informs Poe's deformation of natural/national sublimity, as well as his hostility for and incompatibility with the poetics of Whitman⁵¹ and the Boston Transcendentalists⁵². One way of figuring the difference

⁵⁰ David Ketterer develops this element of Poe's perspective extensively in *The Rationale of Deception in Poe*, where he explains that, in the world as Poe perceives it, "each person must live in a slightly different world, and each such world is an illusion because it is dependent upon a subjective perspective" (15).

⁵¹ Whitman, in *Specimen Days* (1880), wrote that "for a long while, and until lately, I had a distaste for Poe's writings. I wanted, and still want for poetry, the clear sun shining and the fresh air blowing – the strength and the power of health, not of delirium, even amid the stormiest passions – with always the background of the eternal moralities." (34). This insistence on the "background of the eternal moralities," "even amid the stormiest passions," echoes the Kantian insistence on the centrality of moral reason to the experience of the sublime. Both advocate the view that, in Emerson's words, "[t]he sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body" (300).

⁵² Poe was unsparing in his critical condemnation of "The Frogpondians," as he called the Boston Transcendentalists. In an autographic analysis, he wrote that "Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson belongs to a class of gentlemen with whom we have no patience whatever – the mystics for mysticism's sake [...] The best answer to his twaddle is *cui bono*..." Poe's response to his own rhetorical question is, "if not to Mr. Emerson individually, then surely to no man living" (XIV,ii, 260). Poe's relationship to Transcendental thought, however, is often misconstrued by readers and critics. While Poe was opposed to the writings of "the

between the poetic subjects of these fractiously proximate authors is to consider the poetic subject for Emerson to be a *transparent* eyeball, whereas for Poe it is a *translucent* eyeball – a subjective cataract, but one whose perceptual refractions and distortions have a paradoxically creative power.

In *The American Sublime: Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*, Rob Wilson claims that “[c]rossing the Atlantic, the sublime underwent an ideological sea-change. If the Enlightenment sublime had represented the unrepresentable, confronted privation, and pushed language to the limits of imagining the vastness of nature and stellar infinitude as the subject’s innermost ground, the Americanization of this sublime rhetoric represented, in effect, the interiorization of national claims as this Americanized self’s inalienable ground. The Protestant bliss of conversion and the liberal conviction of exalted subjectivity conspired to produce a widely disseminated landscape, and language, confirming and eventuating in the American sublime of Emerson’s era – decades after the sublime had seemed a moribund aesthetic in England” (5). This sublime is a trans-Atlantic continuation of what Mishra variously terms the egotistical and the Romantic sublime (a continuity which is understandable, given the importance of Wordsworth and Coleridge for Emerson, Poe and

Frogpondians,” he was himself steeped in many of the same influences that shaped their thinking. In a letter to Dr. Thomas Chivers, Poe wrote; “you mistake me in supposing I dislike the transcendentalists – it is only the pretenders and sophists among them” (Letters I, 259). In a later letter, Poe shifted his criticism slightly, claiming that “the Bostonians are in error in supposing their ‘burlesque philosophy’ [...] to be Transcendentalism” (Letters I, 284), implying, perhaps, that his own views are closer to an “authentic” Transcendentalism. The best extant summary of the longstanding debates surrounding Poe’s relation to Transcendentalism is Eric Carlson’s article “The Transcendentalist Poe: A Brief History of Criticism.” He points out that “the confused semantics of ‘transcendentalism’ accounts for much of the mutual misunderstanding between the two schools of Poe and New England” (48), concluding that “Poe scholarship and criticism here and abroad has firmly and consistently established the creative and critical Poe to be, by his own definitions, essentially a Platonic and psychal ‘transcendentalist’ (66).

their contemporaries). Mishra writes that “the Romantic sublime [...] is basically an egotistical sublime that consumes in its search for self-transcendence all possible distinctions” (40). Mishra additionally points to the proximity between this sublime and that theorized by Kant (again, the continuity between this sublime and the Emersonian is readily explainable by Kant’s influence on the Boston Transcendentalists generally). Mishra writes, “[t]he Kantian sublime is defiantly Romantic,” (35) in part because it is predicated on “metaphysics of human superiority” (37). In the Kantian representation of the sublime encounter, the subject is enlarged by the recognition of its own rational powers through their dominance over sensation and imagination; thus, the sublime encounter is the occasion for a subjective pseudo-apotheosis, a “raising up” of the subject to the level of transcendental reason (as opposed to the “rushing down” of Poe’s abyssal sublime.)

Kant’s *Analytic of the Sublime*, as the first chapter discussed, can be read as an attempted containment of the “lawless sublime,” and simultaneously a circumscription of Hume’s emphasis on reasoning as an amoral form of sensation. In Kant’s analytic, the subordination of the faculties of imagination and sensation to reason inscribes a faculty psychology that will continue to have a tremendous influence even into the 21st century⁵³. The “lawlessness” of the pre-Kantian sublime and the predominance of imagination over reason both become characteristics of the Gothic sublime. As Mishra points out, the Romantic/Kantian sublime “raises important questions about how another sublime, the Gothic, which both antedates the Kantian and feeds on it, may be defined” (35). In this always-Other sublime, “the metaphysics of human superiority espoused by Kant are no longer the conditions of the sublime” (Mishra 37). These are replaced by an emphasis on

⁵³ One which has particular relevance for Poe, who adopts a schema similar to Kant’s trinity of discrete faculties in the three Critiques in his essay “The Poetic Principle”

affective immanence, and the effective annihilation of the subject, either in terms of a literal death, or a more figurative dissolution of subject/object boundaries.

It is this negative sublime which *Pym*, “Usher” and many of Poe’s other tales gesture toward. Poe’s negative sublimity represents a radically different conception from the Kantian conceptions of Coleridge or Emerson. Unformed and untimely, the sublime in Poe looks back to the unrepresentable, embracing a negative iconoclasm radically at odds with the personalistic sublimity characteristic of Emerson’s poet/Whitman, or powerful political personae such as Washington or Jackson. This negative sublimity informs Poe’s fictional critiques of supposedly sublime objects and subjects. Poe’s negative sublimity is such that it is most often defined against “the sublime” as represented in other authors; the degree to which it refuses to correspond to earlier figurations of the sublime is both an index of its very sublimity, and a sign of Poe’s influence of anxiety-inspired attempts to take possession of the texts of other authors. These negative qualities allow Poe’s writing to anticipate the “emptying” of the sublime Wilson sees performed in the 20th century poetics of Wallace Stevens, among others.

Wilson recognizes the figuration of this transformation in Stevens’ poem “The American Sublime,” which opens with a meditation on the 1853 statue of Jackson by Clark Mills in Washington’s Lafayette Square (174). Wilson explains that Stevens’ poem uses Jackson’s statue to show the migration of the sublime from a positive presentation of egotistical sublimity, through a negative movement which purges sublimity of both objects and subject, translating it into an iconoclastic affirmation of emptiness. He writes that the “man of national sublimity moves beyond identifying with ‘the weather / The landscape and that’ towards the production of an exhilarating emptiness that voids nature and history of

prior presences, as the American sublime comes down to affirming ‘empty spirit / In vacant space’ (Wilson 4). Elected more for his patriotic persona than his undistinguished and indefinite political views, Jackson, whose character quickly assumed a mythic coloration, was known for his aggressive elimination of “prior presences,” as his strong-arm policies toward Native populations amply testify. As Clark Mills’s statue of the seventh President suggests, Jackson was imaginatively elevated to an icon of sublimity worthy of the rugged and expansive American landscape itself.

In writing this radical trajectory from the Romantic/egotistical sublime to the negative sublime with *Pym*, Poe adopts an element of this landscape that would have been immediately recognizable to his readership. I would like to suggest that the cataract that concludes Pym’s narrative serves as a sort of negative textual reflection of that icon of American sublimity, Niagara Falls. Poe’s fiction, and particularly *Pym*, links the cataract of the translucent eyeball to that of the sublime falls, and further employs a link already intimated by Burke’s *Enquiry* between the natural sublime and the dangerous power of popular enthusiasm. Burke claimed that “[e]xcessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror. The noise of *vast cataracts* [...] awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind, though we can observe no nicety or artifice in these sorts of music. The *shouting of multitudes has a similar effect*; and by the sole strength of the sound, so amazes and confounds the imagination, that in this staggering, and hurry of the mind, the best established tempers can scarcely forbear being borne down, and joining in the common cry, and common resolution of the crowd” (82; my italics). Burke’s vast cataracts would have immediately conjured, in the minds of most Americans, their own roaring national spectacle of sublimity; one which had become woven

in the popular imagination with “great figures” of national formation and expansion such as Washington or Jackson.

Elizabeth McKinsey, in her book-length study of the shifting depictions of the Falls throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writes that “George Washington and Niagara Falls were the most often painted subjects in the young country’s art” (2). This pairing of sublime locale and sublime personality suggests the political power the affective image of the Falls possessed, as it became emblematic of a politicization of the natural sublime that both Emerson and Whitman would embrace, but that Poe met with hostility. By Poe’s day, as McKinsey explains, the Falls and the sublime had become almost coterminous. “Changes in images of Niagara falls also reveal shifts in the history of aesthetics in America, particularly the idea of the sublime. Defined by the Eighteenth century aesthetic debate primarily in Britain, and imported by the young American nation along with countless other European ideas, the sublime gained special significance as it was invested in the American landscape and acquired particular American meanings and overtones. By the early decades of the nineteenth century the concept permeated all areas of American thought, from literature and aesthetics to religion and natural science. Its very ubiquity has made it seem to many historians a mere commonplace” (McKinsey 3). Influenced in his earlier writings by the Burkean and Kantian conceptions of the sublime, Poe seems to have become increasingly suspicious of the importance these theories played in contemporaneous political and aesthetic discourse. As Kent Ljungquist explains, “Poe’s comments on literary and cultural nationalism suggest that he would not associate with the aesthetic of nature that would use the sublime as an excuse for national superiority. It is worthwhile to add the obvious note that when Poe did use the aesthetic of the sublime, whether in ‘Hans Pfaal,’

‘MS found in a Bottle,’ or ‘A descent into the Maelstrom,’ he chose locales distinctly non-American ” (85). Ljungquist’s observation also applies to *Pym*, which displaces the Falls and the national-egotistical sublime they figure by relocating them to a blank Antarctic wasteland. Poe’s novella thus effectively deterritorializes the sublime, stripping from its affective power all personal or national attempts at appropriation.

Donald Pease provides a useful conception of the sublime as it was generally understood in Poe’s American context. “By a consensual (heavily idealized) definition derived from Longinus, Burke, and the Scottish Common Sense tradition that remained dominant in American criticism until around 1870, we can say that the sublime is that which in nature or in art impresses the subject with a consciousness of elevation (hypsos). This occurs in a transport contrarily marked with terror at the loss of ordinary self-hood and wonder at the promise of expanded being” (172). Poe’s fictive and critical treatments of the sublime emphasize the terror and loss of self-hood traditionally associated with sublimity, but refuse the egoic expansion and assertion of moral reason which are its correlatives in the Kantian/Romantic conception. While this Romantic sublimity would link the magnificence of Niagara Falls with the sublime personality of Jackson or Whitman, Poe radically refigured the implications of this vast cataract as he invoked it within his fictions, displacing it from its American context and undercutting its rhetorical usage as a metaphor for national greatness, in both its personal and geographic forms.

Poe’s transformation of the significance of the Falls can best be understood by looking at his most explicit treatment of this site. Poe considers the oft-described sublimity of the Falls in a review of Sarah Margaret Fuller, first published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* for August 1846. In this review Poe, stepping outside of his infamous role as a literary

"Tomahawk-man," provides an approving estimation of Fuller's powers of expression, stating that "high genius she unquestionably possesses." In supporting this estimation, Poe focuses on a particular passage from Fuller's "Summer on the Lakes," where she describes that geographic locus of the American sublime, Niagara Falls. Poe provides an excerpt from Fuller, italicizing sections for the reader's attention:

"Daily these proportions widened and towered more and more upon my sight, and I got at last a proper fore-ground for these sublime distances. Before coming away, I think I really saw the full wonder of the scene. After awhile *it drew me into itself as to inspire an undefined dread, such as I never knew before, and such as may be felt when death is about to usher us into a new existence.* The perpetual trampling of the water seized my senses. *I felt that no other sound, however near, could be heard, and would start and look behind me for a foe.* I realized the identity of that mood of nature in which these waters were poured down with such absorbing force, with that in which the Indian was shaped on the same soil. For continually upon my mind came, unsought and unwelcome, *images, such had never haunted it before, of naked savages stealing behind me with uplifted tomahawks.* Again and again this illusion recurred, and even *after I had thought it over, and tried to shake it off, I could not help starting and looking behind me.* What I liked best was to sit on Table Rock close to the great fall; *there all power of observing details, all separate consciousness was quite lost.*

Poe concludes his excerpt with Fuller's description of the loss of separate consciousness, as the contemplating subject experiences an apparent absorption in the contemplated object. This sense of self-transcendence, a central emphasis of most writers on the sublime, is at the heart of Poe's high assessment of Fuller's description. It is her recognition of the dissolution between the objective and subjective dimensions of the sublime encounter, combined with her ability to suggest this effect to the reader, which renders her account successful. Praising Fuller's description, Poe writes, "the truthfulness of the passages italicized will be felt by all; the feelings described are, perhaps, experienced by every (imaginative) person who visits the fall; but most persons, through predominant

subjectiveness, would scarcely be conscious of the feelings, or, at best, would never think of employing them in an attempt to convey to others an impression of the scene. Hence so many desperate failures to convey it on the part of ordinary tourists. Mr. William W. Lord, to be sure, in his poem “Niagara,” is sufficiently objective; he describes not the fall, but very properly the effect of the fall upon him. He says that it made him think of his own greatness, of his own superiority, and so forth [...] it is only when we come to think that the thought of Mr. Lord’s superiority is quite idiosyncratic, confined exclusively to Mr. Lord, that we are in condition to understand how, in despite of his objectiveness, he has failed to convey an idea of anything beyond one Mr. William W. Lord” (XIV, ii 76).

Through his very insistence on being “objective” and rational in his refusal to subrept his sublime response, Lord produces an account that is, Poe insists, far more subjective than Fuller’s. As Ljungquist points out, Poe praises Fuller for her very “subjectiveness, which leads her to paint a scene less by its features than by its effects” (7). Poe’s assessment of Fuller’s genius is clearly informed by his own aesthetic doctrine of the effect. “Poe is impressed not so much by descriptive details as by the private feelings of Fuller and the attendant emotive effects on the reader [...] Fuller has fulfilled Poe’s criteria for effective portrayal of landscape scenery by subordinating external features to subjective effects” (Ljungquist 8). It is the affective assemblage Fuller is able to create, linking reader and author through the agency of the text, which elicits such high praise from Poe and in his mind elevates her treatment of America’s ubiquitously considered cataract above other accounts, including Lord’s. Poe attributes Fuller’s success in this respect directly to her powers of imagination, powers which allow her to elicit affects from her readers comparable to those she herself experiences when faced with the cascading magnificence of the Falls.

Her description of this sublime object is itself sublime insofar as it uses the “power of words” to assimilate both reader and writer to mere effects of an interplay of textual forces.

It is Fuller’s attention to the psycho-physical process of the sublime experience that elicits Poe’s approval, and not in the least the distinctly “American” local characteristics of the Falls themselves. This suggests that the Falls for Poe are not so much an icon of American natural sublimity, as they are an emblem of the psycho-aesthetic process for which authors on the sublime sought desperately to account. This emblem, an image of the “vortex of mysticism” Poe describes in his letters, becomes frequently refigured throughout his fiction, but is always characterized as a vortex or a cataract, involving, rushing in and down, drawing reader and author together in the production of a singular effect.

There is a telling parallel between Poe’s estimation of Fuller’s account and the shift in the conception of sublimity that occurred with Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. KcKinsey writes that “[i]n relocating the basis of the sublime emotion from pain to fear, Kant removes its mechanism from the sense impression received from external objects to the activation of something innate in the human psyche that responds to those objects, something he calls resistance. Objects that could never actually be resisted physically ‘raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height, and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.’ The passive transport Longinus identified and Burke described – we are transported, acted upon – Kant transforms into an active response; the irresistible sublime force inspires a reciprocal imaginative resistance, which constitutes the experience of sublimity. In doing so, he locates the sublime firmly in the human psyche” (McKinsey 35).

Poe's approving italicization of Fuller's feeling of "undefined dread," the sense of a "new existence" it precipitates, and the translation of this affect into the search for "a foe," perhaps in the form of "naked savages," offers a useful crystallization of one of the major tendencies in representations of the sublime encounter, which was often conceived as a sort of schizophrenic break in which the mind is forced to face itself as an Other, and as an opponent. This literalizes the Kantian depiction of the sublime encounter as a conflict of faculties, offering an imaginative account whereby these faculties are experientially embodied. Brockden Brown had already provided a fictional embodiment of this process in *Edgar Huntly*, and with characteristically slippery ambivalence, Poe both expands upon and parodies this embodiment with *Pym*. Fuller's account translates the delicious dread of intrasubjective conflict when faced with the Falls into a monstrous and hostile chimera, the feral, and almost supernatural, specter of the Indian. Brown had already exploited this projection in *Edgar Huntly* with the Indians that Huntly encounters and kills after his descent, and Poe will also do so in the racially re-coded form of *Pym*'s autochthonic black demons, the Tsalalians.

Poe's critical evisceration of William Lord's description of subjective elevation is closely linked to his suspicion of sublime personae like Jackson or Whitman, and the metaphorical usage of the Falls in evoking such egotistical sublimity. It is just this aspiration to grandeur which is parodically undercut by *Pym*. It is thus highly appropriate that *Pym*'s impetus to adventure suggests the importance of such "great figures" for the novel as a whole. Like his confrere Julius Rodman, *Pym* is drawn into the narrative net within which he is caught and ultimately dispersed by the sublime lure of "great men" like Reynolds and

Lewis and Clark, who, like Jackson's statue, seem to embody the promise of the liberal-individual subject's self-reliant mastery of the world.

With their domination of nature through the process of discovery and description, these figures possess a significance that can be likened to Emerson's view of the poet, who "is the Namer or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachments or boundary" (296). *Pym* presents its readers, through its confused protagonist, with a world that does not lend itself so readily to the transparent identifications of the explorer-poet, and that incessantly eludes the assertion of stable boundaries or accurate representations. The effect of naming in *Pym* becomes, rather than a rendering-transparent of nature, an alteration of its very form; it becomes a creative distortion.

Striving to emulate the explorative vitality and poetic function of Reynolds and Lewis and Clark, *Pym* instead takes his readers further into the abyss through his very incapacity, a "sounding of the abyss" through the failure of representation (the *sine non qua* of the sublime which will realize very different peaks/nadirs in, for example, Melville's *Pierre* and Lovecraft's tales). *Pym*'s criticism of the egotistical sublime as figured in the dramatic landscapes offered by exploration narratives is suggested by the context in which his desire for discovery is first stirred. This urge for exploration is awakened within him by his "two years older" friend and sometime bed-companion, Augustus, whose name itself suggests his partial personification of this masculine sublime. The relationship between these characters perpetuates the homosocial vector of affective contagion portrayed by *Caleb Williams* and *Edgar Huntly* (after all, following Burke's formulation, the sublime is a man-

to-man affair.) It is through Augustus's nightly "stories of the natives of the island of Tinian, and other places he had visited in his travels" that Pym is first made to feel "the greatest desire to go so sea" (591), and it is the inspirational powers of Augustus's oral performance that inspire Pym's first short-lived "frolic on the boat". In Pym's words, "I can hardly tell what possessed me, but the words were no sooner out of his mouth than I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure, and thought [Augustus's] mad idea one of the most delightful and most reasonable things in the world" (591).

Scott Bradfield has noted the structural dynamic shared by the Edny-Huntly relationship in Brown's novel and the Pym-Augustus relationship in Poe's. This contagious dynamic, like that which underlies other tales including "Usher" and "The Sphinx," is founded on the telling and hearing of stories. Their exchange of narratives leads these characters to a confusion, and even a collapse, of subjective boundaries. As Dennis Pahl points out, "[t]he identification between Pym and Augustus is made early in the narrative, when they are shown to be inseparable companions – to the point of sometimes occupying the same bed at night. It may of course be possible to draw homoerotic implications from such an association, but the real emphasis of their relationship – as psychological partners as opposed to sexual partners – becomes clearer in Pym's statement concerning the kind of influence that Augustus's sea stories have on him: 'Augustus thoroughly entered into my state of mind. It is probable, indeed, that our intimate communion had resulted in a partial interchange of character' (46). Embodying the intersubjective contagion of the sublime, this relationship offers a variation on the "magnetical sympathy" shared by both Caleb and Falkland, and Huntly and Edny, informing the degree to which the first half of Pym's narrative can be read as refiguring the engagement with the sublime in these earlier fictions.

However, while Pym is drawn *toward* the egotistical sublime he associates with the glory of exploration, he is eventually drawn *into* a much more powerful, and entirely negative, vortex of sublimity, which reveals the Emersonian/ Jacksonian sublimity of the self-reliant explorer to be groundless and illusory. As his narrative makes clear, Pym's egoistic desire for expansion is linked to a desire for self-extinction. This is suggested as early as the narrative's second chapter, as Pym states that "[m]y visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a life-time dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown. Such visions or desires – for they amounted to desires – are common, I have since been assured, to the whole numerous race of the melancholy among men" (597).

Like that of Theodor and the elder Wieland, Pym's sublime desire is linked to his melancholiac⁵⁴ urge for annihilation. He desires to ultimately lose himself in the vast landscapes he tries to explore, offering an affective figuration of the evacuative movement of the American-Gothic Sublime. If, as Emerson once stated, "In America, the geography is sublime, but the men are not," perhaps this is because the people have been swallowed by the landscape, which has been in turn devoured by them. Indeed, this enthusiastic desire for subjective extinction reveals the proximity of *any* sublime to Poe's psycho-critical fiction of the "Imp of the Perverse," as the next chapter will discuss at length. As Daniel Hoffman has pointed out, "Pym's name [is] an anagram of IMP. It is Pym's perverse spirit of self-

⁵⁴ Pym joins the ranks of many of Poe's protagonists through his membership in this melancholiac fraternity. The belief that a melancholy disposition was often a corollary of sensitivity to sublimity is early expressed by Kant's *Observations* (1764), where he writes that "[h]e whose feeling places him among the melancholy is not so named because, robbed of the joys of life, he aggrieves himself into dark dejection [...] He has above all a feeling for the sublime. Even beauty, for which he also has a perception, must not only delight him but move him" (64) He would later discard this view in the *Critical Analytic of the Sublime*.

annihilation which is the spring propelling all his perilous adventures.” Correctly noting Poe’s characterization with the “Imp” of what Freud would later come to call Thanatos, or the death instinct, Hoffman adds that “Poe had unflinchingly seen beyond the pleasure principle three-quarters of a century before Freud, in another terminology, defined the meaning of his imp” (274).

Pym, then, effectively implodes the Romantic/egotistical sublime by re-emphasizing the subjective annihilation which had always already been an element of the sublime experience, prior to and following any of its ephemeral loci, be they subjects (Wordsworth, Jackson, Whitman) or objects (natural or linguistic). It is in this respect that *Pym* offers a fictional anticipation of Stevens’ poetics of negative sublimity. Wilson writes that, “[d]issecting such a will to grandeur, Stevens’s ‘The American Sublime’ (1935) showed that this monumentalizing sublime came down (beyond that imperious statue of General Jackson in the Capitol, gesturing on a horse), via decreation, to a self-voiding perspective on vast nothingness; a tropological evacuation of the transcendental subject” (203). The proximity, in terms of the sublime, between the elevation and annihilation of the subject similarly informs the “tropological evacuation⁵⁵” that was, a century earlier and in a very different literary form, effected by Poe’s *Pym*. Written at the end of Jackson’s presidency, *Pym* enacts a critical evisceration of the national/natural sublimity exemplified in the popular persona of President Jackson and the poetics of Emerson and performs a figurative evacuation of the

⁵⁵ In a different but related usage, critic Eliza Richards has written of Poe’s “evacuative aesthetic” in terms of his use of women as objects/emblems; she points out that Poe’s writing operates by “[d]raining women and women poets” and reducing them to “marmoreal emblems” in a “narcissistic aestheticization of grief.” Paradoxically, the women/objects in Poe’s fiction seem to have little referential value. As Elizabeth Bronfen has argued, Poe’s poetics “endorse a spectatorship that ignores the referent, the non-semiotic body and focuses its reading exclusively on the image as a self-reflexive, materialized sign,” (71) a recognition of the importance of the both textual and materially productive power of language for Poe.

sublime. In doing so, it exemplifies a pervasive tendency in Poe's fiction to refigure the sublime, first by de-forming its presentation in previous authors (often through literary parody and satiric exaggeration), and next by seeking to reproduce sublime affects from novel and insistently textual sources.

The indefinite boundary between the egotistical sublime and the sublime annihilation of the ego is first figured during Pym and Augustus's initial marine misadventure. After having been rescued by the Nantucket ship *The Penguin* (a salvation which ironically foreshadows the numinous inflections of the "penguin" at the narrative's conclusion), Pym learns that Augustus had been sucked down into a whirlpool, but has survived to recount the experience. The language with which Augustus describes this descent clearly underlines the sublimity it bespeaks. Pym reports that "at length he became thoroughly aroused, and spoke much of his sensations while in the water. Upon his first attaining any degree of consciousness, he found himself beneath the surface, whirling round and round with inconceivable rapidity" (595). The emphasis on Augustus' arousal echoes both Pym's reactions to Augustus' earlier oral stimulations, and the arousal that Burke saw as the essence of the sublime experience. In addition, the physical image of the vortex points to the proximity between the subjective death of the sublime encounter, and that of the lapse into unconsciousness (or into the subconscious.) As Kant wrote, "[u]nconsciousness, which usually follows dizziness (a fast spinning circle of many different sensations that is beyond comprehension), is a foretaste of death" (*APV* 59). Augustus' descent is just such a foretaste of the annihilation that Pym himself seeks.

Augustus' subsequent descriptions continue to provide a commentary on the Burkean-Kantian conception of the sublime's intrasubjective conflict as leading to a sensual

intensification and ultimate elevation of rational powers. “Upon once more reviving he was in fuller possession of his reason – this was still, however, in the greatest degree clouded and confused” (595). Augustus’ penetration of this watery abyss does not culminate in an epiphanic recognition of his moral vocation, nor in his becoming an Emersonian “transparent eyeball;” on the contrary, he continues to see the world through a subjective cataract. While his reason is stimulated by this descent, it remains “clouded and confused.”

Just as, following their subjective interpenetration through affective contagion, Edny’s first descent into the caverns is mirrored in Huntly’s, so Augustus’ descent into this marine vortex foreshadows both Pym’s later *Nekyia* aboard the *Grampus* and his eventual descent into the Antarctic cataract. Characterizing the egotistical sublime, Augustus’ descent into a vortex evocative of the de-forming involutions of the negative sublime metonymizes the action of the narrative as a whole. The associations this scene establishes between the image of the vortex, the descent into the subconscious, and the subjective annihilation of the sublime encounter will be redrawn during both these subsequent scenes, each of which continues *Pym*’s critical evisceration of the Kantian/Romantic appropriation and containment of the sublime.

By incorporating and evacuating the sublime objects and scenarios of previous writers, *Pym* becomes a work of *negative sublimity*, which draws the readers’ attention to the illusory nature of sublime objects and the subjects which ostensibly experience them, in contrast to the reality of the sublime as a textual-affective assemblage. As Mishra points out, “[t]here has been an historical tendency to read the Gothic sublime as the natural sublime, as an object-based sublime that excluded the affective subject and the rhetorical trope (language)” (22). *Pym*’s sublime deformations emphasize the fact that in terms of the

discourse on the sublime, “what writers had foremost in their minds were the words of other writers, rather than the immediacy of their own experience. Burke illustrates the material sublime with quotations from the classics; Kant, the great theorist of the sublime, exemplifies it with the effect of the Pyramids and St. Peter’s, which he had never seen; Radcliffe, the great novelist of the sublime, describes a landscape she had not visited; Whitman, singing the song of himself, dredges up every cliché of the genre” (Kirwan 159). Yet through this very negation of “the sublime,” *Pym* achieves a sublime textual-affective plateau of its own, and it does so, like Brown’s *Wieland*, through the challenges it offers to the reader’s imagination and judgment.

As Kennedy explains, “for all its gory sensationalism, *Pym* raises provocative questions of epistemology and metaphysics. In its documentary phases, the narrative seems to assert the possibility of understanding the phenomenal world in some definite, empirical way. Geographic and scientific information appears to validate the truthfulness of the narrative as it demonstrates the intelligibility of physical reality. Yet the young narrator repeatedly makes false inferences by misreading visual signs. Recurrent instances of human deception – ruses, ploys, masquerades – parallel the contradictory relationship in the natural world between appearance and reality” (11-12). *Pym*’s presentation of the contradiction between appearance and reality is ambiguous, as, unlike Radcliffe’s novels or Poe’s “The Sphinx,”⁵⁶ it offers no supposedly objective viewpoint to explain the distortions incorporated

⁵⁶ Like many of Poe’s explorations of deluded consciousness, *Pym* presents the contradiction between appearance and reality due to the limiting conditions of the knowing subject as a “misreading” of signs (even when those signs are objects, events, or other characters within the story). The importance of this pathological misreading to *Pym* can be more clearly seen through the lens of “The Sphinx” (1845), whose title perhaps lent itself to Jules Verne’s “sequel” to *Pym*, *Le Sphinx des Glaces*.

As its opening sentence establishes, “The Sphinx” is set “[d]uring the dread reign of the Cholera in New York” (539), and like Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn*, it connects the contagion-anxieties associated with infectious disease with the “contagion of the passions” associated with sublime language, as news and rumors of disease are portrayed as being as epidemic as the sickness itself. The narrator exclaims that “we trembled at the approach of every messenger. The very air from the South seemed to us redolent with death. That palsifying thought, indeed, took entire possession of my soul. I could neither speak, think, nor dream of anything else” (539). This state of terrified paralysis, expressive of what Anne Radcliffe calls horror as opposed to terror, signals what in Kant becomes the first stage of the sublime experience, which is then supplanted by the elated recognition of the subject’s rational vocation. In Poe’s fictional presentation, this second stage is only present in terms of the intervention of the narrator’s friend. For the narrator himself, this phase remains, by the tale’s conclusion, a state of terminal *disease*.

Emphasizing the act of reading as a site of affective contagion, the tale characteristically links the narrator’s deluded state to his literary selections; his anxious conceptions are compounded by his reading of “certain volumes” which “were of a character to force into germination whatever seeds of hereditary superstition lay latent” in his mind. Poe exploits the polysemous possibilities of *character* in this passage, emphasizing the connection between the narrator’s character (personality/identity), the character (content/style) of the text, and character as a figure/form, a usage which anticipates the narrator’s imminent production of sublime affects through his misreading of a figure glimpsed through his (in Ketterer’s phrase) “half-closed eye.”

He goes on to recount an incident which occurred to him while he sat “book in hand, at an open window, commanding, through a long vista of the river banks, a view of a distant hill.” The term “commanding” suggests the degree to which the narrator’s subjective state imposes itself upon the landscape, projecting his literarily-reinforced affective contagion outward. Looking up from his book and toward the “gloom and desolation of the neighboring city,” the narrator sights a sublime “object,” “some living monster of hideous conformation” Once again, Poe’s use of the word “conformation” is a clue to the reader, as the creature is revealed as merely “conforming” to the narrator’s perceptual/affective state. Unable to comprehend this hideous vision, the narrator exclaims “I doubted my own sanity – or at least the evidence of my own eyes.”

Struggling to describe the vast size of this apparition for his readers, he estimates “the size of the creature by comparison with the diameter of the large trees near which it passed [...] I concluded it to be far larger than any ship of the line in existence. I say ship of the line, because the shape of the monster suggested the idea.” In terms of its bodily form, he writes that “the mouth of the animal was situated at the extremity of a proboscis some sixty or seventy feet in length, and about as thick as the body of an ordinary elephant.” The narrator goes on to provide a lengthy and highly detailed description of the creature, finally noting that “the chief peculiarity of this horrible thing, was the representation of a Death’s head, which covered nearly the whole surface of its breast, and which was as accurately traced in glaring white, upon the dark ground of the body, as if it had been there carefully designed by an artist.”

The creature is an apparent epitome of terror; like the Biblical Behemoth or Leviathan, it embodies sublime monstrosity. The narrator’s affective response reflects this;

“I regarded this terrific animal [...] with a feeling of horror and awe.” The narrator’s terror is intensified as “I perceived the huge jaws at the extremity of the proboscis, suddenly expand themselves, and from them there proceeded a sound so loud and expressive of woe, that it struck upon my nerves like a knell” (540). The narrator is finally overcome by the sight, and “as the monster disappeared at the foot of the hill, I fell at once, fainting, to the floor” (540). His terror remains unalleviated when he tries to relate this apparition to his companion, who “at first laughed heartily – and then lapsed into an excessively grave demeanor, as if my insanity was beyond suspicion” (540). When the narrator sights the apparition through the window once more, this time in the presence of his companion, the origins of his vision are quickly explained. His companion “went on to talk, with what I thought a cruel calmness, of various points of speculative philosophy,” particularly “upon the idea that the principal source of error in all human investigations, lay in the liability of the understanding to under-rate or to over-value the importance of an object, through mere misadmeasurement of its propinquity” (541). The companion’s discourse may well be an echo of Hume’s consideration, in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), of the relationship between magnitude and perspective, a relationship which bears strongly on subsequent discussions of magnitude as a source of sublime affects. Hume writes that “’tis evident that the mere view and contemplation of any greatness, whether successive or extended, enlarges the soul, and gives it a sensible delight and pleasure. A wide plain, the ocean, eternity, a succession of several ages; all these are entertaining objects, and excel every thing, however beautiful, which accompanies not its beauty with a suitable greatness” (308). Hume here anticipates the distinction Burke will extend and popularize in his *Enquiry* between beauty and sublimity. The “great” objects Hume describes, and the idea of size they embody, are characteristic of discussions of the sources of sublime affect, and feature largely in subsequent accounts by both Burke and Kant. The vision seen by “The Sphinx”’s narrator exemplifies a “great figure,” (in the double sense of a gigantic form, and a linguistic expression suggestive of such) as, I will argue, does the “shrouded human figure” glimpsed by Pym.

Hume, however, goes on to point out that “[n]ow when any very distant object is presented to the imagination, we naturally reflect on the interpos’d distance, and by that means, conceiving something great and magnificent, receive the usual satisfaction [...] we find, that ‘tis not necessary the object shou’d be actually distant from us, in order to cause our admiration; but that ‘tis sufficient, if by the natural association of ideas, it conveys our view to any considerable distance” (308).

What “The Sphinx” offers readers, then, is an extended development of what Hume terms the “natural association of ideas:” an ostensibly great distance suggests a correspondingly great size, the apprehension of which is productive of real sublime affects, regardless of their origins from “false” perceptual apprehensions. The story’s alternately horrific and humorous affects are produced by the narrator/reader’s viewing of the object through a figurative cataract, which is the veil of the (illusory) subject’s perceptual/rational limitations.

The narrator’s monstrous apparition is, of course, merely a moth, “of the genus *Sphinx*, of the family *Crepuscularia*, of the order *Lepidoptera*, of the class of *Insecta*.” (541). However, prior to this revelation, the story implicitly exploits the primary meaning of “sphinx” as referring to both a monster and a mysterious riddle. As his companion explains

into the tale. The reader is constrained, throughout, by the limitations of Pym's knowledge and perception, with occasional (and arguably dubitable) interventions by the editor "Mr. Poe." This apparatus of narrative and commentarial layering led Dennis Pahl In *Architects of the Abyss* to argue that Pym (and much of Poe's fiction) is a proto-Derridean text which reveals that "reading does not help to expose some hidden depth of meaning but rather covers with a new layer of language what is already an interpretation, all of which implies there is no bottom, no ground, to the abyss of signification" (xiii).

This is, to a point, a productive mode for reading *Pym*. However, read alongside a story like "The Sphinx," *Pym* would seem to be making a point rather about the imaginary materiality of language (the name "sphinx" conjuring for the reader an ancient, monstrous mystery, just as the name "Tiger" will conjure a ravenous great cat for Pym) and delusive consequences of misapprehension (misreading physical signs), than it would about a condition of language which makes every reading a mis-reading, and thus makes mis-reading impossible.

to the narrator (whose affective response has now shifted from *terror* at an immediate apprehension of danger, to *horror* at the limitations of his own perceptual and rational faculties), the horrific affect produced by the creature extends entirely from a misapprehension of its size relative to its distance from the narrator's eyes and ears. "[A] very remarkable looking creature, I admit it to be. Still, it is by no means so large or so distant as you imagined it; for the fact is that, as it wriggles its way up this thread, which some spider has wrought along the window-sash, I find it to be about the sixteenth of an inch from its extreme length, and also about the sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of my eye." (541)

This narrative intervention, which appears to invert the narrator's magnification by an equally hyperbolic diminution of size and distance, is a structural echo, perhaps even a parody, of the narrative interventions of Anne Radcliffe's rationalist Gothic fictions, and their derivations in Brown's early novels (both Cambridge in *Wieland* and Sarsefield in *Edgar Huntly* serve, to some degree, a similar role). The chief difference between "The Sphinx"'s development of what David Ketterer calls Poe's "half-closed eye" and that of *Pym* (and, as the next chapter will assert, "Usher") is that the latter provides no such clear-cut explanatory narrative intervention.

Recognizing this in *Dreaming Revolution: Transgression in the Development of American Romance*, Scott Bradfield insightfully situated Pym in a textual continuum carried over from Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, and argued, contra Pahl and others, that "Poe is not simply creating a Derridean play of signification, forcing his readers to unravel the metaphysical complicities of fact and fiction; he is ridiculing the ability of readers to tell the difference between truth and illusion, meaning and madness. The problem is not in language itself, Poe believes, but in the faulty, all-too-human people who try to read it" (76). Bradfield's re-situation of the novel is useful, his contention convincing, and his exploration of *Pym*'s relation to Brown's *Edgar Huntly* is apt. Yet his discussion fails to explore at any length the degree to which sections of *Pym* seem to respond directly to, or even parody, elements of *Edgar Huntly*, and neglects the degree to which both novels engage with and transform a particularly Gothic strand of the American sublime. I see this sublime transformation as intimately linked with both *Pym*'s *legerdemain* challenges to readerly judgment, and its creation of "a Derridean play of signification;" characteristics which, operating complementarily, both enable and extend from its negative sublimity.

While, as Kennedy's foregrounding of its context suggests, *Pym* ostensibly concerns a geographic and cultural exploration, it is typical of the American sublime according to Wilson in that it is ultimately "situated within a mimetic vastness that is not geographic (the will to dominate nature) or social (the will to displace Native or contiguous cultures) but rhetorical (the will to differentiate rival textuality)" (9). While *Pym*'s desire (which effectively metonymizes American desire) to "dominate" nature through a process of interpretive mastery, and to displace other cultures (on one level, the goal of the Jane Guy's crew is to commercially exploit the Tsalalians, and on another the Tsalalians themselves

represent a fantasized displacement of imaginatively synthesized Others, particularly black and Native people) is a central element of the narrative, it is finally undermined and displaced by the referentially-evacuative involution of the tale. This evacuation is negatively imaged in the sublime blankness of its conclusion, anticipating Stevens' "empty spirit / in vacant space" with its "shrouded human figure" within an Antarctic cataract.

The question of "rival textuality" is of particular relevance to *Pym*, with its obvious and numerous incorporations of "rival" textual materials. Like most of Poe's tales, *Pym* is marked by his desire to differently reach a double audience. Richard Benton points out that Poe's first published collection, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, "defines the double audience that Poe addressed: the culturally literate few and the culturally limited many. It shows Poe's attitude toward his material and toward his readers in the light of his wide scholarship and learning, his 'half serious, half funny' turn of mind, and his penchant for secret writing – for mystery, ambiguity, conundrums, cryptograms, hieroglyphs, anagrams, obscure allusions, foreign languages, pedantries, logical traces, puns, hoaxes, jokes – in short, for deception and cunning one-upmanship." (Hayes 111).

Marked in expectation of this double audience, many of *Pym*'s more conventional tropes and events are presented with a kind of critical condescension, as though they are so many subliterate scraps tossed in to meet the appetites of a yapping popular audience, a "mob" of "mickey mockers and plated pairs" (to steal Steven's expression)⁵⁷. Poe's

⁵⁷ The proximity between Poe and Stevens in terms of their relationships with the reading public is extensively explored by Louis Renza in *Edgar Allan Poe, Wallace Stevens, and the Poetics of American Privacy*. He claims that, in a manner appropriate to their emphasis on the negative sublime, these authors "internally stage the culture's extant reading conventions at once to isolate 'the public' and to imagine private countermoves in relation to it" (20). Renza argues that while Stevens cultivates an "esoteric style", Poe "emplots" his readers in his tales, metonymically mocking them for their mis-readings (8). This is particularly

appropriation of diverse materials from other textual sources is both the product of an apparent “recipe” to please his periodical readers, and part of an elaborate game played with those readers who, like Poe himself, are able to enjoy the more rarified affective jolts offered by the novel’s negative sublimity, with its elaborate de-formations of popular sublime objects.

The double quality of much of Poe’s fiction does not, however, lend itself to a stable “either/or” separation. Jonathon Elmer termed this critical ambiguity “the notorious tonal instability of Poe’s work – in which, for example, it is never finally clear whether we are reading a takeoff or a straight version, a critique or an example, a mystification or its demystification.” Elmer further states that this tonal instability “is the index of this destabilization of the critical perspective” (175), and is part of the challenge Poe offers to readerly imagination and judgment. This tonal instability is a quality that Poe himself recognized. Writing of his tales in a late letter, Poe noted that “most of them were intended for half-banter, half-satire – although I might not have fully acknowledged this to be their aim even to myself” (XVII 30).

Like the periodic doubling of Pym with both the readers and Poe (as the “author” of the narrative) which is part of the narrative apparatus, this tonal instability is, in Pahl’s words, “more than a simple hoax, a game that Poe is playing with his readers; it serves as a

appropriate to *Pym*, whose narrator announces that “in spite of the air of fable which had been so ingeniously thrown around that portion of my statement which appeared in the *Messenger* (without altering or distorting a single fact), the public were still not at all disposed to receive it as a fable” (590). Ironically pointing to the perspicacity of the *Southern Literary Messenger*’s readership in recognizing the “truth” behind the “fiction” of Pym’s first narrative installment (which was, of course, in truth, a fiction), Poe points to the deliberate *con-fusion* of his confused narrator with his (understandably) confused readers.

point of departure for the text's exploration into the meaning of authorship and into the consequences that writing holds for any epistemological pursuits, that is, for any search for truth and knowledge" (Pahl 43). This exploration is emphasized by Pym's preface to the narrative, as he explains that "I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess, barring only the natural and unavoidable exaggeration to which all of us are prone when detailing events which have had powerful influence in exciting the imaginative faculties" (589).

Poe/Pym's italicization of the word *appearance* points to its polysemous significance for an understanding of the narrative as a whole. It simultaneously emphasizes the contradictory relationship between appearance and reality within the narrative, the contradictory relationship between representations and the represented the narrative's relationship to "factual" exploration narratives interrogates, and the affectively productive power of fiction to *create* reality. This latter suggestion depends on recognizing the term's etymological link to *parent*, as appearance can suggest something which is creative or productive, a connotation which will have particular relevance to the "shrouded human figure" that ominously awaits Pym and the reader at the tale's conclusion.

Functionally echoing the apologia of Clara Wieland and Edgar Huntly for the "fantastic" elements of their respective narratives, Pym's preface is both an ostensible bid for the narrative's veracity, and a commentary on the process of narrativization itself. In the case of *Pym* and many structurally similar Poe tales, these explanatory textual elements, exemplifying the Derridean *supplement*, throw off-balance the expected relationship between commentary and narration. While commentary traditionally serves to explain or clarify

elements of narration, Pym, like many of Poe's fictions, provides a narrative which seems more like an exploration of the principles described in the commentary.

To return to *Pym's* psycho-textual conflation, *appearance's* diacritical emphasis is repeated two paragraphs later as Pym explains that it was "Mr. Poe of Virginia" who arranged to have "the earlier portion" of these adventures published "in the Southern Literary Messenger *under the garb of fiction*" (590). Pym's narrative construction, then, involves a practically infinite recession of representation; it is a "true" commentary on the production of fiction, masquerading as truth, masquerading as fiction, and so on. It presents itself through a *mise en abyme*, an involving apparatus which will be repeatedly figured within the narrative itself.

But, given the obvious and heavily inter-textual fictionality of the narrative, what is this "truth" beneath the "garb of fiction?" This truth (or at least, an aspect of it) is the progression from the object-oriented and subject-founded Romantic-egotistical sublime, to the textual-affective assemblage of the negative sublime. This sublime consists in the dispersal of sublime *objects* and *subjects* in a process which liberates the power of words in the production of sublime *affects*. This de-formation is paradoxically imaged by the appearance of the unreadable "shrouded human figure" at the narrative's conclusion. Poe's use of the word *figure* in this context, like that of the word *character* in "The Sphinx," "The Man of the Crowd," and "The Fall of the House of Usher," polysemously suggests that the truth of the narrative is a matter of its psycho-textual reality, as it programmatically evacuates sublime objects ("great figures" in Longinus's words) and points to the sublime as purely a product of textual-affective (text/mind) interaction.

The issue of plagiarism, and its relation to Poe's psycho-textual conflation, is central to *Pym*, which freely assimilates, alters, and disseminates a wide variety of textual sources. In particular, writing of the section that occurs during Pym's time on the *Jane Guy*, before the arrival at Tsalal, Kennedy observes that "Poe lards these documentary chapters with paragraph after paragraph of information cribbed – we now know – from dozens of contemporary sources but most heavily from Benjamin Morrell's 1832 *The Narrative of Four Voyages*" (Kennedy 54). While the later sections of Pym's narrative pillage these exploration narratives, the earlier sections, as Scott Bradfield suggests, structurally assimilate both Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Brown's *Edgar Huntly*.

In the case of Poe's *Pym*, this interweaving involves threads of the literary sublime drawn directly from other authors, especially Brockden Brown, which are de-formed and re-integrated via *Pym*'s vortextual involutions. *Pym* reinvents Huntly's incurable *libido sciendi* and epistemological misadventures, intimating connections between his distorted perceptions, unreliable powers of judgment, and his enthusiastic addiction to the affective jolts offered by tales of adventure and exploration; like Edgar Huntly and the elder Wieland, Pym is revealed to be a poor reader, who frequently falls prey to subreptive tendencies.

While there are a number of other stylistic and thematic similarities that run throughout both novels, the most striking resemblance arises when one compares the scene of Huntly's awaking in the pit below Solebury with the scene of Pym's awaking in the hold of the *Grampus*. As Alan Axelrod has observed, "[t]he motif of premature burial is found twice in *Pym*, first when Arthur is stowed away in an iron-bound box in the hold of the *Grampus*, and again toward the end of the novel when Arthur, Dick, Peters, and Wilson Allen (who does not survive the ordeal) are buried beneath a mountain. These two scenes

have a great deal in common with the pit motif in 'The Pit and The Pendulum,' as well as with the cave scene in *Edgar Huntly*" (36). This scene in *Pym* is a virtual re-writing of Huntly's *Nekyia*, and Poe uses it to extend *Edgar Huntly*'s commentary on the sublime confusion (dissolution) of subject-object distinctions. Additionally, the alterations Poe makes to the narration of this scene dramatically illustrate the process of negative sublimity that *Pym* as a whole enacts.

Just as Huntly's descent results from his unconscious pursuit of Edny's footsteps, Pym's concealment in the hold of the *Grampus* echoes Augustus' earlier descent into the whirlpool, and is accomplished by Augustus's machinations. The psycho-spatial conflation whereby Solebury's subterranean chasm comes to figure Huntly's irrupting unconscious also informs the *Grampus* section of *Pym*. Kennedy observes that "[a]s he would later do in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), Poe constructs in the *Grampus* episode of *Pym* (chapters 2-13) an analogical relationship between the containing structures of experience (such as a house or ship) and the mind of the protagonist, thus enabling Poe to give tangible dramatic form to impalpable mental processes" (42). Kennedy's claim is reinforced by Pym's description of the *Grampus*' hold. Like Pym's mind, with its repressed memories and misread signs, and like the connective tissue that binds together his narrative itself, "the stowage on board the *Grampus* was most clumsily done, if stowage that could be called which was little better than a promiscuous huddling together of oil-casks and ship furniture" (622). This description also serves a metafictional role by intimating the loosely linked episodic form of the narration, furthering the association between Pym's mind and his narrative itself.

That this episode is meant to be read as a kind of figurative death is suggested by the Biblical typology Pym invokes, claiming “I remained three days and nights (as nearly as I could guess) in my hiding place without getting out of it at all” (600). Echoing Jonah’s foray in the belly of the whale and Christ’s three days in the tomb, Pym’s figurative death tropes the subjective extinction that is the corollary of sublime expansion, once again metonymizing the negative sublimity of the entire narrative, with its eventual evacuation of both sublime objects and of the subject they affectively catalyze.

Emerging from his coffinlike enclosure only after the *Grampus*’ journey is well underway, Pym is enabled by Augustus to acquire a reading candle and books to occupy his attention. As do similar scenes in “Berenice,” “Usher,” “The Sphinx,” and many other tales, this scene presents Poe’s privileged trope of the psycho-textual involution associated with the act of reading. In this case, Pym’s affective contagion is linked explicitly to narratives of exploration, as he “selected the expedition of Lewis and Clark to the mouth of the Columbia” (600) to pass the time. The proximity of Pym’s reading of Lewis and Clark’s narrative to his figurative death reinforces the link between the ego-death of the sublime experience, and the Jacksonian ego-expansion associated with “great figures,” as well as foreshadowing the explorative direction the narrative will eventually take when Pym boards the *Jane Guy* a few chapters later.

After reading and eating some of the food Augustus provided for him, Pym lapses into a soporific state. He awakens in darkness, uncertain of his location. “Upon awakening I felt strangely confused in mind” (601). Like Huntly, he “existed, as it were, in a wakeful dream” (Brown 156). Like Huntly, who realized “there is no standard by which time can be measured but the succession of our thoughts and the changes that take place in the external

world,” (Brown 156) Pym experiences an acute sense of temporal disjunction that the narrative links to his fits of hunger, which, like Huntly’s, lead to carnivorous cravings, which will shortly become embodied in an equally carnivorous apparition. Pym explains, “[p]resently, feeling an almost ravenous appetite, I bethought myself of the cold mutton, some of which I had eaten just before going to sleep, and found excellent. What was my astonishment at discovering it to be in a state of absolute putrefaction! This circumstance occasioned me great disquietude for, connecting it with the disorder of mind I experienced upon awaking, I began to suppose that I must have slept for an inordinately long period of time” (601).

Unable to rouse himself from his paralyzing lethargy, Pym lapses once more into an unconscious state. “I fell, in spite of every exertion to the contrary, into a state of profound sleep, or rather stupour. My dreams were of the most terrific description.” Pym’s dreams are a veritable parade of objects of sublime terror, one metamorphosing into the next. John Dennis’s voluminous catalogue of sublime objects overshadows Pym’s entire narrative, but is particularly present in this section, as Pym’s oneiric trajectory takes him frenetically from one to the next of these objects, as though Poe is larding the shelves of his tale by moving through a shopping list of sublime items. Pym exclaims that “every species of calamity and horror befell me. Among other miseries, I was smothered to death between huge pillows, by demons of the most ghastly and ferocious aspect. Immense serpents⁵⁸ held me in their embrace, and looked earnestly in my face with their fearfully shining eyes [...] at my feet crouched a fierce lion of the tropics. Suddenly his wild eyes opened and fell upon me [...]

⁵⁸ According to Burke, “there are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror. As serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds...” (114).

Stifling in a paroxysm of terror, I at last found myself partially awake. My dream, then, was not all a dream. Now, at least, I was in possession of my senses. The paws of some huge and real monster were pressing heavily upon my bosom – his hot breath was in my ear – and his white and ghastly fangs were gleaming upon me in the gloom.”

This scene bears a striking resemblance to Huntly’s encounter with the panther. In both cases, the narrator’s carnivorous desires anticipate this appearance, and both encounters are begun with a locking of gazes, suggesting the mesmeric intimacy shared between predator and prey, and emphasizing the centrality of the narrator’s perception to the unfolding of events. However, while Huntly is confronted by a “real” hungry panther, which he manages to kill and devour, Pym is humorously confronted by his “Newfoundland dog Tiger” (602), whose name playfully suggests a textual echo of Huntly’s panther, as well as emphasizing the narrator’s subreptive tendency.

The tiger’s transformation into a dog upon Pym’s awaking is a parodic evacuation of this popular sublime object, which offers a mocking echo of Burke’s distinction between the sublime wolf and the domestic dog⁵⁹. Nevertheless, the sublime affectivity of the scene is just as “real” as that in *Edgar Huntly*; Pym’s “Tiger” is just as powerful a source of the sublime as Huntly’s panther, which indicates the textual-affective reality of the sublime experience, in opposition to the vacuity of any supposedly sublime object. The affects this

⁵⁹ Burke claimed that “[d]ogs are indeed the most social, affectionate and amiable animals of the whole brute creation; but love approaches much nearer to contempt than is commonly imagined; and accordingly, though we caress dogs, we borrow from them an appellation of the most despicable kind [...] Wolves have not more strength than several species of dogs; but on account of their unmanageable fierceness, the idea of a wolf is not despicable; it is not excluded from grand descriptions and similitudes” (II.v 118)

scene describes and attempts to elicit, like those of “MS”’s narrator, are made even more palpable by their ultimate disconnection from such objects.

This emphasis on textuality is reinforced as Pym finds a slip of paper attached to Tiger’s collar, which he correctly assumes to be a communiqué from Augustus; “I came across a small slip of what had the feeling of letter paper” (605). Pym is unable to read the letter due to lack of light, since “the hold was so intensely dark that I could not see my hand, however close I would hold it to my face. The white slip of paper could barely be discerned, and not even that when I looked at it directly; by turning the exterior portions of the retina towards it, that is to say, by surveying it slightly askance, I found that it became in some measure perceptible” (606). Pym’s subsequent scramble to find a light source is the occasion for Poe’s explicit engagement with the Kantian conception of the sublime. Pym adopts a Kantian facultative vocabulary in relating his experience, narrating; “[i]n vain I resolved in my brain a multitude of absurd expedients for procuring light [...]each and all of which appear by turns to the dreamer the most reasonable and the most preposterous of conceptions, just as the reasoning or imaginative faculties flicker, alternately, one above the other” (606). While Kant and Poe are conceptually proximate in terms of their high estimation of intuitive knowledge and criticisms of pure reason, one of Poe’s major departures from the Kantian conception of the sublime is his refusal to accept the superordination of the reasoning faculty over the faculty of imagination. Poe’s attempted revaluations of the centrality and dominance of the imaginative faculty inform many of his tales and letters, as well as his psycho-cosmological speculations in *Eureka*. Poe opposes Kant in that “[a]ccording to a statement made in the “Letter to B,” printed as a preface to the 1831 edition of *Poems*, Poe envisaged an opposition between the imaginative and reasoning

faculties, imagination being the only avenue to a perception of ideality and reason being largely responsible for man's state of deception" (Ketterer 238).⁶⁰

This is another point of conceptual proximity between Poe and Hume, for whom "[m]emory, senses, and understanding are therefore all of them founded on the imagination or the vivacity of our ideas." In certain respects, Kant's tripartite faculty psychology, with its ultimate privileging of reason, can be read as an attempt to reinscribe Hume's primacy of the passions and imagination within rationalist limits. As Hume wrote, "[w]e have found [reason] to be nothing but a general calm determination of the passions, founded on some distant view or reflection." The "structure for the determination of subjectivity" which is the sublime, particularly as presented by Poe in *Pym*, erases this Kantian reinscription. The descriptive emphasis on Pym's imagination and sensation during the Grampus section reinforce this through their implosive revision of the sublime encounter.

Having turned the paper itself into a temporary source of light by rubbing it in phosphorus, Pym is disappointed to discover that "had there been any writing upon it, I should not have experienced the least difficulty, I am sure, in reading it. Not a syllable was there, however, - nothing but a dreary and unsatisfactory blank; the illumination died away in a few seconds, and my heart died away within me as it went" (606). This blank white page, the index of the ultimate illegibility of the sublime experience to any kind of analysis,

⁶⁰ This also informs one of Poe's conceptual points of departure from Emerson. In *American Idealism*, Floyd Stovall writes that Poe insisted that "through the attribute of beauty", God "evokes the instinct or sentiment of beauty in the individual soul, and so unites the individual with himself." However, "Emerson turned to the 'reason' for guidance," and Poe to "imagination." Stovall suggests, however, that the dispute was basically semantic, as by "reason" Emerson meant "the intuitive sense," and by "imagination," "Poe intended the same," so that "both were searching for perfection through ways Transcendental" (63). In Carlson's words, "Stovall identifies Poe's 'poetic sentiment,' in contrast to Emerson's moral sentiment, as 'the soul's desire for supernal beauty' and an elevation of the soul experiencing intuitive glimpses of such beauty" (54).

both echoes the insistence of Pym's precursor, the narrator of "MS", that his "new sensation" "will admit of no analysis," and foreshadows the enigmatic apparition that concludes Pym's narrative.

This scene is also reminiscent of the ironic tableaux presented by Brown's *Wieland*, which emphasizes the "illumination" experienced by both Theodor and the elder Wieland upon their readings of Scripture. It emphasizes that Pym, like the Wielands, is a "careless reader." In spite of the textual illumination the phosphorus provides, he misses the fact that there is, indeed, writing on the paper – he was merely examining the wrong side. Pym's interpretive incompetence is compounded when, finally making out the presence of letters on the page, he writes "had I not been too greatly excited, there would have been ample time for me to peruse the whole three sentences before me – for I saw there were three. In my anxiety, however, to read all at once, I succeeded only in reading the seven concluding words, which thus appeared – "*blood-your life depends upon lying close*" (608).

The word "blood" alone is sufficient to overpower Pym with its sublime resonance; the meaning of the note itself becomes lost in the affective jolt it delivers to its already delirious reader, who writes, "'blood,' too, that word of all words – so rife at all times with mystery, and suffering, and terror – how trebly full of import did it now appear – how chillily and heavily (disjointed, as it thus was, from any foregoing words to qualify or render it distinct) did its vague syllables fall, amid the deep gloom of my prison, into the innermost recesses of my soul!" (608). This passage once again emphasizes the imaginary materiality of language, inverting the process whereby a tiger migrated into "Tiger" a few pages earlier. Here "blood" migrates from the realm of the semantic into that of the material, becoming as palpable as the darkness in which Pym reads its redness.

Pym's confusion of "blood" with blood is later justified by Augustus's explanation that he wrote the note in his own blood, due to the lack of available ink, ending his brief warning with the words "*I have scrawled this with blood – your life depends upon lying close*" (617). This reinforces the co-existent materiality of life and language. Blood, the source of both vitality itself, and (according to nineteenth century medical orthodoxy) most diseases and disorders (including those of the mind) becomes ink. Pym's blood is stirred by the vague words writ with Augustus's blood, dramatizing the disruptive potential of the act of reading as a site for the "contagion of the passions." This recalls Hume's claim that "when the imagination, from any extraordinary ferment of the blood and spirits, acquires such a vivacity as disorders all its powers and faculties, there is no means of distinguishing betwixt truth and falsehood" (89). The episode in the *Grampus's* hold also serves, as does Huntly's descent in the middle of his narrative, to intensify this delirious confusion of words and things, subject and objects, for the remainder of the narrative, as Pym never seems to clear himself entirely of the "species of delirium" (608) he experiences at this point. This delirium anticipates Pym's caveat a few pages later, that his narrative "in its latter portions, will be found to include incidents of a nature so entirely out of the range of human experience, and for this reason so far beyond the limits of human credulity, that I proceed in utter hopelessness of obtaining credence for all that I shall tell, yet confidently trusting in time and progressing science to verify some of the most important and most improbable of my statements" (613).

Rescued from his deadly plight by Augustus, Pym learns that his internal revolutions below deck have coincided with an external revolution above, as the crew of the *Grampus* has staged a mutiny. This signals the shift in the narrative's troping of the sublime toward

anxieties about revolutionary violence, tropological migrations from the historical Gothic sublime's proximity to the French Revolution. Like Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, Pym presents a highly racialized depiction of this revolutionary anxiety. The racial dimension of the mutiny aboard the *Grampus*, which foreshadows the later action on Tsalal, is highlighted by Pym's account of the event. Pym writes that "seven of the crew (among whom was the cook, a negro)" (612) led the mutiny.

It is the black cook, portrayed with unreserved savagery, who kills the surrendered crew members, in a scene appropriately evocative of "The Terror" of the Revolution. "[T]he bound seamen were dragged to the gangway. Here the cook stood with an axe, striking each victim on the head as he was forced over the side of the vessel by the other mutineers" (612). The black cook "was a perfect demon [...] who seemed to exert as much influence, if not more, than the mate himself" (613). Like *Edgar Huntly's* Indians, Pym's blacks (both here and on Tsalal) are demonic figurations of the impulsive and libidinal substrate of our identity; they are dehumanized and autochthonic impersonations of subjective processes. As Bradfield points out, "[f]or Poe, blacks are the living embodiment of white unreason" (81). The novel's most unsettling and objectionable embodiments of subreption, they suggest the irrational power of the "lawless sublime" in their violent hyper-masculinity, palpable darkness, unreadable opacity (Pym's later inability to "read" the intentions of the Tsalalians reinforces this), and especially in their deadly threat to the existence of the subject.

The proximity of the mutineers to Pym's periodic states of delirious affective intensity is emphasized, as the mutineers "were continually intoxicated" (614). Against "the Terror" of this revolution, Poe and his companions are forced to mobilize a clever counter-insurgency which offers yet another dramatic de-formation of a sublime object. Having

costumed himself as Roger's rotting revenant in an attempt to terrify the mutineers, Pym himself becomes an object of sublime terror, lent eerie effect by the ship's low light. He writes "by the dim light of a kind of battle-lantern, I was so impressed with a sense of vague awe at my appearance and at the recollection of the terrific reality which I was thus representing, that I was seized with a violent tremor" (629). Pym as Roger's specter presents another illusory sublime object that nonetheless succeeds in producing actual sublime affects. These affects are so potent, they overwhelm even Pym himself, reinforcing his presentation as a "reader" who lacks analytic insight, and is thus, like "Usher's" narrator, unwittingly subject to the affective power of art. This also reinforces the analogy between Pym and Poe's superciliously baited "mob" of indiscriminating readers, dupes to the fetishistic power of "sublime" objects and personae.

In witnessing the profound effect this apparition has on the mutineers, Pym makes an observation that has tremendous significance for the narrative as a whole. "Usually, in cases of a similar nature, there is left in the mind of the spectator some glimmering of doubt as to the reality of the vision before his eyes; a degree of hope, however feeble, that he is the victim of chicanery, and that the apparition is not actually a visitant from the world of shadows. It is not too much to say that such remnants of doubt have been at the bottom of almost every such visitation, and that the appalling horror which has sometimes been brought about is to be attributed, even in the cases most in point, and where most suffering has been experienced, more to a kind of anticipative horror, lest the apparition might possibly be real, than to an unwavering belief in its reality." However, Pym continues, "in the present instance, it will be seen immediately, that in the minds of the mutineers there was

not even the shadow of a basis upon which to rest a doubt that the apparition of Rogers was indeed a revivification of his disgusting corpse, or at least its spiritual image” (631).

The reality of the sublime affects produced by the blood (or “blood”) soaked spectacle of Pym-as-Rogers is amplified by its absolute reality in the minds of the spectators. The claim that “there was not even the shadow of a basis upon which to rest a doubt” of the revenant’s reality is pure Poe in its pregnant irony, given the artificiality of this catalyzing sublime object as it is presented to the reader. Echoing the phrasing of the narrative’s introduction with its emphasis on truth “*under the garb of fiction*” (Pym in the garb of Rogers figuring the textual-affective reality of the sublime cloaked in the illusion of a “spirit of the dead,” notably one of Dennis’s catalogued sublime objects), and the foregoing migration of a tiger into “Tiger” and “blood” into blood, this scene is perhaps the best example of the text’s combined production of humorous and horrific affects through its evacuation of sublime objects.

Once again, the ship itself becomes a containing figuration of the perceiving subject. Pym attributes the mutineers’ absolute certainty of the specter’s reality to “[t]he isolated situation of the brig, [which] with its entire inaccessibility on account of the gale, confined the apparently possible means of deception within such narrow and definite limits, that they must have thought themselves enabled to survey them all at a glance” (631). It is precisely due to their own “subjective limits,” as figured in the isolation of the *Grampus*’s brig itself, that the crew is utterly unable to penetrate the “cloak of fiction” in which the truth of Pym’s deception is inscribed.

This ruse accomplishes the desired effect, and Pym and his companions gain control over the *Grampus*. Following an encounter with a ghostly Dutch ship (an encounter allusive

of Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner"), an anthropophagous seagull, yet another shipwreck, and the exigent cannibalization of Parker, Pym and his surviving companions are finally rescued by the Jane Guy, a change of ships which precipitates a change of narrative mode. As though commenting on the shift in narrative voice that occurs with his boarding of the Jane Guy, Pym explains that "we began to remember what had passed, rather as a frightful dream from which we had been happily awakened, than as events which had taken place in sober and naked reality. I have since found that this species of partial oblivion is usually brought about by sudden transition, whether from joy to sorrow or from sorrow to joy – the degree of forgetfulness being proportioned to the degree of difference in the exchange" (659).

This pontification provides a commentary on Addison's statement that our reaction upon apprehending the sublime is like that upon witnessing the carcass of "a dead monster." The strength of the initial phase of shock and horror, determined by the magnitude and monstrosity of the figure, then becomes a corresponding phase of pleasurable relief (the physiological precursor to Kant's elated recognition of our rational vocation) upon the realization that it poses no actual threat, a pleasure which is indexed to the intensity of its initializing terror. As Kennedy points out, however, in Pym's case this relief accompanies a kind of mnemonic suppression – a "partial oblivion" that anticipates the Freudian conception of repression, and that further undermines Pym's reliability as narrator.

In accordance with this change of containing structure and affective mode, the narrative now moves from the *Caleb Williams/Edgar Huntly* pre-texts to an approximation of exploration narratives, particularly Morrell's *Narrative of Four Voyages*. So extensive are Poe's textual appropriations in these sections, in fact, that the alterations Poe makes to them

give a useful indication of how he re-envisioned the narrative for his own purposes. In this respect, it is interesting to note the ironic anticipation Pym's narrative offers of Darwin's exploration narrative, *the Voyage of the Beagle*, published in the following year. Pym repeatedly tries to play the natural historian, making numerous observations about the flora and fauna he encounters. He becomes, instead of a reader of books, a reader of natural signs. He is, however, apparently no more adept at this hermeneutic enterprise.

Pym's inability to use the natural world as a basis for the production of truthful representations is another example of the degree to which, for all Poe's criticism of Kant, his fictions critically embody key Kantian concepts. One of these is Kant's rejection of knowledge of nature's external purposiveness.⁶¹ Pym's elaborate play with reflection and purposiveness, particularly in this exploratory section, are expressive of an obscure intersection between mind and world that textually embodies this inward turn. Like Kant's *Critique*, *Pym* (the novel) portrays both God and Nature as productive purely of reflective knowledge, although Pym (the narrator) continually fails to realize this. But, as Emerson's spectacles analogy suggests, his failure itself, and its linguistic expression, become

⁶¹ According to Kant, the knowledge we acquire through our studies of nature, as they are always mediated by our cognitive and perceptual limits, are internally purposive, providing only reflective knowledge. That is, they are purposive subjectively, and tell us about ourselves as knowing subjects. External purposiveness cannot be attributed to them. We cannot determinately say that they have an end, or a purpose, in themselves; this is a teleological delusion. Terry Pinker writes that "[i]f anything, the Kantian revolution left behind a view that nature per se could no longer serve as the source of such meaning, and that we therefore had to look to human spontaneity to supply it or to find the conditions under which such claims could be meaningfully made" (358). This parallels Kant's representation of the Deity. God is posited as a necessary supposition in order for our subjective condition to have meaning. God's existence is dictated by moral reason, rather than posited as an existent in the world-as-phenomenon; God-as-noumenon must perforce be beyond the world. Our ideas of God, like our representations of Nature, are thus only internally purposive, and tell us not about God, but about ourselves as subjects. They are *reflective*, a claim which perhaps informs the conclusion of Poe's tale.

productive of reality. Like Deleuze's reading of Hume, Poe insists that the world "constitutes a fiction," (in the language of *Eureka*, "the universe is a plot of God") that affects bodies and alters the conditions of reality. This is something Poe's placement of a suggestively theistic, but also potentially purely perceptual, apparition in the conclusion's narrative cataract will powerfully figure.

Shortly after Pym and company board, the Jane Guy passes by "Desolation Island," which emphasizes the problems of relying on natural objects as signs as, though it is as barren as its name suggests, "the navigator might be induced to suppose otherwise, as the sides of most of the hills, from September to March, are clothed with very brilliant verdure. This deceitful appearance is caused by a small plant resembling saxifrage" (661). The "deceitful appearance" of the natural world is re-emphasized by Pym's voluminous descriptions of "the feathered tribes" that abound in the area. While (perhaps as an oblique nod to the indebtedness of this section to Morrell's and similar accounts) Pym acknowledges that "these rookeries have been often described," since his "readers may not all have seen these descriptions," he "shall have occasion to speak of the penguin and albatross" (662). This statement also serves to bring the description of these creatures to the readers' attention, suggesting its centrality to a reading of Pym's narrative as a whole.

The description of the penguins and the albatross is the site of two of the three primary conceptual alterations Poe makes to Morrell's narrative. The first occurs during Pym's detailed description of indigenous royal penguins, a description which is central to Pym's unsettlingly ambiguous conclusion. According to Pym, "[t]he royal penguin, so called from its size and beautiful plumage, is the largest" of the indigenous species of penguin. "The upper part of the body is usually gray, sometimes of a lilac tint; the under portion of the

purest white imaginable.” The description is notable especially because of Pym’s emphasis on the anthropoid characteristics of the species, which “walk erect, with a stately carriage. They carry their heads high with their wings drooping like two arms, and, as their tails project from their body in a line with the legs, the resemblance to a human figure is very striking, and would be apt to deceive the spectator at a casual glance or in the gloom of the evening” (661). Claudia Silverman points to Poe’s deviation from Morrell’s description during this passage. She explains that “though Morrell cites the resemblance of the penguins to children and sentinels, the term ‘human figure’ is Poe’s.”

The next alteration to Morrell’s account is during the description of the elaborate cooperation between the penguins and the albatross in the design and construction of the rookery. Silverman points out that “Morrell attests to the implicit role of Providence and ‘the great Creator in the action of the birds; Morrell attributes to the rookery an aspect that is ‘calculated to lead a reflecting mind to contemplation,’ while Poe places a spirit of reflection’ in the birds which is ‘calculated to elicit reflection in. . . human intellect.’” Pym’s speculation of a reflective power operant within the birds themselves is an apt dramatization of Kantian subreption, as he attributes to the creatures themselves the sublime reflections to which they lead their observer. Pym thus creates a conceptual *mise en abyme* by holding up his own reflections against the reflections of the birds themselves, suggesting a closed-circuit of reflection that anticipates the literal *mise en abyme* the narrative will create using the mirrors aboard the *Jane Guy* a few pages later.

Silverman points out that, while the episode with the natives ogling the ship’s guns and the cabin’s mirror are borrowed from Morrell, Poe “adds a second mirror to the ship’s cabin.” In Poe’s version, “there were two large mirrors in the cabin, and here was the acme

of their amazement. Too-wit was the first to approach them, and he had got in the middle of the cabin, with his face to one and his back to the other, before he fairly perceived them. Upon raising his eyes and seeing his reflected self in the glass, I thought the savage would go mad” (675). Faced with an illusion of infinite depth, Too-Wit (with the connotations of the imagination that name carries) is nearly driven “mad” in a strangely literal figuration of Kant’s conception of the mathematical sublime, through which the imagination is “driven to an abyss” by its inability to comprehend the idea of infinity.

This scene provides a visual re-iteration of the *mise en abyme* Pym imagined in his earlier discussion of the rookery’s reflecting birds. Here, Too-Wit suggests a jab at Pym, whose “too-witty” interpretations of characters and events do nothing to overcome his fundamental misrecognition of reality. This jab is, in all probability, also aimed at the over-eager interpreter of Pym’s narrative, who could be said to share his failure to “see” the world at all, due to the unwitting inwardness of his gaze, and his enclosure within an infinite proliferation of images and illusory depths. Unlike Too-Wit, both Pym and the reader whose viewpoint he mediates are unable to step outside of this reflective circuit.

The emphasis in these passages on reflection opens into the foregrounding of the process of reflection that pervades the last sections of the narrative. This emphasis becomes clear after Pym and his companions flee from the murderous Tsalalians. The exploration of “the chasm of black granite into which we had made our way in the first search” (692), with its anticipation of the descent into the chasm of the white cataract a few pages later, is the occasion for the narrative’s explicit echo of Poe’s earlier tale, “MS found in a Bottle.” This section presents an intensification of Pym’s tendency to confuse his own imaginative reflections with his perceptual apprehensions, a process he comments on explicitly.

As they descend ever deeper into the chasm, Pym exclaims, “presently I found my imagination growing terribly excited by thoughts of the vast depth yet to be descended” (696). This leads to the amplification, even reification, of Pym’s “conceptions,” which come to overshadow the palpable reality revealed by his senses; in other words, Pym’s powers of reflection become indistinguishable from his powers of sensation. He states that “the more earnestly I struggled not to think, the more intensely vivid became my conceptions, and the more horribly distinct” (696). Pym’s sublime affects, like those he experienced during his disguise as the revenant of murdered Rogers, are revealed as the most (perhaps the only) reality. They are the material from which the text of his narrative experience is woven; he claims that “I found these fancies creating their own realities, and all imagined horrors crowding in upon me in fact” (696).

This agonistic intrasubjective encounter precedes a section in the narrative that once again foregrounds the question of the purposiveness of nature so central to Kant’s *Analytic of the Sublime*. Their continued descent shortly exposes Pym and his companions to a number of shapes, seemingly hewn from the granite. Pym reports two types of stone figures that suggest some kind of meaningful artifice. The first type, he claims, resemble humanoid statuary, and the second, linguistic signs; “with a very slight exertion of the imagination, the left, or most northern of these indentures might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arms. The rest of them bore also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters” (694). Pym’s desire to see this as a “human figure” with outstretched arms both anticipates and calls into question the “shrouded human form” that awaits with the narrative’s conclusion.

For Kant, the presence of both beauty and sublimity in the natural world represented an occasion for reflection, through which we become aware of our own rational vocation. Once again, Poe's repeatedly emphasizing Pym's reflections upon natural objects can be read as a skeptical embodiment of Kant's "principle that nature has a purpose, which is the unstated *a priori* principle of teleological judgment, [which] can only be a regulative principle for reflecting judgment, not a constitutive principle for determining judgment that actually contributes to our scientific knowledge of nature" (*CJ* xxvii). To mistake this knowledge for "a constitutive principle for determining judgment" is to commit the philosophical sin of subreption. In terms of making mistaken assumptions about the external purposiveness of nature, this is a subreption most dramatically characterized by the natural sublime. In attributing teleology to a natural object, we perform a specious personification of nature. Adopting earlier textual incarnations of this natural sublime, Pym critically embodies this tendency, which will be more literally embodied by the novel's conclusion⁶².

⁶² In this instance, however, it is Pym's refusal to recognize external purposiveness in these objects that informs the disparity between his comments and those of "Poe." The challenges "Mr. Poe" raises to Pym's interpretations of the stone figures/characters in the black granite chasm highlight precisely the difference between "reading" these figures as non-purposive (or internally purposive) natural formations which coincidentally suggest linguistic signs (as Pym does), and "reading" them as purposive and communicative artifacts (as "Poe" does.) He writes that "Mr. Pym has given the figures of the chasms without comment, and speaks decidedly of the indentures found at the extremity of the most easterly of these chasms as having but a fanciful resemblance to alphabetical characters, and, in short, as being positively not such. This assertion is made in a manner so simple and sustained by a species of demonstration so conclusive [...] that we are forced to believe the writer in earnest [...] But as the facts in relation to all the figures are most singular (especially when taken in connection with statements made in the body of the narrative), it may be as well to say a word or two concerning them."

"Poe" then goes on to propose that these figures are linguistic by providing a probable etymology for each of them; a variation on the "Ethiopian verbal root" "to be shady," the "Arabic verbal root" "to be white," and "the full Egyptian word" "the region of the south," respectively. In light of these inferences, "Poe" notes that these figures "open a wide field for speculation and exciting conjecture. They should be regarded, perhaps, in

Many of Pym's interpretive errors throughout the second half of the narrative (his "naturalistic" comments on the wildlife on the islands, at the rookery, and on Tsalal) are products of such a subreption, springing from his attempts to infer constitutive principles from his perceptions of the natural world. This informs the parody of scientific exploration that underlies much of the narrative, as Pym's supposed contributions to scientific knowledge typically arise from his misrecognition of his own subjective reflections as constitutive of external entities. This also accounts for the two primary changes Poe makes to Morell's narrative, each of which is altered to provide a comment on the act of reflection.

This interrogation is mirrored by that which *Pym* demands the reader make of its own "purposiveness" as narrative. Pym/Poe's judgment of these black "great figures" (and later on the white "great figure") emphasizes the process of interpretation the narrative asks the reader to perform. This question of the aesthetic purposiveness of the narrative is then further emphasized by the following scene, which brings Pym and company to another enigmatic site where the boundaries between natural objects and human artifacts/signs are further blurred. The description of this scene, with its emphasis on chaos, barrenness and vastness, is a stark exemplification of the Burkean-Kantian image of natural sublimity. "The place was one of singular wildness, and its aspect brought to my mind the descriptions given by travelers of those dreary regions marking the site of degraded Babylon. Not to speak of the ruins of the disrupted cliff, which formed a chaotic barrier in the vista to the northward, the surface of the ground in every other direction was strewn with huge tumuli, apparently the wreck of some gigantic structures of art; although, in detail, no semblance of art could be detected" (697).

connection with some of the most faintly-detailed incidents of the narrative; although in no visible manner is this chain of connection complete" (704).

Kennedy reads this scene as a probable self-reflexive criticism by Poe on the conditions of his narrative, writing that “[i]f it is possible to identify a specific scene that conveys Poe’s awareness that he had reached a narrative impasse [“chaotic barrier”], it may well be the moment in chapter 24 when Pym emerges from the chasm in a location reminiscent of ‘those dreary regions marking the site of degraded Babylon. [...] Pym confronts a contradictory sort of wreckage that seems at once artful and artless. We may surmise that here Poe metaphorically surveys the shambles of his own unfinished narrative’ (Kennedy 68). Rather than (or in addition to) an assessment of this scene as a piece of metafictional criticism by Poe, it is useful to read the ambiguity of this scene’s significance in light of the connections between Pym and Shawn Rosenheim’s analysis of “Murders in the Rue Morgue.”

Rosenheim points out that it is Dupin’s ability to realize that the sounds heard at the site of the killing were non-linguistic that leads to his solution of the crime. He explains that, by “having the solution to the crime in “Rue Morgue” turn on the aural cryptogram, Poe simultaneously dramatizes both the power of human analysis and his fear of what life without language might be like” (160). Pym, conversely, presents the reader with a narrator who claims to be able to differentiate mere objects from signs, but who is repeatedly proven to be incapable of doing so. Pym repeatedly fails to distinguish between the forms and sounds of animals and those of human beings, and, as Poe’s concluding notes to the story suggest, may have also been incapable of distinguishing whether the stone characters discovered near the end of the narrative were in fact the products of geological formation, or communicative human artifice. Thus, his vision of a “shrouded human figure” at the narrative’s conclusion must be read in terms of this unreliability.

Pym's closing paragraph begins with an intimation of obscurity as a palpable presence which evokes Brown's sublime figurations in *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly*. Poe's emphasis on darkness (a negation, an absence) as a material presence parallels his presentation of the negative sublime as materially productive. The palpability of this absence of light is ironized by the figuration of unreadability with which Pym's narrative concludes. "The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal Tekeli-li! As they retreated from our vision. Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but upon touching him, we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (702).

Readers and critics of Pym have taken this closing passage in practically innumerable ways. Interpretations of Pym's conclusion constitute a veritable circus of colourful speculations, as each reader refracts the blank whiteness Pym faces, finding differing combinations of colour contained therein. Poe's reliance on the polysemous term *cataract*' (rooted in a Greek word meaning to rush downward) lends itself readily to these interpretive refractions. First, Pym and his companions are descending into a chasm via a cataract (waterfall) as this vision appears. Second, the word's scriptural significance as a reference to the floodgates of Heaven (see Genesis 7:11 and 8:2) informs the sense of religious sublimity the "shrouded human figure" evokes. Many critics have emphasized the sense of the numinous that pervades the cryptic passage, reading the figure as an intimation of God,

the ultimate ground of the sublime according to Shaftesbury, Dennis, Addison and Burke, which Shaftesbury described as “the Abyss of Deity.” The theistic intimations of this passage are certainly appropriate to the sublimity which pervades the tale in its entirety. After all, if Pym is read in the light of Dennis’s lengthy catalogue of sublime objects in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, its theistic conclusion is readily predictable. Having affectively jolted the shaken (although perhaps not stirred) reader with “demons, hell, spirits and souls of men, miracles, prodigies, enchantments, witchcrafts, thunder, tempests, raging seas, inundations, torrents, earthquakes, volcanoes, monsters, serpents, lions, tigers, fire, war, pestilence” and famine, what remains but to ice the proverbial cake with an apparition of that incomparably terrible idea, God?

Finally, the term’s usage to refer to the opacity of the eye’s lens suggests the perceptual distortion that informs this sublime vision, which many critics have read as a hallucinatory misperception by the lost, starving, and delirious Pym. For example, Kopley (151) and Kennedy (54) point to the figure’s resemblance to the species of penguin described earlier in the narrative, “the royal penguin, so called from its size and beautiful plumage” which features an “under portion of the purest white imaginable” (661). The possibility that Pym has mistaken this great bird for a superhuman figure is supported by his earlier confusion of a seagull’s cry with a human voice, and his statement, conspicuously altered from a passage otherwise lifted directly from Morrell’s *Narrative*, of the resemblance between the birds of the rookery and human beings. The narrative lends further support to this reading a few sentences before the radiant apparition, as the reference to the “gigantic and pallidly white birds” which fly “continuously now from beyond the veil” also suggest the outline of this white figure, as well as anticipating its apocalyptic (“beyond the veil”)

aura. All of this suggests the possibility that in Pym's narrative, Shaftesbury's "Abyss of Deity" arises from a textual *trompe l'oeil*, the sublime represented as a reported glare of reflected light, or a penguin as king of the ghosts.

Kennedy writes that "[t]he final, ambiguous episode, in which Pym seems to disappear in a *polar* cataract, dramatizes *either* revelation *or* delirium; in either case, it betrays authorial mystification as Poe leaves his reader literally hanging on the edge of an interpretive abyss" (12; my italics). While Kennedy's image of the story's conclusion as leaving the reader toeing an abyss is apt, he appears to miss the irony of his own bi-polar formulation, which limits the reader to an either/or interpretation of this "great figure." That this either/or is an unsatisfactory restriction is suggested by Poe's usage of the word cataract. In light of his frequent etymological play and emphasis on the materiality of language, this word serves as a cue to the reader that to view the story's conclusion as *either* delirium *or* revelation, is to fall prey to Pym's own pathological interpretosis, and to neglect the negative sublimity that underlies the entire narrative.

Like the reader of Clara's narrative in *Wieland*, the reader of Pym's narrative is, at the novel's conclusion, put in the position of Pym himself, and challenged unsettlingly by a narrative that resists his eager attempts to make definite meaning of its recalcitrant materials. In Kennedy's words, "Poe's novel delivers an ironic critique of our human compulsion to make sense, literally to manufacture meaning; intelligence abhors a cognitive vacuum and must fill a discernable void with signification" (Kennedy 72). Additionally, Claudia Silverman has pointed to the resemblance between the phrasing of the novel's last few sentences, and the sentences which open the narrative, suggesting the possibility of a circular reading of *Pym*. In light of this circular structure, the *apparition* of this enigmatic figure can

be read as reflecting “the *appearance* of that truth” which Pym tries to convey to his reader in the introduction; its “shroud” is the illusory sublime object, which serves to tenuously disguise the reality of the vortex of the negative sublime, violently involving the reader in its textual-affective matrix “*under the garb of fiction.*” It is this vortextual matrix which both invokes and evades our compulsive attempts to cover it with meaning, to contain it within objects as a way of preserving the stability of subjective identity.

This movement has already been traced by a number of preceding sublime encounters catalyzed by emptied objects, including the description of Augustus’s adventurous orations at the novel’s outset, Pym’s pet Tiger during his *Nekyia* aboard the *Grampus*, and his costuming as Roger’s corpse during the counter-mutiny. Each propagates sublime affects, while parodying their generation from sublime objects, ironically making the sublimity they evoke more effective by evacuating the objects themselves of real significance.

Similarly, Pym’s pallid apparition can be read alongside the eponymous moth-monster of “The Sphinx,” which produces a vertiginous facultative conflict for the narrator/reader in spite of its miniscule simplicity. But, while I and, I suspect, most readers, find the conclusion of “The Sphinx” to be quite comical, there is something much more disturbing about the “great figure” of Pym’s conclusion. Kennedy, for example, writes that “the white figure marks the limit of human knowing and the threshold of the numinous; thus it remains inexplicable, irreducible and – to modern critics –relentlessly disconcerting” (74). Paradoxically inexplicable and interminably explicable, Pym’s “shrouded human figure” remains a startling figuration of that which cannot be figured: the negative sublime. This is further suggested by the figure’s resemblance to Longinus’s description of “[t]hese great

figures,” which “shining before our gaze, will somehow elevate our minds to the greatness of which we form a mental image” (14.1)⁶³.

When compared with the “egotistical sublimity” of Whitman or Emerson, or even the psychological sublimity of Brockden Brown, Pym’s conclusion provides a different “stance” altogether through which to behold the sublime: the infinite absolute negativity of irony, which supplants the rhetorical tropes dubbed “sublime” by Longinus with one which cannot be matched by them for its “unplumbable depths” or its vertiginous complexity. Wilson writes that, “[t]he sublime is unmasked as a fiction of self-empowerment, a hyperbole of ideal agency better segregated from the lyric into the genres of ‘allegory’ and ‘satire’ where it can be overcome through the ascesis of perpetual self-irony” (211). It is the “perpetual self-irony” of *Pym* that informs Pahl’s reading of the novel as producing a Derridean play of signification. What Pahl misses with his deconstructive study of Poe’s fiction, however, is that Pym’s profound negation, through Poe’s insistence on the materially productive power of the word, is also a double affirmation: it is a paradox, as Deleuze defines it, because it is “the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time” (8). Negating subject and object, both the “either” and the “or” in Kennedy’s formulation, it also affirms both. Rather than forcing a false interpretive dilemma on its readers, demanding they either see “God” or “penguin⁶⁴” (or Frankenstein’s monster, last sighted in a similar tropic of the polar sublime,

⁶³ It is worth noting the similarity between this statement and Poe’s defense of his textual assimilations as produced by poetic absorption in such sublime figures, which come to have “a secondary origination within the soul” of the reader, an issue which will be further explored by the next chapter. It is appropriate, in light of this connection, that *Pym*, Poe’s most extended engagement with the negative sublime, has spawned so many sequels and imitations by other authors; it becomes, by its very sublimity, beyond the scope of the authorial subject it undermines to possess or contain.

⁶⁴ If we are to believe the pantheistic propositions of Vankirk, the narrator of “Mesmeric Revelation,” or Poe as the author of *Eureka*, “The ultimate, or unparticled matter, not only

or a Gothicized Frosty the Snowman, for that matter), Pym suggests that these (like the multiple meanings of cataract) are both products of the same textual-affective matrix.

In other words, Pym's final figure exemplifies Kierkegaard's claim that, "[f]or irony, everything becomes nothingness, but nothingness may be taken in several ways" (275). By way of contrast, whereas in Wilson's words, "[s]eeking to solidify the sublime, [Whitman's] 'Song of Myself' moves through states of terror and horror to renewed affirmations of spiritual wonder, rapt awe, and plenary union with the vastness of God" (146), Poe's *Pym*, seeking to express the sublime through negation, ironizes this union, but simultaneously sublimates this irony, aligning it with the textual-affective "vortex of mysticism" as a productive and destructive power. This ironic sublimation, and sublime de-formation, is reinforced by the closing phrase of the story's postscript: "*I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock*"

A paragraph apart from the foregoing commentary by "Poe," the relationship between this phrase and the text that precedes it is ambiguous; it has no immediately apparent author. With its faux Biblical resonance (and close echo of Anne Bradstreet's early evocation of the religious sublime in "Contemplations:" "But he whose name is grav'd in the white stone/ Shall last and shine when all of these are gone") it evokes Dennis's apogee of sublimity, "the wrath of an angry God," but also invokes the evacuative involution of Poe's representational gamesmanship. The "wrath" is the vibrantly ironic "vengeance" of the

permeates all things but impels all things – and thus is all things within itself. This matter is God. What men attempt to embody in the word 'thought,' is this matter in motion" (428). On Poe's immanent plane of world and words, God is the original thought, that cannot be thought, or "the unthoughtlike thought" that is "the soul of thought". This is the ineffable, original sublimity; the thought that exceeds and annihilates the possibility of a thinker. It is this undifferentiated and interpenetrating intensity that is gestured toward by Poe's textual-affective assemblages of the sublime.

(fictional?) author of Pym's being, whose sublime performance posits an affective production predicated on a profound negation.

The sublimity of Poe's *Pym*, then, is powerful and pure, precisely insofar as it is utterly empty, and entirely negative. While it is frequently suggestive of meanings that lie "below the surface" of the text, and continues to, siren-like, draw fascinated readers into these illusory vortices, it simultaneously destabilizes the possibility of "deep" readings. It is, in Pym's words "unfathomable" because its depths are all supremely surfacial; it is beyond depth in being two-dimensional. In *Marginalia*, Poe offers his readers an insight that can well be applied to a reading of *Pym*. He writes that "[t]here is a double entendre in the old adage about Truth in a Well; but, taking the profundity of Truth as at least one of the meanings – understanding it to be implied that correct ideas on any topic are to be fished up only from great depths, and that to have common sense it is necessary to be abysmal – this being taken as the moral of the adage, I have no objections on the spot. The profundity of which so much is said, lies more frequently in the places where we seek Truth than in those where we find her" (95). The depths lie spread out upon the surface, as the textual-affective matrix of the sublime inseparably involves the opacity of the optic lens in its appearance of measureless depth. Deleuze writes that "[i]t is by following the border, by skirting the surface, that one passes from bodies to the incorporeal. Paul Valery had a profound idea: what is most deep is the skin. This is a stoic discovery" (10). Valery's "profound idea," as the title of Eliot's classic study *From Poe to Valery* suggests, is one he uncovered during his descent into Poe's surfacially abyssal texts.

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym can thus be said to operate like the "woman" of Nietzsche's aphorism. It is so deep, one can find no bottom to it, so deep, it lacks the depth

even to be shallow. This is the achievement of *Pym*'s conclusion. It gestures, through the "abyss of Deity" of sublime egoic expansion/annihilation, to the "abyss" of an ironic recession in perpetuity, or, in Kierkegaard's words, an "infinite absolute negativity". It thus lies like an icy chasm between the Romantic/Kantian sublime that will continue to find its voice in Whitman and the Boston Transcendentalists, and the postmodern recapitulation of this sublime as not a natural plenitude, but an "empty spirit / in vacant space," in Stevens' words.

“Torture[d] into aught of the Sublime:”**Poe’s Fall of the House of Burke, Usher and Kant**

“The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and Astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises that great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.”

Edmund Burke, *Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*

“It is not, as Mr Locke says, that the tales of nurses have made night the scene of terrors, but that the solemnity and real awfulness of the night, has made it the natural scene of frightful tales and apparitions in all nations. It is to meet the sublime impression undisturbed, that the poet retires to the solitary walks of the country; that he seeks for vales hid from the human eye, where silence seems to take up her dwelling; and loves to frequent the woods covered with darkness and shade: there he feels, with all the certainty of intuition, the presence of the universal genius, whose immediate influence tunes his voice to music, and fires the imagination with rapture.”

James Ussher, *Clio*

“Deception due to the strength of the human power of imagination often goes so far that a person believes he sees and feels outside himself that which he has only in his mind. Thus the dizziness that seizes the person who looks into an abyss, even though he has a wide enough surface around him so as not to fall, or even stands by a firm handrail. – Some mentally ill people have a strange fear that, seized by an inner impulse, they will spontaneously hurl themselves down”

Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Viewpoint*

“We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss – we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger [...] but out of this our cloud upon the precipice’s edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height.”

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Imp of the Perverse”

Upon reading Poe's tales, French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire experienced a vertiginous sense of dissolution and elevation of self that could perhaps best be described as a literary experience of the sublime. Both finding and losing himself in the poetic fictions of this mysterious American master, Baudelaire found an exemplar of precisely the Modern aesthetic that he himself had been fumbling for. Writing of Poe's tales, Baudelaire famously observed that "each one of [Poe's] opening paragraphs draws the reader in without violence – like a whirlpool" (90). This is perhaps the earliest and most renowned recognition of what can be called Poe's *vortextual* aesthetics, an aesthetic philosophy and practice which is both grounded in the historical discourse on the sublime, and which is taken to a singular peak (or nadir) by Poe. This aesthetic approach is metonymized continuously within the tales themselves, as their characters are drawn inexorably into a variety of vortextual incarnations.

The narrator of "MS found in a Bottle" is finally sucked down into a mysterious marine whirlpool" "Metzengerstein"'s narration concludes with the image of a ghostly horseman glimpsed in "a whirlwind of chaotic fire" (98). The narrator of "A Descent into the Maelstrom" finds himself "swimming in a vortex," and drawn into "the wonders of the whirlpool" (279). The narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" throws himself into a churning, watery abyss to escape an agonizing death by fire. The narrator of "Ligeia" finds his consciousness swallowed by the swirling black eyes, "deeper than the well of Democritus," of his dark beloved. The narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" stands "upon the brink of a precipice," driven by his own palpable thoughts to hurl himself into a figurative abyss. In short, the image of a figure drawn irrevocably into the terrific involutions of an abyssal vortex is ubiquitous throughout Poe's fiction. In her 1935 psychoanalytic study of Poe's works, Marie Bonaparte tirelessly insisted on the significance

of these and similar images, as an invariably male narrator/character is “drawn into a vast whirlpool – which, for all its terror, fatally attracts him.” This image is, alongside “the death of a beautiful woman,” perhaps the most pervasive trope in Poe’s oeuvre. Bonaparte claims that it doesn’t take a Freudian analyst “to realize that these tales, each in its own way, expresses a version of the return-to-the-womb phantasy” (353).

Bonaparte’s early recognition of the centrality of this image for an understanding of Poe’s fiction is indisputable, and her assessment of Poe’s varied vortices as figuring an archetypal womb/matrix of sorts remains a valuable insight. However, I would like to suggest, contra Bonaparte’s venerable Freudian exegesis, that this image need not be read through the extra-textual Freudian reference points of “Mommy, Daddy, Me.” These images, suggestive of what Poe termed the “vortex of mysticism,” can be more productively read as the fictive embodiments of the *vortex* of sublimity, figurations of the dissolution of reading subject and read object through the ideal involution of the text. If Poe’s tales trace the return of his characters to a womb, it is finally a textual matrix, a *Poe-tic* and ecstatic vortex, to which they return, and into which Poe often seems to have felt drawn. This sensation became a foundational principle for his philosophy of language and aesthetics.

What Poe describes in “The Poetic Principle” and elsewhere as the *feeling of ideality* which is the end and agency of true poetry (a term which, for the purposes of my argument, is inclusive of fiction, as well as verse, that aspires to a “unity of effect”) is a plateau of subjective intensity that, through the affective power of the text, effectively dissolves the apparent distinction between author and reader, and author/reader and text. This feeling of ideality can readily be recognized as both a recapitulation of the simultaneous elevation and emptying of the self described by Longinian *ekstasis*, and a precursor to the poststructuralist

“death of the author” (one which has made Poe’s work particularly appealing to poststructurally inclined critics.) It is this power which is repeatedly figured in Poe’s fiction by the image of the cataract or vortex, as a narrating subject is caught up and dissolved in the involution of a textual-affective matrix. The link between Poe’s “feeling of ideality” and Longinian *ekstasis* is reinforced by his depiction of this feeling as “the sense of the beautiful, of the sublime, and of the mystical.” This sense, with its excruciating commingling of pleasure and pain, beauty and terror, is the energetic eye of Poe’s “vortex of mysticism.” Poe’s conception of this involution is deeply rooted in the discourse on the sublime, yet at the same time its trajectory goes well beyond the key theoretical descriptions of the sublime encounter that influenced it, by shedding the ostensible objects and interpretive restrictions of these theories. It is this creative negation, as the rest of this chapter will argue, that is dramatized by “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

Poe’s most exemplary tale, “Usher” is, like *Pym*, emanated by the psycho-aesthetic image of the vortex, and it closes with an image that mirrors *Pym*’s inconclusive conclusion. While *Pym* and his companions are swallowed by a sublime waterfall, the House of Usher and its twin personifications are consumed by a “whirlwind,” which like *Pym*’s fatally blank falls, issues “a rushing sound as of a thousand waters.” Here, Poe’s enigmatic emblem of sublimity is a literalization of Longinus’s description of sublime language as a force which “tears everything up like a whirlwind.” *Pym*’s cataract and Usher’s dismantling whirlwind are both negative figurations of the psycho-textual involution which both stylistically and thematically underwrites so much of Poe’s literary production. I will consider “Usher’s” “vortex of mysticism” alongside a number of Poe’s other writings, each of which offers aid

to the reader who seeks to sound the paradoxically surfacial and sublime depths underlying, and overlaying, the architecture of Poe's "House of Usher."

Following critics such as Kent Ljungquist and Jack G. Voller, I read "Usher" in terms of its self-conscious engagement *with* – and simultaneous disengagement *from* – the discourse on the sublime. I argue, first, that it continues the evacuative movement of negative sublimity that the last chapter recognized in *Pym*. This negative sublimity is a response to, or rejection of, not just the appropriation of natural imagery in the production of a national or egoistic sublimity, but also the architecture of sublime theorizations inherited from European intellectuals such as Burke, Ussher, and Kant, and the conventions of a Gothic fiction which was nourished by these theories. Second, I argue that "Usher" produces this negative sublimity by collapsing a number of contemporaneously dominant philosophical and aesthetic binaries. It metonymizes these collapsed binaries both through its refusal to grant complete autonomy to the twinned characters of Roderick and Madeline, or Roderick and the narrator, and through its own completion in the collapse of the architecture of the house itself.

Usher's house, as generations of conflicting critical interpretation makes clear, is a highly overdetermined image, its suggestive instability lending extraordinary power to the tale and enabling the multiple and often contradictory readings which it continues to occasion. I argue that, as a symbolic structure, the house, and specifically its collapse at the close of the tale, has tremendous significance for Poe's aesthetics and philosophy of language. It figures, on the one hand, the then-conventional architecture of Gothic fiction, with its ancestral curses, corrupt genealogies, crumbling piles and clichéd supernatural objects of terror. The conventions of Gothic fiction are both embodied and overturned by the

tale, which can be read as the dramatization of the collapse of these conventions. The house figures, on the other hand, the theoretical architecture of the sublime, and the conflicted image of the mind that this architecture implies.

Poe's critical engagement with the sublime has not gone unnoticed by previous critics. His sustained and extensive interest in the sublime is readily evidenced by J. Lasley Dameron's identification, in *An Index to Poe's Critical Vocabulary*, of thirty-eight usages of the term 'sublime' in Poe's critical writings alone. Citing Dameron, Kent Ljungquist suggests that Poe's familiarity with the sublime may have arisen largely from his familiarity with Burke's *Enquiry*, a familiarity which is indubitable, given the "several references to Burke in Poe's works, and one, in particular, [which] bespeaks a knowledge of the *Enquiry* (VIII 328, IX 31, X 173)" (48).

Also drawing on Dameron, Jack G. Voller argued in his article "The Power of Terror: Burke and Kant in the House of Usher" that "Usher" is concerned with criticizing the two predominant theorizations of the sublime in the early nineteenth century; the theoretical architecture developed by Edmund Burke, and under Burke's figurative tutelage, that developed by Immanuel Kant. According to him, "Usher" is "as much concerned with Kant's aesthetic as with that offered by Burke and his inheritors" (27), and "finally records not merely Poe's rejection of two particular theories of sublimity, but of the possibility that the sublime can provide a meaningful or even competent accounting of terror" (27). I would like to extend this analysis of the tale by suggesting that "Usher" is Poe's fictive liberation of the affect of terror both from the theoretical architecture of Burkean and Kantian theorizations of sublimity, and also from the conventional machinery of Gothic fiction, which the tale ironically installs and strategically collapses. I will also show how Poe's affective liberation

of terror is inextricably linked to his aesthetic achievement, and his oft-unrecognized importance as a (proto)-Modernist fictional innovator.

The theories of Burke and Kant were definitive contributions to the discourse on the sublime, and both conceptually circumscribed the affect of terror (so central to Poe's work as a whole) in a way which lent itself to the subsequent formation of a moral teleology, and a literary hierarchy, both of which Poe was determined to unsettle and overturn. While concurring with Voller, who argues that with "Usher," Poe is "writing a tale directed against established theories of sublimity" (27), I would like to challenge and refine some of Voller's arguments, and add further tropological detail to the map that he and others have made of "Usher"'s critical exploration of sublimity. Due to his emphasis on establishing a particular allegorical relationship between "Usher" and Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime", Voller fails to attend to the way in which the tale adopts and undercuts a number of other interlinked binaries of eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophical and aesthetic thought. Through its destabilization of these binary (or, in Kant's case, triangular) architectures, the tale creates a ficto-philosophical conflagration that allows a radical transformation of the relationship between the affect of terror and the complex of concepts that constitutes the discourse on the sublime. The foundational binaries that are collapsed with the "House of Usher" include the Burkean distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, the Kantian distinction between imagination and reason (the emphasis of Voller's article), the Radcliffean distinction between the affects of terror and horror, and the Coleridgean distinction between fancy and imagination. Each of these conceptual binaries remained widely known and virulently influential during Poe's literary career, and each had contributed to the establishment of a

theorization of affective terror that Poe expressly rejected in his thought and writing, both fiction and non-fiction.

First, it is necessary to comment on the narrative structure of the tale itself. Like each of the other fictions discussed in the course of this thesis, "Usher" is a first-person narration that often achieves its effects/affects by positioning the reader (or inciting the reader to actively resist such subject positioning) through direct narratorial address. As Scott Bradfield has suggested, the tale's narrative structure resembles that of both *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Gordon Pym*, and thus, like those texts, "Usher" can be recognized as to some degree inscribed by the influence of Godwin's *Caleb Williams*. Also like these pre-texts and most of Poe's confessional first person narratives, "Usher" devotes a great deal of textual space and rhetorical energy to the narrator's various attempts to persuade the reader of his own sanity and lack of culpability (for an excellent discussion of Poe's usage of formal rhetorical devices in achieving such effects, see Zimmerman 2005) in the bizarre crime the tale obscurely describes. The tale's foregrounding of issues arising from the discourse on the sublime, particularly the affective contagion enabled by sublime characters (be they geographic, linguistic, or psychological) is essential to its narrative arrangement, as the judgments the tale invites its readers to make of the narrator's mental condition and involvement in the apparent deaths of the Usher siblings (particularly, the prematurely interred Madeline) are problematized by the confusions and compulsions he recounts himself having experienced during his stay in the grim and gloomy House of Usher.

I would like to point out two additional considerations of Usher's narrative structure that inform its treatment of negative sublimity. The first is its resemblance to the influential, and quite Burkean, textual treatment of sublimity offered by Irish poet and critic James

Ussher (often spelled ‘Usher’)s late eighteenth century *Clio, or a Discourse on Taste*. Given “Usher”s sustained critical engagement with the discourse on the sublime, it is probable that, with the tale’s eponymous patronym, Poe offers his readers a self-conscious echo of James Ussher’s name. Usher’s *Clio*, itself structurally echoing Johnson’s *Rasselas*, with its presentation of an urban narrator travelling to the more naturally sublime abode of his rural friend, is written by an older male mentor to a young female friend and pupil.

Clio expounds a conception of the sublime that draws heavily on that depicted by Burke’s *Enquiry*, but one which carefully circumscribes the role that the affect of terror plays in the experience of the sublime, a circumscription that “Usher” goes to great lengths to explode. *Clio*’s narrator attributes the pontifications on the sublime he will disseminate to his young friend⁶⁵ to an “old friend”, “a genius” who, like Roderick, dwells in sublime isolation, the better to bask in the sublimity of the remote landscape and attend to the productions of his poetic craft. “[H]e had withdrawn himself from the trifling bustle of the little world, to converse with his own heart, and end a stormy life in obscure quiet” (148). It was during a visit to the remote home of this reclusive genius that the narrator was granted the insights into aesthetics that he now shares with his epistolary narratee, Clio. The narrator emphasizes that the power of sublimity inheres in a “universal spirit” of which all human beings, to some degree, partake (an idea proximate to Kant’s notion of a *sensus communis*, and one which will be eerily exaggerated by Roderick’s theory of pansentience) .

He claims that “[t]he sublime, by an authority which the soul is utterly unable to resist, takes possession of our attention, and of all of our faculties, and absorbs them in

⁶⁵ I’ll resist the urge to develop at length the potential pun this dissemination presents, particularly in light of Dennis’s early characterization of Longinian *ekstasis* as a “*ravishment*.”

astonishment. The passion it inspires us with is evidently a mixture of terror, curiosity, and exultation: but they are stamped with a majesty that bestows on them a different air and character from those passions on any other occasion” (147). Usher goes to great lengths to qualify and contain the terror which Burke had more openly identified as the “common stock of everything which is sublime,” a containment which will also characterize Kant’s revision of the sublime encounter in the widely influential “Analytic of the Sublime” from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Usher claims that “[t]he combination of passions in the sublime, renders the idea of it obscure. No doubt the sensation of fear is very distinct in it; but it is equally obvious, that *there is something in the sublime more than this abject passion*. In all other terrors, the soul loses its dignity, and as it were shrinks below its usual size: but at the presence of the sublime, although it be always awful, the soul of man seems to be raised out of a trance; it assumes an unknown grandeur” (147; my italics).

Usher re-states this central point later, writing that “we must carefully distinguish between *common accidental fear*, and this *noble sensation that elevates* while it overawes” (151; my italics). The distinction Usher attempts to make here between abject terror and elevated terror is one that will be echoed by Anne Radcliffe’s slightly later attempt to differentiate the sublime affect of terror from the repulsive affect of horror. In a dramatic dialogical essay titled “On the Supernatural in Poetry” first penned in 1798 and later republished as part of her late novel *Gaston de Blondville*, Radcliffe placed a distinction in the mouth of one of her characters between “Terror and horror,” which, “are so far the opposite, that the first *expands* the soul, and *awakens* the faculties to a high degree of life; the other *contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates* them.”

As Radcliffe's readers would have immediately recognized, this description of terror paralleled Burke's account of the sublime affect in the *Enquiry* closely. While Burke had made no clear distinction between "terror" and "horror," in the *Enquiry*, Radcliffe('s amanuensis) viewed this as a terminological oversight; "[w]hile I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to **positive horror** as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?" This distinction, while to some degree logically founded on the etymological origins of each word (terror originating in a Latin term meaning to tremble or shake, suggesting excitement and motion, horror in a Latin term meaning to bristle or stiffen, suggesting cold and perhaps paralysis), was also clearly designed to serve Radcliffe's aesthetic-political agenda. First penned shortly after she read Matthew Lewis's scandalous Gothic novel, *The Monk* (1796), which he openly admitted had been inspired by her own *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), it gave her an opportunity to create a clear distinction between Lewis's frenetic, excessively sensationalistic and socially transgressive novel and her own more restrained and rationalistic fiction (a distinction which in the 20th century would be used to divide much Gothic fiction into the "male Gothic" and "female Gothic" subgenres; see for example Hogle iii). Radcliffe's distinction, like James Usher's, is one which Poe rejected, and which "Usher" will fictively collapse.

In *Clio*, Usher goes on to claim that "The Greeks, the fathers of thought and sublime knowledge, always nicely observed the difference between the native powers of the mind over its stock of sensible ideas, and the sublime influence to which it was passive" (152).

Usher's account identifies precisely that element of the sublime that made Enlightenment thinkers so uncomfortable; its ability to, in Burke's formulation "anticipate our reasonings" and "hurry us onward" even in opposition to them. As Hume's skepticism had already postulated, reason, understood as merely "a calm determination of the passions," could not be an adequate goad to moral and rational behaviour in the face of more extreme determinations of the passions, such as those experienced during a moment of sublime *ekstasis*.

The power of the sublime to inspire action independent of rational moral consideration was something that would be wrestled with both by the later Burke (as in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke was forced to address readings of the French Revolution which used his *Enquiry* to present the Revolution, by virtue of its very reliance on violent force, as sublime, and therefore desirable) and by Kant (who, while he approvingly acknowledged the sublime dimensions of the French Revolution in Book V of *Conflict of the Faculties*, re-inscribes the stirring power of the sublime within the limits of moral reason through his argument in the "Analytic of the Sublime"). For James Usher, as for numerous eighteenth century commentators on the sublime, what saved the concept from this enthusiastic amorality was the anchoring of its power in the concept of divine authority; for in *Clio*, Usher explains that the Greeks "traced the [sublime] through its various appearances, and never failed to attribute it to divine power; sometimes to the muses, sometimes to Apollo, to the Furies, to Pan, to the Sylvan deities, and to the genius of the place" (152).

This sacred anchorage is notably absent from the almost parodic recapitulation of James Usher's phraseology performed by Poe's "Usher." For James Usher's attribution of an

irresistible sublime influence to “the genius of the place” is essential to an understanding of Poe’s “Usher,” since the entirety of the tale depends upon a recognition of the co-extensive nature of the pathological “genius” which is the artist Roderick Usher, and the “genius” of the house and its environs, a genius which (echoing the “genius” of Poe’s principle of perversity) inexorably affects all in its presence. I shall return to the issues presented by Poe’s transformation of Usher through “Usher” below.

Before moving into the reading of the tale itself, however, it is necessary to establish one more analogy created by “Usher”’s narrative structure. Extending from the tale’s structural resemblance to both *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Gordon Pym*, this is the tale’s parodic use of the Radcliffean convention of a rationally intervening narrative voice. In terms of its narrative structure, Poe’s later tale “The Sphinx” (1845) offers an inversion of “Usher.” Recall that the narrator’s avowed reason for travelling to the Usher house in the first place is in response to Roderick’s desperate epistolary request. Like Edgar Huntly, the narrator seeks to play a role of rational intervention for his mentally and physically ailing friend. In “The Sphinx,” it is the narrator’s friend who plays this interventionist role, comically revealing his visions of a “monster” to be mere perceptual illusions. “Usher”’s narrator, on the other hand, who intends to perform a similar function for the ailing Roderick, egregiously fails to do so, just as Pym fails to conquer nature by providing an accurate account of his travels. Instead, the narrator only succeeds in becoming increasingly implicated in Roderick’s “delusions.” Not only does he, instead of “curing” Roderick, succeed only in providing an impotent and ironic commentary on his collapse, he is also revealed by the confusions and lacunae in his account to have been, at least to some degree, implicated in both the deterioration of Roderick’s condition and the attempted murder by

premature burial of Madeline. In short, the combination of the story's narrative structure and its suggestive engagement with the consequences of sublime "affective contagion" serve to both foreground and finally obscure its forensic dimensions, making it, in certain respects, similar to Brown's seminal *Wieland*.

As a number of critics have noted, the tale's engagement *with*, and ultimate rejection *of*, the Burkean sublime is signalled on its opening page by its reference to and refusal of "that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible" (199). The tale's lengthy introductory passage, much like *Pym*'s fictionally non-fictional apparatus or the opening meditation on analysis of "Murders in the Rue Morgue," is an example of the Poe-tic *supplement*, providing a conceptual lens through which to read the rest of the story. This negative invocation of that "pleasurable, because poetic sentiment" implies the narrator's familiarity with the discourse on the sublime, and also highlights his vain expectation of experiencing such poetic affects. He is, to some degree, a literary confrere of both the travelogue-addicted Pym and Jane Austen's Quixotic Catherine Morland, whose experience of reality is mediated by her enthusiasm for Radcliffean Gothic fictions.

This passage also emphasizes the disparity between ostensibly "sublime" scenery and the affects with which it is associated, as the narrator, approaching an obscure and desolate landscape, fails to experience the affective jolt traditionally offered by such scenes. To the narrator's apparent disappointment, neither the rapturous transports of Radcliffe's novels nor the tortuous arguments and apparently definitive distinctions of Burke and Kant seem to apply to his experience at all. Instead, here and throughout "Usher," terrific affects of the sublime are fissured from "sublime" objects through the tale's dissolution of the

theoretical underpinnings which bound them together. As Voller puts it, “the mind’s ability to resist the power of sublime objects, to regard them as ‘without any dominion over us and our personality’ is shown by Poe to be an illusion [...] ‘Usher’ flatly rejects Kant’s easy confidence in the mind’s superiority over nature, for ‘Usher’ is the heavily symbolic account of the conflict between the rational and the imaginative in the ‘sublimed mind’ (29). Instead of the poetic intoxication he anticipates, the narrator feels only an oppressive disillusionment, a “dropping off of the veil” which intimates the unmasking of specious theorizations of sublime terror which the rest of the tale performs. Instead of the delightful terror of the sublime, the narrator experiences “an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime” (199).

Referring to this passage, Voller writes that “the narrator encounters an external object that [...] he expects will excite his faculties; instead, he experiences precisely the opposite [...] the significance of this passage and the failure it documents becomes fully apparent when we understand that the sublime is, in essence, an ironic trope, converting impressions of vacuity and insignificance into suggestions of plenitude and potency” (28). This conceptual irony is particularly true of the Kantian conception of the sublime, since Kant, who insisted that natural beauty was a symbol of morality, was at pains to employ the natural sublime to the same end, but was forced to perform a clever conceptual inversion in doing so. As de Man explains it, “[t]he initial effect of the sublime, of a sudden encounter with colossal natural entities such as cataracts, abysses, and towering mountains, is one of shock, says Kant, astonishment that borders upon terror. By a play, a trick of the imagination, this terror is transformed into a feeling of tranquil superiority” (102).

In a Kantian encounter with such a sublimely desolate landscape, Poe's narrator would find his "utter depression of soul" alleviated by such a sense of elevation. However, he instead experiences "an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness" (199). Poe's precisely selected and sibilant phrasing in this passage is a key to the tale's deterritorialization of the affect of terror through its rejection of dominant theories of the sublime. With its emphasis on the feeling of "sinking", the narrator's phrase echoes Pope's *Peri Bathous, or On the Art of Sinking in Literature*, itself a satiric-parodic response to the profusion of imitative literature produced in the eighteenth century in response to the popularity of Longinus's treatise. The "sinking" sensation experienced by the narrator is one of numerous foreshadowing devices the tale employs, as this movement will be writ large by the tale's conclusion, in which the eponymous structure sinks into the tarn. The narrator's auto-affective description also effectively revises both Burke's physiological account of the sublime experience, and Radcliffe's strategic distinction between terror and horror. The sensations of iciness, sinking, and sickening were all sensations Radcliffe claimed were produced by the affect of *horror*, rather than *terror*, which by her formulation is alone associated with both Burke's sublime, and less explicitly, her own Gothic productions. What Poe has his narrator experience is, in Radcliffean terms, the affect of *horror*, an icy, disempowering sensation of paralysis that has nothing to do with the sublime.

The narrator questions his own affective response to the house as he draws closer, asking "what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy *fancies* that crowded upon me as I pondered" (199; my italics). This is the first usage of a term that Poe strategically deploys throughout the tale. While the Gothic architecture and landscape of the scenery is

familiar, the narrator notes the unfamiliar “fancies” which this scene is nonetheless stirring up. The word *fancy*, more or less synonymous with “imagination” throughout the eighteenth century, became semantically demoted by Coleridge’s influential distinction in *Biographia Literaria* (a distinction which itself follows the sloping bipolar logic of Burke’s beautiful/sublime opposition) between mere fancy and revered imagination. An excellent example of the pre-Coleridgean, inclusive use of the term “fancy” relevant for the development of Gothic fiction occurs in the essay “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror” (1773) by John and Laetitia Aikin. There, the term has a profound and positive resonance that clearly links it to Burke’s *Enquiry*: “A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of “forms unseen, and mightier far than we,” [...] passion and fancy co-operating elevate the soul to its highest pitch; and the pain of terror is lost in amazement. (129). Just as, pre-Radcliffe, horror is associated with the power of sublimity, so is pre-Coleridgean fancy able to partake of this supposedly transcendent power.

Poe notably rejected Coleridge’s distinction in the Drake-Halleck Review. There, he writes, “‘Fancy,’ says the author of ‘Aids to Reflection,’ (who aided reflection to much better purpose in his ‘Genevieve’) – ‘Fancy combines – Imagination creates.’ This was intended and has been received, as a distinction, but it is a distinction without a difference – without even a difference of degree. The Fancy as nearly created as the imagination, and neither at all. Novel conceptions are merely unusual combinations... What man imagines, is, but was also. The mind of man cannot imagine what is not” (XII 37). As if explicitly challenging the Coleridgean distinction in “Usher,” Poe repeatedly deploys not only the term “fancy” (it appears eight times in the tale), but also a number of its etymological siblings,

including “phantasmagoric,” “fantasias” (204), “fantastic,” (204 and 208) and “Phantasm,” (206), chiefly in describing the artistic productions of Roderick, and the affective states and conceptions of both Usher and the narrator.

In his “Review of American Prose Writers,” Poe reinforces his view that the imagination can only recombine the extant, as the author digs minor plots in imitation of the Universe, “which is a plot of God.” In the same passage he also explicitly rejects the Burkean distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. Drawing implicitly on Coleridge’s definition of imagination as distinct from fancy, but altering it for his own purposes, Poe claims that “[t]he fact seems to be that Imagination, Fancy, Fantasy and Humour have in common the elements of Combination and Novelty. The imagination is the artist of the four. From novel arrangements the old forms which present themselves to it, it selects only such as are harmonious; - the result, of course, is beauty itself – using the term in its most extended sense, and as inclusive of the sublime” (Review of American Prose Writers, No. 2., *Broadway Journal*, 1845, XII, 38) (82)

I will return to the House of Usher’s numerous intimations of Poe’s explicit rejection of Burke’s beauty/sublimity distinction below. At this early juncture in the tale, attempting to account for these strange fancies, the narrator fumbles urgently for an explanation of his affective state in his knowledge of the discourse on the sublime. He is, however, forced to face up to its inadequacy, explaining that “while beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth” (199). The suggestive use of “beyond our depth” presents a punning jab at the discourse on the sublime, a body of

writings paradoxically devoted to cataloguing the causes and effects of a condition which is definitively ineffable.

All of this strongly suggests that from the very outset of the tale, part of Poe's purpose with "Usher" is to unveil the conceptual sleight of hand at work in distinctions such as Burke's and Radcliffe's, but, as Voller has argued, it is Kant's moral and teleological reterritorialization of the sublime that the tale most powerfully contradicts. In this respect, "Usher" can be read alongside Poe's numerous attempts (for example, "Maelzel's Chess-Player" or "The Balloon Hoax") to unmask contemporaneously influential deceptions (or in this case, specious philosophies). As Voller explains, denying the irony whereby Kant's argument turns the sublime's absence of form into a presentation of moral reason, "Poe orchestrates an aesthetic experience that, by leading the narrator to interiorize directly the chaos and gloomy presence of the object – here, the house and its environs – amounts to an anti-sublime" (28).

While adopting this element of Voller's argument, I would like to change his terminology slightly, and re-assert that what Poe develops in this tale, as he had earlier done in *Pym*, is a *negative* sublimity; like Pym, the narrator of "Usher" seeks elevation, and is drawn instead into a cataract from which he barely escapes with his life. Voller's apt observation about the narrator's interiorization of the object is also further evidence of Poe's tropological debt to and continuation of Brockden Brown's early work, and particularly of the refiguration of the natural sublime performed by *Edgar Huntly*. While believing that he experiences the "wild, unruly and disordered" (Kant) landscape of Norwalk as a call to his own rational vocation, Huntly instead internalized this disorder, propagating it through his subreptive misprisions of reality. Such subreptive misprisions also characterize "Usher"'s

narrator, who is a capacious exemplar of Poe's power to effectively employ unreliable narration in his first-person confessional tales. Like Huntly, the tale's narrator (mis)recognizes the disease that wracks his friend Roderick, and like Huntly, he attempts to play a therapeutic role for his friend. Like Edny, Roderick recognizes the narrator's deluded state where he himself does not, eventually labelling him a "MADMAN!" (211) for failing to read the obvious signs of their premature interment of Madeline, a failure that is prolonged by the narrator's hallucinogenic reading of the sublimely bathetic "The Mad Trist" (the title of which slyly intimates both the homosocial vector of affective contagion between the narrator and Roderick, and the implicitly illicit intimacy between Roderick and Madeline), to which I will return below.

The narrator's detailed description of the House's exterior reinforces its figuration of the theoretical architecture of the Burkean-Kantian sublime, as "there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones" (201). While Burke's and Kant's readings of the sublime present powerful and influential theorizations when taken as totalities, "Usher" implies that both, when their elements are scrutinized closely, present only a "specious totality," (201) as they are riven by "a barely perceptible fissure" (201). This fissure, whose expansion is coterminous with the tale's progression, is inclusive of both Burke's artificial isolation of beauty from terror, and Kant's containment of terror within a moral teleology.

As has oft been noted, the narrator's emphasis on the house's dark reflection in the dank tarn both foreshadows the tale's conclusion and also serves to introduce its trajectory through a series of gradually displaced doublings (the house and its reflection, the narrator and his "intimate" associate Roderick, Roderick and his feminine reflection, Madeline). This

“remodelled and inverted image” (199) also suggests Poe’s re-presentation of Burkean-Kantian theories of the sublime. These theories, predicated on an ironic elevation in the face of abyssal descent, are literally inverted by the depth-charge of the story’s closing implosion, as the *sublime*’s prefix is re-emphasized not as a raising up or evolution, but as a rushing down, or involution. The theoretical architecture that articulates these distinctions, like the Usher house itself, is revealed by the narration as “a specious totality [...] which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of external air” (201). This “specious totality” will be destroyed by the tale, which essentially traces an ever-widening “fissure” in this architecture. The “breath of external air,” which is Poe’s ficto-philosophical challenge to these influential conceptions, is figured at the tale’s conclusion by the eminently Longinian description of the “fierce breath of the whirlwind” which arises as the Usher house collapses into the dank tarn below. This image additionally offers a figuration of the “vortex of mysticism” about which Poe so often wrote; an image which is emblematic of his view of the power of words to produce a textual-affective assemblage in which textual objects and reading subjects are dissolved.

The tale’s critique of sublimity continues as the narrator describes the portal through which he must pass in penetrating the house as “the Gothic archway of the hall”⁶⁶ (201),

⁶⁶ The narrator’s careful commentary on his own affective reaction to this Gothic architecture critically invokes Coleridge’s influential lectures on the differences between Gothic and Greek architecture as exempla of the Burkean distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. In his lecture on the “General Character of the Gothic Mind in the Middle Ages” (1818), Coleridge described Gothic architecture in terms redolent of both the Burkean and Kantian sublime, with its overpowering intimations of infinity. “He called our attention to the peculiarity of their art, and showed how it entirely depended on a symbolical expression of the infinite, - which is not vastness, not immensity, nor perfection, but whatever cannot be circumscribed within the limits of actual sensuous being” (quoted in Clery and Miles 95). According to Coleridge, in opposition to Gothic art, “[t]he Greek art is *beautiful*. When I enter a Greek church, my eye is charmed, and my mind elated; I feel

phrasing which both suggestively links the Gothic generic architecture into which the narrator/reader is passing with the sublime affects with which it is traditionally associated, and points to the tenuous quality of this link, since the narrator insists he experiences terrific affect *in spite of* these overly familiar objects of terror. The narrator's mention of this 'Gothic archway' also potentially represents a pun on the word "sublime" itself, which, as Philip Shaw explains, is "[d]erived from the latin *sublimus*, a combination of *sub* (up to) and *limen* (lintel, literally the top piece of a door)" (2).

The link between the impressively Gothic design of this portal and the sublime speech and images produced by Roderick Usher is reinforced by the metaphoric relationship presented later in the framed text of "The Haunted Palace," as this "palace door" becomes the mouth of Usher, "all with pearl and ruby glowing." Indeed, as the poem hammers home, the structure of the entire house, replete with "Gothic Archways" and "large and lofty rooms," is merely an echo or extension of Roderick's mind, a construction which, like the experience of the sublime itself, exists only "in the Monarch thought's dominion." Thus, Poe provides an additional layer of critical commentary on the sublime, by directing the reader's attention away from the stereotyped sublime objects of Gothic fiction (Radcliffe's abbeys and castles) and inward, toward the perceiving mind, presented architecturally by the story. With its emphases on mirroring, doublings, and reflections, the tale, like *Pym*, suggests that it is in the act of reflection that the "vague sentiments" of the sublime experience arise.

exalted, and proud that I am a man. But the Gothic art is *sublime*. On entering a cathedral, I am filled with devotion and awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite" (96). While it is clear from the tale that the narrator has become "lost to the actualities that surround" him, that this results from the expansion of his being into the infinite is much less certain.

The narrator's kinship with the Gothic-Quixotic Catherine Morland is emphasized as he explains that "[m]uch that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the *vague sentiments* of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me – while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the *phantasmagoric* armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy – while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this – I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the *fancies* which ordinary images were stirring up" (201; my italics). In this passage, emphasis on the narrator's familiarity with such quintessentially, or stereotypically, Gothic set-pieces allows Poe to make a pointed comment on the conventional preponderance of generically Gothic fiction. Like his narrator, Poe and his contemporary readers had "been accustomed" to the conventions of the Gothic novel from infancy, to the point where the oft-catalogued objects associated with the sublime affect of terror had been stripped of effect through repetition and ubiquity; these affects had become scaffolded by an architecture whose "specious totality" could not contain them. "Usher," in a process of negative sublimity, empties out these generic objects of sublimity, while representing and rejuvenating the affects with which they were traditionally associated.

This passage also invokes the semantic ambiguity of the term "Gothic" introduced by the "Gothic archway" into the house, which is further developed in this and similar passages as a means of reinforcing a connection between intense affect and physical architecture. However, while the narrator's sublime affects arise in spite of the overly-conventional Gothicism of the house, they are described as being directly elicited by the sublime objects of Usher's poetry, music, and paintings. Coleridge's Kantian conception of Gothic

architecture as offering a “symbolical *expression* of the infinite” is precisely what gives Roderick’s musical and visual productions their particular fascination for the narrator/reader, and it is an *expression* which the narrator finds in Usher’s face itself, inseparable from the Gothic estate that encloses it. The conflation of physical spaces with mental states, objects with affects, is also a logical extension of the conflicting ideas of the discourse on sublimity. This identification between a physical place and an affective state is reinforced repeatedly by Poe’s polysemous employment of the term “Character” throughout the tale. According to Ljungquist, “Poe achieves this analogical relationship largely through the repetition of the term ‘character,’ mentioned no fewer than eleven times in the course of the tale. Its repetition not only develops the body-house relationship but also establishes a series of analogies among the landscape and the features of Roderick’s face, his esoteric studies, his ‘fantastic’ musical performances, Madeline’s illness, her facial features, and the sound of the disintegrating house” (100).

Ljungquist further explains that ‘Character,’ “a term popular with the picturesque aestheticians [...] became a significant aesthetic concern that could allow a union of place and personality, psychology and setting” (99). Poe’s frequent invocations of “character” throughout the tale are important for its re-presentation of the sublime, given the importance of “character” in experiencing sublime affects in the theories of Radcliffe and the Critical Kant, both of whom maintained that a degree of aesthetic and moral inculturation were necessary for a proper apprehension of the sublime.

Roderick Usher, on the other hand, like Brown’s Theodor and the elder Wieland and many of Poe’s other narrators (those, for example, of “Berenice,” “Ligeia,” and “The Sphinx”), represents the archetype of the melancholiac described by Kant’s earlier

Observations in 1764, predisposed to sublime experience. As Poe presents him as exigently entangled with, to use James Usher's phrasing, "the genius of the place," his sublimely melancholy character is ultimately inseparable from that of the house, his gloomy and arcane readings, and even the *characters* of Madeline and the narrator. In fact, due to the contagiousness of his character, Roderick, a polysemous "genius" in both the sense of an inspired artist and that of a presiding spirit of a particular locale, is a character who (or which) challenges the notion of stable subjectivity implied by the concept of individual character itself. As the de Beranger epigraph (whose image of the heart echoes James Usher's image of the sublime heart of the genius-artist) to the tale emphasizes, character can be a fluid and resonant quality, one that, much like the power of words presented by Poe's vortext, readily crosses the constructed boundaries of individual identity.

Poe's vortextual conception is, in certain key respects, a logical outgrowth of some of the more unsettling implications of Burke's *Enquiry*. As Boulton explains, "when he attributes the effect of poetic language to original combinations of ideas, to the power of sympathetic emotion and of suggestion, Burke shows himself aware that such language functions simultaneously on more than one level: it can convey descriptive information; at the same time it suggests the emotional relationship which exists between the writer and the object," (lxxx) or between the writer and reader via the medium of the (textual) object. Philip Shaw points out that "[w]ords have a power, Burke argues, to raise the idea of the sublime, such that the distinction between the sublime object and its description no longer applies; it is language, in other words, that brings about the transformation of the world, enabling us to hymn the vastness of the cathedral or the depths of the ravine. More radically, the stress on sublimity as an aspect of language leads Burke to undermine the privileging of

human consciousness. For if the grandeur of the ocean is no more than a matter of rhetoric or description, might the same not be said of other alleged truth claims, such as the integrity and autonomy of the self?" (6) Indeed, it is likely that Kant's tortuous arguments in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, so different from his pre-critical meditations in 1764, were informed to a large degree by a recognition of the consequences of Burke's *Enquiry* (which he probably read in translation in 1773), and a desire to counter these unsettling implications by theoretically utilizing the sublime in the combined production of a stable conception of subjectivity and a moral teleology, both of which are undermined by "The House of Usher"'s coruscating chiaroscuro.

All of this is intimated by the tale's emphasis on physiognomic and phrenological details, which repeatedly reinforce the association between the architecture of the Usher house, and that of the character of Roderick Usher's sublime mind. The interlinked pseudo-sciences of phrenology and physiognomy held a powerful fascination for Poe, who believed that "the soul is a cipher, in the sense of a cryptograph" (XV 81), in that they purported to offer a method for deciphering the cipher of the soul through its expression in the face and body. The link between sublimity and the concept of character personified by Usher is made clear through the narrator's unsparingly detailed description of Usher's physiognomy, as he states that "the character of his face had been at all times remarkable" (201). The sublime effect of Usher's grave visage, his "cadaverous" complexion and "luminous" eye, is reinforced by the "delicate Hebrew model" (202), of his nose, a subtle detail that links him to Judaic religion, the scriptural progenitor of the iconoclastic sublimity cited by both Longinus and Kant (a link to which I will return below).

In addition, Usher's sublime visage metonymizes Poe's "vortex of mysticism" as a strategy of authorial appropriation. Stephen Rachman has insightfully noted that "[t]he chief attraction for Poe of physiognomy and phrenology lay in their power to constitute personality in a composite fashion that corresponds to his techniques of plagiarized composition" (80), and Usher's face, like the text of both *Pym* and "Usher," is indeed a complex but indefinite bricolage of assimilated and altered sources of textual sublimity⁶⁷. This figuration is particularly noteworthy in that Poe's vortexts of negative sublimity, with their prescient presentation of the "death of the author" and the "subjectless subjectivity" of post-structural ontologies, served to provide Poe, on a pragmatic level, with a convenient strategy with which to defend himself against the same accusations of plagiarism he so enthusiastically hurled at his literary confreres.

Rachman draws on Shawn Rosenheim's psychoanalytic reading of Poe's tales, and especially "Murders in the Rue Morgue," in making his argument, particularly in his contention that "the central problem of Poe's fiction is 'the problem of the existence of other minds'. I would reformulate this as a problem with the existence of other texts. *Other minds are, for Poe, other texts*; plagiarism, therefore, as in the July 1846 note, is displaced by its own thematic" (Rachman 62; my italics). In light of this, the narrator's affective infection by Usher's character or condition can be read as reflecting Poe's own anxieties surrounding literary identity, anxieties that follow necessarily from his vortextual aesthetics.

Poe treated his own poetics of appropriation most explicitly by a strategic re-definition of the "feeling of ideality" described by "The Poetic Principle." He claimed that "the poetic sentiment...implies a peculiarly, perhaps an abnormally keen appreciation of the

⁶⁷ Another of which is E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale "The Entail," from which certain elements of the plot and Roderick's first name are derived.

beautiful, with a longing for its assimilation, or absorption, into the poetic identity. What the poet intensely admires, becomes thus, in fact only partially, a portion of his own intellect [...] in fact all literary history demonstrates that, for the most frequent and palpable plagiarisms, we must search the works of the most eminent poets” (68). This echoes Longinus’s classic conception of the sublime, as the mind of the reader, feeling itself to be the source of elevation it finds in the sublime text, is (however illusorily) raised to the level of the author’s sublimity. Longinus claimed that “the mind is naturally elevated by the true sublime, and so sensibly affected with its lively strokes, that it swells in transport and an inward pride, as if what was only heard had been the product of its own invention” (23). Burke’s *Enquiry* disseminated a similar view, arguing that the sublime experience occurs “when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects, the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates” (51).

Citing this passage from Poe, Meredith McGill argues that, as a result of the literary feud known as “the Longfellow War,” “Poe shifts from his attempt to prove the legitimacy of the grounds of the charge of plagiarism to an attempt to construct a narrative in which the practice of plagiarism could be considered legitimate. In what appears to be a dramatic reversal, Poe argues that plagiarism can be viewed not as malicious theft, but as the product of a heightened sensitivity to beauty that is the hallmark of the true poet” (290). As McGill explains, “what is perhaps most striking about this defence of plagiarism is the utter passivity of the offending poet. He is not only fully possessed by another’s thought in the act of reading, he is subject to a kind of hair-trigger reproduction of his thought [...] authorial possession appears as its Gothic opposite – the haunting by another – yet these states are curiously reciprocal” (297). This reader-author relationship, characterized by a commingling

of Longinian *ekstasis* and Bloomian anxiety of influence, is intriguingly embodied in “Usher” by the relationship between Roderick and the narrator, a relationship that has much in common with that shared by Edny and Huntly and Augustus and Pym, and one grounded in the (notably masculine) “contagion of the passions,” in Burke’s words, of the sublime.

However, while the narrator is tremendously affected by Roderick Usher’s expressions, he frustratingly discovers that, like those of the “Man of the Crowd,” and the humanoid rock formations spied by Pym, they do not permit themselves to be read. While the narrator recognizes that Roderick’s expressions (facial, linguistic, musical and visual) represent a cipher that he is desperate to interpret, he finds that they cannot be effectively analyzed or interpreted, but only experienced subjectively, through the affective contagion they produce. His tortuously hypotactic account of the effects of Usher’s art over him testifies to this; “[f]rom the paintings over which his elaborate *fancy* brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vaguenesses at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why; from these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavour to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words.” Commenting on this passage, Scott Bradfield relates the narrator’s affects to his lack of analytic power. He writes that, “[w]hen hearing Roderick’s ‘dirges’ or observing his paintings, the narrator recalls that after being exposed to these ‘vaguenesses’ he always ‘shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why’. The narrator lacks the ability to analyze art, so he can only submit to its power” (Bradfield 93). In this respect, he closely resembles Pym, whose analytic incompetence is one of his narrative’s most notable characteristics.

However, it is just as possible to read the narrator's inability to comprehend the formlessness he apprehends in Usher's works as a necessity, given their sublimity. Roderick's paintings intimate the infinite, and thus evade definition. As Philip Shaw reminds us, "[i]n the 'Analytic of the Sublime,' Kant links the beautiful with the bounded. A beautiful object has clear outlines and distinct form, whereas the sublime is found in formlessness" (117). Poe's emphasis on Roderick's paintings itself seems to raise this point, particularly since, as it turns out, Roderick's artistic pieces possess sublimity sufficient to prevent them being contained by their frames.

In this respect, Roderick, a quintessentially Poe-tic pathological genius, can be read as an impersonation of the obscure power of the sublime itself, a power the narrator, much like the Burkean and Kantian theories to which he early alludes, finally (and perhaps necessarily) fails to comprehend. Usher's features, like the house's features, force the narrator to "the unsatisfactory conclusion" that their "power lies among considerations beyond our depth" (199). Usher's expression cannot be transformed into a simple sign, nor into a clear representation, as its power is inseparable from its obscurity and indeterminacy. As the narrator finally confesses, his attempts to interpret this cipher are in vain; "I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity" (202). A recognition of the sustained opposition established throughout Poe's writings between the ornate involutions of the arabesque and the "idea of simple humanity" led Baudelaire to write of Poe's title for the collection, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, that it is "remarkable and deliberately chosen," "for the grotesque and arabesque ornaments thrust aside the human figure" (78). This recognition would in turn inform the thesis of Ketterer's important 1979 study, *The Rationale of Deception in Poe*. There, Ketterer claims

that “[w]hen man learns to view reality as a continuum, the lines that separate one thing from another blur and dissolve to reveal the shifting and fluid state, the quicksand, which may allow a perception of ideal reality. The arabesque designs are active symbols of Poe’s efforts to melt away the rigid pattern that is imposed by man’s reason” (1979 36)⁶⁸.

Ketterer’s metaphor of quicksand represents an attempt to represent the vortexual quality of Poe’s fictions, the involving cataract through which characters, author, and reader are drawn down and dispersed into a textual-affective matrix.

Poe’s invocation of the Arabesque in describing Roderick’s paradoxically detailed but indistinct visage is also of vital importance to the tale’s engagement with the religious sources of the sublime. Recall Kant’s insistence that “there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth, etc. This commandment alone can explain the enthusiasm [*Enthusiasmus*] that the Jewish people felt in its civilized period for its religion when it compared itself with other peoples” (*CJ* 156). As Poe (who participated in the nineteenth century Romantic craze for Orientalist appropriations of Islamic culture, as poems like “Al-Aaraaf” and stories like “The

⁶⁸ Less persuasive is the pursuant part of Ketterer’s thesis, where he attempts to make a solid distinction between Poe’s tales of the arabesque, and those of the grotesque. Ketterer claims that “[t]he tales that emphasize this process might appropriately be designated arabesques. Opposed to the arabesque tales are the grotesques, a word that for Poe’s purposes well describes the world created by man’s divided perceptions” (36). Ketterer goes on to claim of Poe’s arabesques that, “[c]hronologically listed, they fall roughly into pairs: ‘Metzengerstein’ and ‘The Assigination,’ ‘Berenice’ and Morella,’ ‘Ligeia’ and ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’ ‘Eleonora’ and ‘The Oval Portrait’, ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ and ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’” (181). I find this distinction between two types of tales to be a reductive simplification, and read Poe’s title as indicating that each of his tales involves, to some degree, elements of both these aesthetic designs. Just as terror and beauty are finally inseparable for Poe, so are the grotesque and the arabesque intermingled throughout his oeuvre.

Hundred and Second Tale of Scheherezade” testify) would have known, the Arabesque form in painting and architecture first evolved in the Middle East as a result of Islam’s enforcement of the Scriptural ban on the production of “graven images.” Roderick’s “arabesque” expressions thus strongly suggest his, and the tale’s, critical engagement with the negative sublime.

In addition, Poe’s investment in the Arabesque was probably influenced by one of the chief champions of the arabesque in art, Friedrich Schlegel, who was also an important influence on Coleridge. Winfried Menninghaus explains that “[f]or Friedrich Schlegel the arabesque was ‘the original form of painting’ and also ‘the genuine mother, the embryo of all modern painting’” [...] But Schlegel went further than this. He declared the arabesque to be indeed ‘the oldest and original form of human fantasy’ “(85). In Schlegel’s conception, then, the arabesque is understood to represent what Poe would, with evocative vagueness, call “the vortex of mysticism.” This vortex in turn informs the dark whorls of Usher’s paintings, which even at their most representational, partake of a “formlessness” and “abstraction” that signals their negative sublimity, affectively jolting the narrator with their “thrilling vaguenesses.”

The effect of Usher’s paintings is mirrored by his poetry and musical productions, which similarly resist aesthetic containment. Take, for example, the framed text of Usher/Poe’s poem “The Haunted Palace,” which reinforces the structural parallel between splintered subject and cracked architecture on which the entire tale depends. The poem, ostensibly a parergon, an ornamental addition to the tale which the narrator includes as it reveals “a full consciousness on the part of Usher, of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne,” (204) quite literally escapes its frame, transforming the entirety of the narrative

as the reader recognizes its reiteration of the structural analogy between fissured architecture and schizophrenic (in the etymological, not necessarily clinical, sense of the word) consciousness. Indeed, with its apparatus of framed narrations, “Usher” is formally constructed to call into question the limits of artifice in a way that reflects its preoccupation with the contagious and indefinite limits of subjectivity, as embodied by Usher’s infectious affectivity, and as expressed by his elliptically indicated theory of “the sentience of all vegetable things”⁶⁹ (206).

As Jacques Derrida famously observed, “[i]f art takes form by limiting, indeed by framing, there can be a parergon of the beautiful, the parergon of a column or the parergon as column. But there cannot be, it seems, any parergon of the sublime.” This, the tale emphasizes, is the power of Usher’s art, which is a fictive embodiment of the vortexual power of Poe’s tale itself: it perpetually exceeds its frame. Its sublimity is necessarily negative, resistant to formal containment, since, as soon as the sublime is framed or defined, it ceases, by definition, to be the sublime, which must always offer a paradoxical glimpse of infinity to be properly so-called.

Responding to the re-visitations of the Kantian sublime by thinkers like Derrida, de Man and Lyotard, Kirk Pillow asks “why Kant’s aesthetics generally, and his judgment of sublimity in particular, enjoy such a following today. The answer is surely in part that Kant’s aesthetic theory, and especially its take on the sublime, explores the limits of determinately conceptual or representational thinking. Kant’s aesthetics of the sublime marks the border zone where our efforts at comprehension fail, where the unity of understanding crumbles”

⁶⁹ Roderick’s theory of pan-sentience also reinforces his proximity to Poe’s own authorial viewpoint, as it anticipates ideas Poe will later give fuller expression in his quasi-scientific opus, *Eureka*.

(1). Here is the movement dramatized by both Poe's response to Fuller's reading of the Falls (discussed in Chapter Three) and the narrator's attempts at "reading" Usher's paintings and poems: both display the involving vortex of the sublime abyss. This vortex is an experiential process which ultimately allows for no distinction between experiencing subject and experienced object, and that finally admits of no satisfactory representation or conceptual containment, a process that, like Pym's final, blank figure or the face of Usher (either Roderick or the house itself) does not permit itself to be read.

Roderick's painting of a subterranean chamber serves similarly, as it elicits from the narrator an affect of terror inexplicable by the form of the painting itself. The painting affects the narrator so in part because of the illusion of great depth it creates; "certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth" (204). Here, the conflation of Roderick's physiognomy and artistic expressions with both the house of Usher's and the "The Fall of the House of Usher"'s structure is reinforced, as the tale is also designed to "convey the idea" of exceeding depth. This painting's escape from its second-order status as parergon is literalized slightly later in the tale, as the reader realizes it is a suggestive rendition of the chamber in which Roderick and the narrator will enter the beautiful Madeline.

In terms of its resistance to aesthetic containment, this image, like all of Roderick's Arabesque expressions (facial, linguistic and pictorial) also serve to usher in Poe's (proto)-Modernist concern with presenting the unrepresentable, a concern inseparable from the tale's negative sublimity as it collapses the inherited theoretical architecture of the discourse on the sublime. Recall Kant's claim that "The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object

insofar as limitlessness is represented in it” (CJ 128). According to the narrator, it is not exactly the *form* of Usher’s paintings that create their unsettling effects, but the *ideal power* they somehow suggest; in fact, it is their “formlessness” and “abstraction” that render them effective. In this respect, Usher can be read as an uncanny prefiguration of Jean Francois Lyotard’s conception of the Modernist painter. Lyotard claims that “[t]o make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible: this is what is at stake in modern painting. But how to make visible that there is something which cannot be seen? Kant himself shows the way when he names ‘formlessness, the absence of form,’ as a possible index to the unrepresentable. He also says of the empty ‘abstraction’ which the imagination experiences when in search for a presentation of the infinite (another unrepresentable): this abstraction itself is like a presentation of the infinite, its ‘negative presentation’” (78).

The paradox of Usher’s art, however, is that it renders the *abstraction* of terror in the face of infinity as a *palpable* power, a power whose description is rife with the intolerably delightful terror of the sublime. Faced with Usher’s art, the narrator experiences “an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli” (204). This allusion to Fuseli sets up a reference four pages later that dramatizes Roderick’s translation of sublime abstraction into embodied terror.

At this point, recognizing but failing to account for the changes in his affective state during his stay, the narrator subrepts his subjective changes defensively, trying to attribute them to the influence of the house’s design itself. Additionally, like a good Kantian, he makes a valiant attempt to subjugate these unsettling vagaries of sensation and imagination

to his rationality, but unlike the implicitly imagined protagonist of Kant's encounter, he is unable to do so. "I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. I endeavoured to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the phantasmagoric influence of the gloomy furniture of the room...But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame, and, at length, there sat upon my heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm" (208). Poe seeds the narrator's description of his affective condition with the popular image of Fuseli's most famous painting, "The Nightmare." This image's archetypal rendition of a phobic dream-made-flesh further suggests the connection between the "palpable darkness" of Usher's abstract and objectless terror, and the psychological principle Poe termed "perversity."

Voller, quite accurately, has identified the primary basis for Poe's break with Kant's theory (which is also the basis for Poe's break with James Usher's theory) as extending from his conception of the importance of terror. Voller notes that "for Poe, sublimity's very dependence upon terror proves its undoing, its deconstructive key" (28). This is due to the fact that, "[i]nsisting that terror is necessary for the sublime, Burke also insists (as will Kant) that the sublime cannot exist when the agent of terror threatens the life of the observer" (28). For both Burke and Kant, terror emerges as a subjective response to a particular object. As Voller explains, "Poe's concern, we must recall, is not exclusively or even primarily with the *sources* of terror" (32; my italics) While it was the *sources* of terror, that widely variable class of objects associated with sublime affects, that chiefly interested early eighteenth-century commentators on the sublime, from Dennis to Addison to Burke, Poe "is, rather, concerned with its *consequences*, with what we might call terror's final metaphysical import" (32; my italics). Similarly, it is precisely Kant's emphasis on the transcendental

significance of sublime terror that makes his “Analytic of the Sublime” so simultaneously powerful and problem-fraught. It is also this emphasis that “Usher” is especially critical of, since, as Voller insightfully suggests but fails to fully develop, it is Kant’s teleological and moralistic appropriation of terror as sublime affect that Poe seeks to explode with this and related fictions.

In “Usher,” as in *Pym*, terror is not merely a response to an object, but a palpable danger in and of itself. This is dramatized by the tale’s adoption of Fuseli’s “The Nightmare,” which, as discussed above, presents a migration which is the inverse of the traditional conception of sublime terror. Whereas in the formulations of Dennis, Addison, or Burke, the sublime experience is catalyzed by an encounter with a particular object of terror, which elicits certain affects from the subject, “The Nightmare” instead presents an affect (paralyzing horror) presented in a provisional object (the imp crouched on the woman’s chest, its oppressive weight figuring the paralyzing power of what Anne Radcliffe insisted was *horror*, as opposed to *terror*). This precisely mirrors Roderick’s insistence on sublime horror as a *thing* in itself, preceding and unlimited by any particular object or class of objects. This is what makes the “species of terror” that Usher, and through him the narrator (and perhaps, the reader) experiences so “anomalous” (202). As Roderick explains, “I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect – in terror. In this unnerved – in this pitiable condition – I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR” (202-3). In other words, it is this terror itself that threatens Usher with subjective extinction, not the threat represented by any particular object of terror. Whereas in Kant’s *Analytic*, the terror associated with the sublime is ultimately utilized as a guarantor of subjective cohesion,

in Usher, terror signifies instead an inevitable compulsion for self-extinction, one that is finally inseparable from the abyssal lure of the sublime itself.

Usher's suggestive presentation of this self-annihilating subjective compulsion as "the grim phantasm, FEAR" is mirrored by the tale's appropriation of Fuseli's nightmarish imp, which itself suggests the relationship between Usher's "phantasm, FEAR" and Poe's later, and fuller, development of this psychological fiction in "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845). Significantly, the narrator of "Imp" selects a quintessentially sublime scenario in articulating his thesis about "a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment" (516) of perversity. He writes, "We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss – we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger [...] but out of this *our* cloud upon the precipice's edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height" (518). Merely a thought – and yet for both Roderick Usher and the narrator of "The Imp," also a compulsion of fatal power.

This passage's emphasis on the commingled pleasure and pain characteristic of the post-Burkean sublime is apt, as its imagery duplicates and amplifies the descent of the Usher siblings, Pym, and Poe's numerous other vortextually dispersed characters into the abyss. Whereas, in the sublime encounter read through Kant, this "abyss toward which the imagination is driven" leads to an act of subjective reflection that alleviates the affective intensity undergone by the subject through reason's facultative ascendancy, for the narrator, "to indulge for a moment, in any attempt at *thought*, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but

urges us to forbear, and *therefore* it is, I say, that we *cannot*" (519). The very power of reason is, in Poe's formulation, transformed into impotence; for all its supposed power, reason is unable to provoke action against the magnetic pull of sublime compulsion.

Similarly, Poe's Gothic version of the sublime encounter is expressive not of the reassertion of the subject's unity, but of the dispersion of its illusory coherence.

James Kirwan writes that "If we look back at some of the central concerns of the eighteenth-century discussion of the sublime we can see how this teleology of that 'passion' can illuminate some of its more problematic features. The fact that certain features of this teleology echo features found in the realm of psychopathology finds a parallel in eighteenth-century misgivings about the cosanguinity of the sublime and the enthusiastic. Insofar as the experience remains within the circuit of self-created pleasure, its rationality or lack of it is of no consequence. So long as it only made Boswell feel *as if* he could rush into the thick of battle, the demands of reason were beside the point, though if he actually *had* this would be another matter" (165). Poe's fiction repeatedly explores this intersection of aesthetic inspiration and psychopathology by imagining terror not as a force which can be confined to the effects of particular fetishistic objects, but one which is an ineradicably powerful principle operant within human subjectivity itself. Poe's characters, faced with the perverse power of sublime terror, do not just feel as if they could rush into the abyss; they are *irresistibly driven* to do so.

Recall that Burke's, James Usher's and Kant's conceptions of the role of terror in the experience of the sublime depend upon a particular type of terror which exists at a remove from the subject. If the existence of the perceiving subject is directly threatened, the respect and delight which are intermixed with the sublime sensation of terror are lost, and the

terrible ceases to be sublime. “Usher” undermines this formulation altogether and it does so by refusing this deracinated and delimited conception of terror. Just as Usher’s sublime art refuses to be restrained by a frame, the tale’s terror refuses to be contained by Kant’s epistemological appropriation. As the narrator of “The Imp” and Usher both attest, *true terror always represents a palpable threat to the subject*, regardless of the ostensible object which elicits it. Furthermore, this threat does not remove the paradoxical “fierceness of the delight of its horror.” On the contrary: Roderick’s aesthetic bliss, an intensity indistinguishable from his abject anxiety, attains a plateau in the moments immediately preceding his death.

As Daniel Hoffman has aptly noted, Poe’s re-presentation of sublime terror in “Usher” and “The Imp” provides a nascent theory of what Freud would, over half a century later, come to call Thanatos, or the Death Drive. I would like to add that this is a theory which is ultimately inextricable from the influence of the discourse of sublimity on Poe’s vortextual aesthetics, since Poe’s presentation in “The Imp” once again links the subjective extinction of this compulsive power of terror, a “mere thought” made more dangerously palpable than any devil or other Gothic monstrosity, to the subjective extinction that occurs in the aesthetic apprehension of the “vortex of mysticism.” Just as the reader/author is dissolved into and through the sublime text, the autonomy of the subject is dissolved by the abyssal power of the “Imp of the Perverse.”

This effectively Gothicized psychological principle also serves as an explanatory narrative for what Kant would skeptically term “radical evil.” Joan Copjec writes of “the often forwarded proposal that Kant could not face squarely his own discovery of the radicality of evil; he could not admit that it ultimately extends beyond the corruption of all our moral maxims [...] to a corruption of the will itself” (ix). Poe’s psycho-critical fiction of

the “Imp” articulates just such an admission. As the narrator himself explains at the outset of the tale, both phrenologists and “the moralists who have preceded them” “have failed to make room for a propensity” (516) that he will seek to explicate through his narration. The narrator insists that induction should have forced such thinkers “to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call perverseness.” (517) It is quite possible that Poe had Kant in mind as one of these mistaken moralists, for according to Kant in *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (1793), “evil” typically describes actions motivated by a reliance on maxims motivated not by the moral law, but by self-love. However, Kant also suggests another, and more disturbing, conception of evil, which he calls radical evil [*radikal Bose*]. “This evil is radical, because it corrupts the ground of all maxims; it is, moreover, as a natural propensity, inextirpable by human powers, since extirpation could occur only by good maxims, and cannot take place when the ultimate subjective ground of all maxims is postulated as corrupt” (quoted in Bernstein 32). Kant further describes this proposed corruption by writing that “[i]t may also be called the perversity [*perversitas*] of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order [of priority] among the incentives of a *free will*” (quoted in Bernstein 29).

Poe’s “Imp” does Kant’s imagining of such a perversity one better, by proposing a principle that exists in radical opposition to the notion of ethical freedom rigorously enforced by Kant’s moral ontology. The narrator of “The Imp” is insistent that, at least for some people, a compulsive principle exists within the subject’s very constitution; one which *compels* actions contrary to the maxims dictated not only by the moral law, but also those dictated by the self-love which Kant typically opposes to this moral law. For, as the narrator

of the tale makes clear, the victims of this perversity do not do evil for their own benefit, they do evil because some “primitive and irreducible” impulse compels them to do so.

Poe’s association of this impulse with the compulsive power of the aesthetics of sublimity is suggested by the relationship “Usher” establishes between both Roderick’s art and the narrator’s oppressive affects, and Roderick’s art and Madeline’s burial. For, before Roderick and the narrator (inadvertently or otherwise) attempt to murder the sickly Madeline by premature burial, this interment has already been *imagined* by one of Usher’s paintings. This image exerts a powerful and inexplicable influence over the narrator, an influence which perhaps informs his egregiously gullible (or deceptively sadistic) acceptance of Roderick’s suspicious request to bury her without any kind of medical examination.

Nevertheless, however sublime Usher’s expressions may be, it is finally not his words or images, but Madeline’s deathlike silence and near-invisibility that provide the tale with its most unsettling intimation of negative sublimity. Madeline’s sublimity is suggested by the narrator’s response to her first appearance in the tale; “I regarded her with an utter *astonishment* not unmingled with *dread*” (203; my italics). This description invokes the traditional ambivalence of sublimity, its commingling of pleasure and pain, awe and terror. Like the earlier effect of the house on him, and the later effects of Usher’s art, the narrator finds it “impossible to account for such feelings” (203) as Madeline evokes in him.

While it may be, at first glance, tempting to apply a feminist reading to Poe’s awful empowerment of Madeline contra the Burkean/Kantian masculinization of the sublime – since, in Kirwan’s words, for “Burke and Kant the emphasis is definitely on the ‘manliness’ of the sublime” (44) - such an attempt at positively validating her unspoken power in the tale is problematized by the ambiguity of her autonomy from her brother. As the narrator

notes, “[a] striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention, and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them” (207). Madeline’s exigent entanglement with (or even creation from) her brother is further suggested by the fact that it is Roderick’s utterance which later seems to conjure her revenant into being, “as if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell” (211).

Any simplistic attempt to read Madeline’s sublimity as feminine empowerment is further undercut by the fact that it is her very voiceless-ness that informs her sublimity. Poe draws on a long tradition within the discourse on the sublime in this respect, as in *Peri Hupsous*, Longinus had esteemed the silence of Ajax amongst the Dead (*Odyssey* 11) as more sublime than any words. Similarly, Burke held Milton’s description of silent Death, the King of Terrors, in *Paradise Lost* as paradigmatically sublime. Like the terror evoked by the “vagueness” and “abstraction” of Usher’s paintings, the terror that Madeline’s premature burial and wordless return bring to the tale is made paradoxically more palpable by its very refusal to be presented by words, or even imagined (in the literal sense of the word, as the narrator flees before *seeing* this unspeaking and unspeakable specter’s vengeance.)

Madeline, however, as an ideal embodiment of both beauty and terror, *does* potently personate Poe’s rejection of Burke’s binary of feminine beauty and masculine sublimity. It is she who finally brings down the house, so to speak, of Burke, Usher and Kant at the end of the tale, since both Burke and Kant had defined the sublime in such a way as to make it clear that it was a “masculine” concept, opposed to the beautiful feminine. This is a distinction which Poe, with his relentless portrayal of women-as-sublime-objects, effectively

undermines. This reflects a gradual shift in Poe's conception of the sublime away from the Burkean paradigm which he originally appears to have embraced. Ljungquist writes that, "[i]n the early criticism at least, Poe makes a firm distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. In a review of Sarah Stickney's *The Poetry of Life* (SLM 1836) Poe, following the lead of Burke, seems to align the sublime with power and vitality and the beautiful with more subdued and restrained emotions" (49). However, As Ljungquist goes on to explain, "in the later criticism, the firm contradistinction between the beautiful and the sublime seems to be, at least, blurred, if not completely dropped" (82). This was a philosophical and aesthetic necessity for Poe, for whom beauty and sublimity were coeval elements of the same aesthetic-affective process. Ljungquist writes that "Poe does not limit the sublime to the realm of unbridled emotion. In the "Drake-Halleck review," he connects the sublime with a conceptual and intellectual process. Such a notion sets Poe apart from Burke and his eighteenth century disciples. He remarks, 'Very nearly akin to this feeling [veneration] and liable to the same analysis, is the feeling of ideality – which is the sentiment of Poesy. The sentiment is the sense of the beautiful, of the sublime, and of the mystical'" (53). Madeline, then, speechless sister both of Roderick and of that procession of gravely lovely literary ladies that includes Berenice, Morella, and Ligeia, can be seen as a metonym for Poe's work as a whole, as she is the perfect synthesis of "the death of a beautiful woman" and the ideal power of poetry as a "vortex of mysticism." It is eminently appropriate, then, that it is her climactic return that signals the terrific collapse of the house, with its overdetermined figurations of generic Gothic ancestry and "specious" theoretical architecture.

At this juncture, it is well worth considering Voller's allegorical reading of Madeline. Going, as many critics have done, against Poe's refusal to admit allegorical readings of his

fictions⁷⁰ (a refusal born of his contempt for didacticism), Voller claims that “the lure of the imaginative, the nonrational, is embodied (not surprisingly for Poe) in the story’s only female character” (29). Voller’s allegorization of Madeline is based on his desire to see Kant’s theory of the sublime dramatized in the tale, and as far as that goes, it is productive. Voller explains that “it is a critical commonplace that the house of Usher is an objectification of Roderick’s mind; this mind becomes, in the tale, the disputed territory in the conflict between reason and imagination, intellection and intuition” (30). In Voller’s (as in a number of other) critical readings of the tale, the house becomes the scene of an intrapsychic conflict; the gloomy stage whereupon a facultative antagonism is dramatized.

Madeline does, indeed, seem to effectively embody the imagination which, in Kant’s conception, is sacrificially lain at the altar of moral reason. Yet I find this fixed allegorical generalization unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it seems to exclude the relationship that obviously exists between Usher, the archetypical mad genius, and Poe’s conception of the imagination; and second, in that it fails to account for a number of other conceptual binaries which “Usher”’s collapse effectively overturns through the complex, if elliptically presented, figure of Madeline, who can also be read as personifying Burke’s attempt to subordinate the feminized beautiful to the masculinised sublime.

Following the same logic, Madeline, who unlike her brother is not artistically productive within the tale, but instead serves (at least, in death) as the object of her brother’s

⁷⁰ As Brett Zimmerman explains, “[i]t is well known that Poe claimed to disapprove of allegoria. In an oft-quoted review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, he states ‘in defence of allegory (however, or for whatever object, employed,) there is scarcely one respectable word to be said’ [13:48]. The review in which this statement appears was first published in *Graham’s Magazine* in May 1842, the same edition in which “The Masque of the Red Death” was first published [...] that Poe did not disdain to write this kind of literature is shown by scholars who insist that several of his other tales can also be read this way” (59).

art, can be recognized as personifying Coleridge's subordination of the merely combinative fancy to the generative imagination. Poe's rejection of both Burke's and Coleridge's formulations are thus both aptly dramatized by "Usher." The tale suggests that, like Madeline, Burke's denatured conception of beauty, separated from the vitality of terror, and Coleridge's conception of fancy, denied the power of creativity, has been prematurely buried, and thus must be made to return to life.

Similarly, there is a weakness in Voller's reading insofar as he relies on the binaristic conflict of imagination vs. reason, which represent only two of the key faculties in Kant's analytic equation, an equation that Poe explicitly adopted, with minor modifications, in "The Poetic Principle". There, Poe writes that "dividing the world of mind into its three most immediately obvious distinctions, we have the Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense" (273). These "most immediately obvious distinctions" were treated by Kant in, respectively, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which treats of intellectual truth, the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which treats of taste, and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), which treats of moral reason. Given the triangular structure of the tale's characterization, it is quite tempting to read "Usher" as an allegorization of this agonistic structure of the faculties. Furthermore, just as "Usher" emphasizes the interpenetration of its three characters, and their identity with the narrative and physical architecture that contains them, Poe emphasizes the interpenetration of these faculties. Poe claims that "I place taste in the middle, because it is just this position which, in the mind, it occupies." Taste, the beautiful, personified by Madeline, literally comes between Roderick and the narrator in a number of senses within the tale. First, it is her illness which causes Usher to seek out his long lost friend; next, she comes between as, in apparent death, she is carried by them to her impromptu tomb beneath

the house; and finally, as the narrator (representing a very fallible version of moral sense) learns that Usher has chosen a chamber that lies directly beneath his room for her interment (which, as Voller notes, almost vulgarly literalizes the Kantian subordination of sensation to moral vocation.) Appropriate, given Poe's recognition that "the Moral Sense is separated [from Taste] by so faint a difference that Aristotle has not hesitated to place some of its operations among the virtues themselves" (273).

However, keeping in mind both Poe's suspicion of allegory, and his monomaniacal penchant for literary one-upmanship, it is clear that a certain degree of both caution and humour are called for in the production of such edifying interpretations of the tale, whose symbolic fluidity and occultation of causal relations (to which I return below) are perhaps its greatest strengths. It may be more apt to read this dramatization as a kind of elaborate parodic play, meant to trap readers who, like the narrator himself, are subject to speciously rationalistic interpretosis. In this light, the tale can be productively read as a parody of the personifying tendencies already at work in both the Burkean and Kantian conceptions of the sublime. Of Burke's fairly obvious engendered personifications, little else need be written here. Kant's personifying tendencies are less obvious, and more worthy of comment.

Paul de Man, writing of the *Analytic of the Sublime*, has incisively asked: "What could it possibly mean, in analytical terms, that the imagination sacrifices itself, like Antigone or Iphigenia – for one can only imagine this shrewd and admirable imagination as the feminine heroine of a tragedy – for the sake of reason? And what is the status of all this heroism and cunning, which allows it to reach apathia, to overcome pathos, by ways of the very pathos of sacrifice? How can faculties, themselves a heuristic hypothesis devoid of any reality – only for those who have read too much eighteenth-century psychology and

philosophy might end up believing that they have an imagination, a reason, the same way that have blue eyes or a big nose – how can faculties be said to act, or even to act freely, as if they were conscious and complete human beings?” (104). Penetrating questions indeed; with Madeline’s interment, “Usher” implicitly questions precisely this, rewriting the Kantian facultative *akedah*, only to finally undercut it with her return, which signals the collapse of the house’s, and both Burke and Kant’s, “specious totality.”

The tale’s penultimate scene foregrounds the affective contagion and dissolution of subjective boundaries experienced in the act of reading a sublime text, as the narrator declaims “The Mad Trist” aloud in an ill-advised attempt to “calm” the ailing Roderick. This scene is reminiscent of Brown’s *Wieland*, with its nested reading of a German work of “adventurous and lawless fancy.” The narrator’s choice of reading materials ushers in the final collapse of both the house itself and the narrator’s attempts to structure and categorize his experiences therein. Voller writes that “reason’s helplessness in the face of the engulfing and chaotic forces of terror is evident in the narrator’s reading of “The Mad Trist,” a story whose elements of magic and chivalry are markedly inimical to rational authority. The fact that such a text is the only one at hand, when neither Roderick nor the narrator care for maudlin romance, is strong evidence of the decay of reason’s assuredness and of the ascendancy of the imaginative and nonrational” (32).

Similarly, the emphasis this scene places on the suggestive power of poetic language dramatizes *within* the narrative the stylistic force *of* the narrative itself, as the narrator’s performance creates a vortex into which he himself then sinks (even as Usher remains outside of its effects, aware as he is of the “real” origin of the sounds the narrator mistakes for supernatural embodiments of “The Mad Trist”). Upon reading aloud the account of

Ethelred's braining of the dragon, the narrator remarks, startled, that he hears "the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon's unnatural shriek as described by the romancer" (210). Once again, contra Coleridge, Poe emphasizes the creative (if perhaps pathologically so) power of fancy. The narrator is, once again, "oppressed" by sublime affects, "by the thousand conflicting sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror were predominant" (210). Still believing himself a rational and therapeutic influence on Usher, the narrator remains silent at this sound, in order to avoid agitating "the sensitive nervousness of his companion," (210) who, the reader rapidly learns, is much more aware of what unfolds around him than the supposedly rational narrator.

The textual vortex in which the narrator is trapped as he superimposes "The Mad Trist"'s clangorous events over his own experience suggests the loss of self-consciousness that Poe's aesthetic perspective held as the basis for the sublime experience of "the vortex of mysticism," and also serves as a final foreshadowing of the tale's apocalyptically involving conclusion. Most importantly, however, this presentation of an act of reading as a "Mad Trist" of affective contagion can be understood to dramatize that, in Ashfield and de Bolla's words, "in the technical descriptive analytic of the reading activity where the tropes of ravishment and transport begin to generate transformations at the descriptive level of the discourse [...] the analysis of reading becomes stained by a set of discriminations which it neither knowingly inherits nor necessarily welcomes from the discourse on the sublime" (7). Perhaps this recognition best characterizes the relationship Poe's work has with the discourse on the sublime. While he often consciously rejected the formulations of sublimity which chiefly constituted this discourse, his own aesthetic conceptions were always

irrevocably stained by the ink of sublimity, however negative his fictional presentations of this stain may have been.

Yet, for all its pointed and sophisticated critical engagement with the philosophical discourse of sublimity, “Usher”’s status as a work *of*, and not merely *on*, the negative sublime is ultimately dependent on the inadequacy of theoretical interpretations to define or clarify its meanings, or to differentiate its causes from its effects. In praising the sublimity of Milton’s evocation of Death, Burke wrote that “[i]n this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible; and sublime to the last degree” (II.iv 115). Uncertainty – or, more accurately in the case of Usher, *indeterminacy*, is an exigent ingredient of effective sublimity. The tale’s greatness lies precisely in its lack of clarity, its refusal of certainty.

As a work of the negative sublime, “Usher” is vast in its pregnant obscurity. The tale’s power to simultaneously sustain and resist sundry allegorical interpretations can be likened to its metonymic relation with Usher’s unframable and illegible expressions, with their intimations of infinity. As Burke claimed, “let it be considered that hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do while we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea” (115). Poe’s aesthetic orchestration in “Usher” is both a literary culmination of this profound uncertainty, and an untimely and influential emergence of the radical indeterminacy that will come to characterize much Modernist fiction half a century later.

In *Inside Modernism: Relativity Theory, Cubism, Narrative*, Vargish and Mook cite Henry James’ novel *The Turn of The Screw* as a definitively Modernist work due in large

part to its resistance to any definite causal explanation of narrativized events. They write that James' narrator-governess "is often cited as an extreme example of the 'unreliable narrator,' a modernist critical formulation indicating that in various ways the events of the text and the attitudes of other characters raise doubts about the strict empirical accuracy of what the narrating voice tells us. As with dramatic monologues in poetry or prose, like Browning's or Poe's, the narrator may be duplicitous or mad or oblivious of the real significance of the events narrated." According to them, what sets the governess apart from these other unreliable narrators is that "[i]n almost all nineteenth-century narrative, the limitations of such a narrator become clear to the reader, who is given the means to see beyond the subjectivities to the empirical fact" (44), but *The Turn of the Screw* employs unreliable narration in a sophisticated fashion that prevents any final penetration of "subjectivities" to the "empirical facts" they cover. As Vargish and Mook explain, readers and critics of James' novel have tended to argue either that the governess's experiences are due to her own mental and emotional instability, or that the events are indeed due to the involvement of some supernatural agency. They write that "[b]oth interpretations have received numerous defenses by scholars and critics of established reputation [...] but to take sides at all is to fall into the relativistic trap that James set for such thinkers back in 1898. What the story inescapably asserts is that the governess *may* be mad *and* that the ghosts *may* be real. That these two possibilities appear to contradict each other does not disqualify either one. In the world of modernist narrative, as in the world of Relativity Theory, two contradictory measurements of the same reality can coexist as one" (46; my italics). This indeterminacy had already been amply explored by "Usher", which through its presentation of the entangled triumvirate of the narrator, Roderick, and Madeline creates a narrative

context wherein characters function both as autonomous textual entities, and as fragmentary facultative impersonations, and where events have both a natural, physical explanation (structural flaws, buried residue of gunpowder and belated sparks from the grating of metal doors explaining the house's implosion) and a psychodramatic one (the final schizophrenic implosion of the allegorized mind.)

Vargish and Mook argue, in interpreting *The Turn of the Screw* and related narratives, that "what kills is our inability to accept the existence of simultaneous, logically exclusive interpretations" (47). Part of Poe's achievement with "Usher" is to have created a narrative context that licenses a proliferation of such "logically exclusive interpretations" and "contradictory measurements" of the tale's meaning. As I have argued throughout this chapter, Poe's occulting orchestration of negative sublimity renders "Usher" an architecture of unknowing, an exigent black box (in which a black cat may be, simultaneously, both dead and alive).

While both Brockden Brown's *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly* and some of Poe's earlier tales had already played with this indeterminacy, "Usher" represents an aesthetic plateau in this respect. I would also suggest that, in spite of Henry James's famed statement that "an enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a primitive state of reflection," he himself had carefully read and assimilated Poe's sublime strategies of indeterminacy. Like most critics, Vargish and Mook note Poe's importance in terms of his explorations of unreliable narration, but fail to recognize that the Modernist indeterminacy they value so highly in James is already fully realized in Poe's "Usher."

Furthermore, what these and numerous other critics have missed is that this Modernist indeterminacy was an avowed element of Poe's aesthetics, as attested by his

conception of a tale's unity of effect. It is this that renders "Usher" exemplary of Poe's doctrine of the *reciprocity of adaptation* between apparent causes and effects, and of "the unity of effect" that he aspired to in all his most important fictions. Poe emphasizes this necessary interspersion of cause and effect explicitly in his final "fiction," *Eureka*, writing that "[t]he pleasure which we derive from any display of human ingenuity is in the ratio of the approach to this species of reciprocity. In the construction of plot, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the incidents that we shall not be able to determine, of any one of them, whether it depends from any other or upholds it. In this sense, of course, perfection of plot is really, or practically, unattainable – but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God" (53). Poe comes unsettlingly close to this divine *imitatio* with the construction and collapse of the "House of Usher."

Conclusion: As In America, Darkly

“It is Mr. Locke’s opinion, that darkness is not naturally an idea of terror; and that, though an excessive light is painful to the senses, the greatest excess of darkness is in no ways troublesome. He observes indeed in another place, that a nurse or old woman having once associated the idea of ghosts and goblins with that of darkness, night, ever after, becomes painful and horrible to the imagination [...] with all deference to such an authority, it seems to me, that an association of a more general nature, an association which takes in all mankind, and make darkness terrible; for in utter darkness it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take...”

Edmund Burke, *Enquiry*

“Plague operates by invisible agents, and we know not in what quarter it is about to attack us. No shield, therefore, can be lifted up against it. We fear it as we are terrified by the dark in which though much of our panic be, doubtless, owing to the influence of education, and may be removed by habitual exposure to it, yet our defenceless condition and the invisible approaches of danger may contribute to our alarms. I am not even wholly uninfected by this disease, because strong is the influence of early association; when in the dark, if an unlucky incident calls my attention to the imperfect gleam [...] I find myself seized by unwelcome shrinking and hasten to the asylum which sleep, or light, or company or abstract meditations may offer me.”

Charles Brockden Brown, letter to James Brown

“Poe once confessed to the editor George Graham that ‘he disliked the dark, and was rarely out at night. On one occasion he said to me, ‘I believe that demons take advantage of the night to mislead the unwary—although, you know,’ he added, ‘I don’t believe in them.’”

Jeffrey Myers, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*

“The experience of the American writer is inseparable from the American experience, even when the writer does not speak of America.”

Gilles Deleuze, “Whitman,” *Essays Critical and Clinical*

Henry James famously claimed that “an enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive state of reflection.” Generally taken as a criticism of Poe’s apparent puerility, this critical jibe also offers oblique insight into the importance of both Poe and Brown as primitives in the sense of primary, foundational figures. James’s comment is perhaps the best known, but a number of other critics (including luminaries such as T.S. Eliot and Leslie Fiedler) have also described both these authors in hebephrenic terms. Its derogatory connotations of immaturity and reliance on a simplistic psycho-developmental model of literary history aside, this comparison *does* tell us something valuable about these American pioneers and literary psychonauts, whose cartographic fictions aided the determination of a trajectory, not only for subsequent American fiction, but also for the subsequent development of literary Modernism at large. In “What Children Say,” an essay with particular relevance to these “primitive” American cartographies of the abyss, Gilles Deleuze states that “children never stop talking about what they are doing or trying to do: exploring milieus, by means of dynamic trajectories, and drawing up maps of them. The maps of these trajectories are essential to psychic activity” (61). In light of this, the apparently hebephrenic qualities of Brown and Poe’s fictions are finally inseparable from their cartographic significance, just as their primitivity is finally a function of their pioneering importance.

Deleuze describes the act of map-making as the production of a subjective trajectory. He writes that “[t]he trajectory merges not only with the subjectivity of those who travel through a milieu, but also with the subjectivity of the milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it. The map expresses the identity of the journey and what journeys through it. It merges with its object, when the object itself is movement” (61). The fictive

maps drawn by Brown and Poe represent a trajectory wherein the subjectivity of the authors and their characters are inseparably connected with the subjectivity of a milieu itself, meaning both the political state of the early American Republic and the intellectual state of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries, the emergence of the Modern episteme. Wieland and Huntly, Usher and Pym reflect and are reflected by the milieu into which they were written, just as their authors reflect and are reflected by the milieu in which they wrote. They represent a trajectory wherein the darkness of the Enlightenment's shadows merge with the darkness of American anxieties about political identity, racial conflict, and the enthusiastic dangers of democratic populism, a trajectory wherein the darkness of America's wilderness merges with the darkness of what Foucault calls "the unthought,"⁷¹ Modernity's epistemic unconscious.

Foucault's *The Order of Things* provides a useful understanding of the Modern episteme by highlighting connections between the late eighteenth century fascination with the ineffable and the unrepresentable (a fascination most clearly evident within the discourse on the sublime) and Kant's critical project. Foucault claims that "[c]onfronting Ideology, the Kantian critique [...] marks the threshold of our modernity; it questions representation, not in accordance with the endless movement that proceeds from the simple elements in all its possible combinations, but on the basis of its rightful limits. Thus it sanctions for the first

⁷¹ Foucault describes consciousness uncovering, "both in itself and outside itself, at its borders yet also in its very warp and woof, an element of darkness, an apparently inert density in which it is embedded, an unthought which it contains entirely, yet in which it is also caught" (326). This unthought, which Foucault also describes as "this obscure space so readily interpreted as an abyssal region in man's nature," (326) is a conception anticipated throughout Poe's oeuvre, but especially by his reference in a letter 'To Marie Louise' (1847) to "unthought-like thoughts, scarcely the shade of thought." In fact, as Burton R. Pollin has observed, Poe is the first writer in the English language to make use of the paradoxical construction "unthought-like thoughts," and all that it entails in terms of the disjunction between affect, cognition, and linguistic communication (1980 67).

time that event in European culture which coincides with the end of the eighteenth century: the withdrawal of knowledge and thought outside the space of representation” (242). Building on Foucault’s claim in *Madness and Modernism* (1992), Louis Sass writes that “[t]he profound effect of the new mode of philosophical awareness that Kant initiated was to foreground the role of the human mind in the constitution of the world [...] Previously we had, as it were, looked right through the lens of consciousness at the objects it revealed; now, with Kant’s new, transcendental forms of reflection, that lens seemed to be clouding over and calling attention to itself, thereby withdrawing cognition from an interest in the world and directing it back upon its own intrinsic structure. But the withdrawal and involution inherent in this new ‘philosophy of reflection’ had two implications – one tending to elevate the status of consciousness, the other to lower it” (327). This paradox, which Sass describes as underlying the numerous associations between schizophrenic perception and Modern epistemology, is one which is already nascent in pre-Kantian eighteenth-century theorizations of the sublime encounter, theorizations which indubitably inflected both Kant’s critical thought, and the epistemologically anxious fictions of Brown and Poe, with their Gothicized embodiments of radical skepticism. Indeed, Poe’s repeated and powerful play on the term *cataract* provides an apt commentary on what Foucault and Sass see as Kant’s seminal contribution to Modern epistemology. This recognition led Kant to posit a vast, shadowy landscape underlying our subjectivity, one where the light of conscious awareness did not often penetrate. Contemporaneously, it led Brown, and slightly later, Poe, to attempt to map this inscrutable landscape, superimposing upon it the geography of an alien and imaginary America. The America explored by these fictions of Brown and Poe is thus the other “Dark Continent,” a place of obscure shadow and unplumbable depths. Ultimately

neither country nor continent, this cartographic entity is, in Kant's phrase, "the vast map of our mind" on which only "a few points are illuminated." As Bruce Mills points out, the psycho-aesthetic experiments of these authors evolved "[b]ecause the study of human psychology and the nature of the unconscious was in its early stages," which meant that "the very practical challenge for writers – that is, to develop a new mode of discourse that encompassed a new understanding of mind – seemed especially acute in the first half of the nineteenth century" (4).

While critics since Fiedler and Bonaparte have noted the development of a (typically Freudian) conception of the unconscious in the works of Brown and Poe, the discursive debt of this conception to the eighteenth century discourse on the sublime and its fictional exploration through the interpenetrating psychogeographies of these fictions has never before been adequately considered. This is a serious lacuna in the scholarship on both authors, as this psychogeographic exploration offers a key to the particular power still exerted by each of these early American soundings of the Modern subject's depths, soundings empowered by the engagement each has with the discourse on the sublime. In *The Gothic Sublime*, Vijay Mishra claims that "Melville's *Pierre* stands at the receiving end of an entire aesthetic of the sublime as the eighteenth century read the idea, as Kant and the post-Kantians expanded it, and as the Gothic enriched it by transforming this aesthetic into a psychology. In this respect, *Pierre* anticipates, as the Gothic texts did, the sublime as a moment of entry into the unconscious, the 'unplumbable'" (19).

In light of this claim, the four fictions by Brown and Poe discussed in this thesis must be recognized as prior points of entry into Pierre's "unplumbable," the unconscious which

Richter called “an inner Africa⁷²” and which is written out in these fictions as multiple maps of a vast, obscure and imaginary America (even when, as in “Usher” and *Pym*, this America is written under another name.) This imaginary space serves as a metaphor for the intrasubjective alterity which is the heart of the sublime encounter, wherein the mind is forced to face its own obscure reflection via the medium of an object of the senses. However, these fictions also render this metaphorization reciprocal, as the intrasubjective alterity of the sublime encounter becomes an experiential metaphor for America itself, whose motto of “*E Pluribus Unum*” is rewritten as an anxious reminder that within any one of us dwell strange, and seemingly unrecognizable, multitudes (Usher’s Imp, Pym’s Tsalalians, Huntly’s demonic Indians, Theodor’s Daemon.) But the deep and divided Modern subject, troped by Brown and Poe as an American “inner Africa,” is an imaginary geography whose fraught tropics are mapped with characters drawn unmistakably from a particular historical and geographic context; like any articulation of subjectivity, it bears distinct traces of the time and place in which it was produced. These psycho-fictional cartographies map a frontier inseparable from the discovery (or discursive invention) of the unconscious in the nineteenth century, a discovery which signals a cultural and epistemic Modernity. Through their cultivation of an aesthetics of complex indeterminacy, these fictions also map a frontier that will subsequently become the staging ground for the emergence of an international literary Modernism. These aesthetic characteristics and their

⁷² The conflation of darkness as epistemological aporia with darkness as stigma of racial/cultural distinction which is acutely exploited in both *Edgar Huntly* and *Arthur Gordon Pym*, both of which tropically anticipate Conrad’s canonically early-Modernist *Heart of Darkness*, is already anticipated in Burke’s *Enquiry*. See especially sections XV-XVII.

epistemological context are inseparable, since the post-Enlightenment skepticism that informed both Brown and Poe's thought did much to empower their aesthetic explorations.

However, while their literary presentations of darkness as both epistemological aporias and aesthetic plateaus create fascinating linkages between these fictions of Brown and Poe, the limits of this parallel trajectory must be recognized. It would be a mistake to think that the cartographic activities of these literary pioneers were identical, or were even produced by comparable motivations. Indeed, Brown and Poe had altogether different conceptions of the nature and function of literature, and these conceptions indelibly altered the sometimes parallel, but also quite different, trajectories their respective works would take. The respective epigraphs to this conclusion from Brown and Poe, in which they comment on the darkness and its demons, provide two apertures through which to view both the cataract of the sublime, and the different conceptions of the function of literature to which these authors ascribed, and which motivated their interconnected cartographies of the abyss.

Brown's expressed purpose with his Gothic fictions, as with his later domestic fictions and political pamphlets, had always been didactic. He sought to instruct and at times, perhaps, to inspire political action. As his 1796 letter to his brother James suggests, his purpose in employing variations on the Gothic model was a kind of heuristic vaccination against the dangers of unrestrained imagination. In Waterman's words, "[r]eaders of Brown's fiction may be tempted to regard as perverse his selection of the gothic novel, with its typical traffic in terror, as the vehicle by which he would 'reason down' fear of the fever and set such public examples. Yet in diagnosing the disease of 'fear,' Brown implies that various factors – age, experience, reflection, habit – may themselves provide sufficient

'cure[s].' He might have added that literary narrative itself could serve as a prophylactic, particularly if it conjures up terror in order to habituate or perhaps even to inoculate a reader's to fear's unhealthy side effects" (191).

Brown's faith in both the inoculative possibilities of literary terror and the importance of such Gothic psycho-cartographies, after his literary explosion from 1796-1801, quickly waned. As the first two chapters of this thesis explained, Brown's earlier Gothic novels attempted to sound the depths and explore the unplumbable recesses of the Modern American subject. As Scott Bradfield explains, "[s]leepwalking pioneers like Edgar and Clithero never uncover America's final border so much as increasing lapses, vacuums, hunger, an infinite series of places where America can never be found. From Clara Wieland to Arthur Mervyn, Brown's protagonists seek to penetrate obscurities, only to become lost in still deeper ones" (30). However, Brown's later writings reveal a Wittgensteinian resignation to pass over in silence that which cannot be adequately spoken (or written) of. By 1803, Brown seems to have altogether lost his conviction that imaginative literature can serve as a vaccinating vector against the sublime dangers of excessive imagination. Poe's fictions, on the other hand, can be seen as picking up where these early works by Brown left off, which led to Leslie Fiedler's aptly paradoxical claim that "Poe seems to have invented Charles Brockden Brown" as a necessary American precursor. While Brown eventually turned away from his early, almost Huntlyesque, attempts to act as a kind of guide to wanderers in this American abyss or "inner Africa," Poe, like Melville's Pierre, seemed determined to go ever deeper and deeper down in his attempt to give expression to what he would call "unthought-like thoughts."

As Poe's oft-quoted passage about his fear of the dark suggests, his purpose in pursuing these dark passages was exploratory, rather than explanatory, experimental rather than didactic. While Brown tried to use his early fictions to reveal the dangers of the imagination unrestrained (even when the imagination presents itself in the guise of reason, as it did for both Theodor Wieland and Edgar Huntly) Poe's tales employ what Deleuze (drawing, to some degree, on Hume) calls the "powers of the false;" they employ fictions to reveal that the world, like the mind that seems to experience it, is itself a work of the imagination, a product of the "power of words." In other words, that "all we say and seem is but a dream within a dream."

Poe's ontological skepticism gives rise to the tonal instability, the absolute infinite negativity, that pervades his works, and his statement to George Graham, with its oblique reference to the influential remarks of Locke and Burke on the relationship between darkness and terror, is exemplary of the Schlegelian romantic irony that G.R. Thompson identified as the chief characteristic of virtually all of Poe's oeuvre (with the *possible* exception of some of his letters and criticism.) It is, in part, this characteristic quality of Poe's writing that caused T.S. Eliot to castigate Poe's "as if" quality, his refusal to make serious assertions. It is this quality that informs Eliot's assessment of Poe as a literary hebephrenic. As Elmer observes, "[w]hen Eliot reads Poe, in other words, when he wonders about his combination of modernity and mediocrity, and psychologizes, against his better judgement, about Poe's supposed immaturity, he is at bottom reading America, that well-known version of America which is fascinated with 'wonders of nature and mechanics,' wildly precocious but essentially unformed, an America that for all its grossness remains 'inevitable,' as Bloom says. Poe's work becomes for Eliot an emblem of a peculiar fissure in the American cultural

edifice; or rather, to keep Eliot's developmental metaphors, it is symptomatic of America's immature recalcitrance before the demands of seriousness, its lingering antididacticism, a childish refusal to give up entertaining itself with ideas rather than believing them" (25).

This exigent subjunctive quality is a testament to Poe's poetics of negative sublimity, and it is a quality which reaches its highest pitch in Poe's last lengthy work, the cosmogonic and quasi-scientific prose-poem, *Eureka*. Appropriately enough, this is the single text by Poe which employs the most frequent usages of the word "sublime". Here, the simultaneous dissolution/elevation of the subject that is the heart of the sublime encounter is writ large. Here, Shaftesbury's "Abyss of Deity" is reconceived through a kind of pantheistic vitalism, what Barbara Cantalupo has aptly called "a vast democracy of thought, an ingenious cosmos of which the annihilated self becomes the center" (257). It is this "vast democracy" that pushes Poe's trajectory of America-as-sublime-mind to its greatest plateau. Nevertheless, this psychographic trajectory, inaugurated by Brown and Poe, will continue to be pursued in American literature, as works like Melville's *Pierre*, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, Miller's *Tropics*, and Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* (to name just a few) amply testify.

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