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**NATURAL CAUSES:  
AMERICAN GOTHIC LITERATURE  
AND THE DOCTRINE OF NATURAL LAW**

**By Elizabeth Rosen**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

**2000**

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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William P. Kelly  
Chair of Examining Committee

12.13/99  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Joan Richardson  
Executive Officer

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Louis Menand

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Marc Dolan

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

**Abstract****NATURAL CAUSES:  
AMERICAN GOTHIC LITERATURE  
AND THE DOCTRINE OF NATURAL LAW****By****Elizabeth Rosen****Adviser: Professor William P. Kelly**

**Less than one generation after Thomas Jefferson declared his native land to be “nature’s nation” American gothic literature of the nineteenth-century paints a picture of nature disfigured: pestilence pollutes the landscape, ghosts follow the unwitting through verdant fields, virtuous men commit violent murders and corpses rise from their tombs. In the work of these gothic writers, the natural world is a locus of terror. Most striking, this image of a malevolent and untrustworthy nature, which is the hallmark of the gothic, made its mark as an American genre at almost the same moment that Jefferson and the other founding fathers used natural law as the authorizing principle of the American constitutional system.**

**This dissertation will examine the strange coincidence of two radically different notions of nature: In one, nature is a frightening landscape of the unpredictable and uncontrollable, as epitomized in the literature of the American gothic. In the second, nature is redemptive and didactic; the doctrine of natural law insisted that that nature would reveal the eternal principles of order upon which a new government could be built.**

**The dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first will consider natural law and its American application. It will document and describe the idealized view of nature that held sway when America’s first novelists began to write. The second chapter will consider the work of Charles Brockden Brown. While the Enlightenment proffered a**

view of nature that was both ordered and legible, Brown's gothic work was set in a landscape that became both disordered and inscrutable. Washington Irving, the subject of the third chapter, is unique as a gothic author. He presents nature as a lost pastoral, and he is able to make fun of the conceits of natural law at the same time he senses the tragedy of their fiction. The last chapter will focus on the work of Edgar Allan Poe. In Poe's tales, the expansive American landscape appears to be contracting and nature, that limitless expanse so celebrated in American letters, becomes claustrophobic. In these, and in ways that have not as yet been charted critically, the real setting of American gothic literature has been the American legal landscape.

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## **Introduction**

**American gothic literature of the nineteenth-century paints a picture of nature disfigured: pestilence pollutes the landscape, ghosts follow the unwitting through verdant fields, virtuous men commit violent murders and corpses rise from their tombs. In the work of these gothic writers, the natural world is a locus of terror. Appearance is never a trustworthy emblem of reality; the lush landscape subverts the pleasure of those who seek its shelter, and the most benign protagonist often turns out to be the instrument of the reader's terror.**

**Most striking, this image of a malevolent and untrustworthy nature, which is the hallmark of the gothic, made its mark as an American genre less than one generation after Thomas Jefferson declared his native land to be "nature's nation." Jefferson, and the other founding fathers, used natural law as the authorizing principle of the American constitutional system. This dissertation will examine the strange coincidence of two radically different notions of nature: In one, nature is a frightening landscape of the unpredictable and uncontrollable, as epitomized in the literature of the American gothic. In the second, nature is redemptive and didactic; the doctrine of natural law insisted that that nature would reveal the eternal principles of order upon which a new government could be built.**

**At first glance, it may appear that a contrast between gothic literature and American legal philosophy is simply a study of inapposites. What, after all, do horror stories have to do with American political theory? On closer examination, however, the underlying connections between these seemingly disparate branches of study become profound.**

The first major American gothic writers, Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving, were lawyers themselves. In the early nineteenth-century, legal training included the study of both legal regulations and legal philosophy. Both Brown and Irving were necessarily well-schooled in the doctrine of natural law and the promise of benign nature upon which its conception depended. Moreover, natural law doctrine was not simply an arcane branch of legal study. The Enlightenment dictates that transformed philosophy revolutionized government as well. In the American constitutional system, nature is the force that grants law its authority. Natural law, as it was enshrined in the nation's founding documents, supplanted God and monarchies as the pre-eminent symbol of authority. In the early days of the republic, all legal and ethical debate eventually had recourse to the doctrine of natural law. And the controversies that found their way into American courtrooms during the early period of the nation's history reflected the pervasive influence of natural law doctrine. During the first half of the nineteenth-century, there are 1042 references to either nature or natural law in reported judicial opinions. Many of these decisions were recorded and debated in pamphlets and newspapers of the day. Natural law doctrine thus played a lively and active role in early American discourse.

Finally, as recent scholarship in the law and literature movement has shown, literature does not speak in a vacuum, but is part of a larger cultural conversation. Legal language speaks with a force and compulsion that literary language cannot claim. However, for this very reason, literature often can give voice to alternative and often disruptive views that legal language avoids. The emergence of the gothic at almost the same moment that American natural law doctrine had taken root suggests the deep commerce between the two.

For these reasons, a study of the vision of nature provided by American gothic writers necessarily involves important legal questions. If nature was to serve as a pre-eminent symbol of authority in this new nation, what does gothic nature have to say about the reliability of a legal system organized around precepts of “natural” law? John Locke, whose treatises on government and philosophy profoundly influenced the authors of the Constitution, had premised his theory of knowledge upon the reliability of sensual experience. Characters in gothic novels carefully process their received sensory impressions (consider Wieland’s reaction to hearing the voice of Carwin the Biloquist, or William Wilson’s reliance on his sight and hearing in “unmasking” his putative double), only to find that this unmediated sensory experience results in their own destruction. The very sources of American Constitutional polity are subversively derided by the authors of American gothic literature. Moreover, arguments founded in natural law, insisting that nature itself revealed eternal and socially redemptive truths, remained an almost constant refrain in early nineteenth-century jurisprudence. Gothic literature, with its violence, its pestilence, its inscrutability, reinstates the dark side of nature. The work of American gothic writers thus adds a critical counterpoint to the dominant tone of early American legal debate.

The almost simultaneous ascendance of these opposing views of the natural world in legal and literary texts is, in a word, startling. This dissertation will address two key questions: what is the concept of nature that allows for the growth of the natural law doctrine, and what is the concept of nature in American gothic literature that provides such a drastic counterpoint to it? The changes that took place in natural law doctrine as it evolved are often skeptically recorded in

the literature produced by American gothic writers. The traditional division between legal discourse and literary works has not recognized, let alone accounted for, the connection between these texts. Why are two such radically different notions of nature articulated less than one generation apart? By recording, in tandem, these varying legal and literary conceptions of nature during the first half of the nineteenth-century, I hope to produce a more accurate representation of American cultural history during this critical period. I expect my work will cast doubt upon the popular notion (recounted even today, by legal scholars and members of the judiciary) of natural law as an homogenous body of normative legal ethics. While I will rely upon a variety of legal sources to prove that natural law was, in its very construction, highly fluid and often internally contradictory, it will be the work of gothic writers that will provide key evidence that natural law doctrine was, and is, more problematic than its commentators have yet to admit. Moreover, it is only when gothic texts are read against the prevailing legal view of nature as an ethical norm that the full resonance of their presentation of nature's peril can be heard.

Obviously, not all gothic writers address natural law questions. Indeed, as a generic form, the gothic novel had its beginnings long before this study takes note of them. As M.H. Abrams notes, "the best [gothic novels] opened up to fiction the realm of the irrational and of the perverse impulses and the nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the orderly surface of the civilized mind" (74). In the first half of the nineteenth-century, a surprising number of American writers met this challenge. Their work is both a result of, and an assault upon, the Age of Reason. In its peculiarly American form, gothic literature is intimately entwined with questions of political order. This is not surprising, since the American

experiment, as both Paine and Jefferson called it, was intended as a testing ground for the Enlightenment's humanist claims. Each of the gothic writers considered here suggest the fallibility of a system built upon reason, and dictated by natural law. For each of these authors, gothic fiction becomes an inevitable vehicle for political critique.

This work is divided into four chapters. The first will consider natural law and its American application. It will document and describe the idealized view of nature that held sway when America's first novelists began to write. The second chapter will consider the work of Charles Brockden Brown. While the Enlightenment proffered a view of nature that was both ordered and legible, Brown's gothic work was set in a landscape that became both disordered and inscrutable. Washington Irving, the subject of the third chapter, is unique as a gothic author. He presents nature as a lost pastoral, and he is able to make fun of the conceits of natural law at the same time he senses the tragedy of their fiction. The last chapter will focus on the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's presentation of the natural world is unique in American fiction. In Poe's tales, the expansive American landscape appears to be contracting. His narrators cannot be trusted, reason is of little help in deciphering his world, and the very walls of the universe are said to be closing in. Nature, that limitless expanse that so many American writers sought to celebrate, becomes at last claustrophobic<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>I should also note that although this project focuses on the treatment of nature in both law and literature, it is not a work of ecocriticism. In fact, ecocriticism tends to repeat many of the same metaphors that natural law theorists use, in describing nature's beneficence. The tendency to project on to nature an idealized image is one of the more interesting parallels between contemporary criticism and eighteenth-century views of nature. While I will try to mention these where possible, a full discussion of ecocriticism will not be provided here.

In 1815, the American poet Philip Freneau wrote:

Religion, such as nature taught,  
With all divine perfection suits;  
Had all mankind this system sought  
Sophists would cease their vain disputes,  
And from this source would nations know  
All that can make their heaven below. (725)

How extraordinary that this poem was written at almost a chronologically equidistant point between Charles Brockden Brown's image of Philadelphia as the city of brotherly love beset by yellow fever in Arthur Mervyn, and the strange disappearance of Ichabod Crane from a bucolic landscape in Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." What can account for such varied notions of nature's redemptive power, in contradistinction to nature's hidden peril? The concomitant legal arguments pitting natural law versus positive law have a clear analog in the literature of the American gothic. In the work of writers like Brown, Irving and Poe, nature, as a paradigm of legal fraternity and morality, is exposed as a source of the pernicious. As a corollary to this uncongenial image of the natural world, a legal system based upon the "self-evident truths" that nature is said to dictate, is thrown into question.

My dissertation will follow what I believe to be the self-conscious questioning, by the masters of American gothic, of the doctrine of natural law. The principles of John Locke, which formed both the basis of the natural rights

theory and the judicial justification for the rise of the industrial economy, are pointedly challenged by the American gothic. (That Roderick Usher is a man “suffering from a morbid acuteness of the senses” shows us much about the promise of such sensory perception as a means of knowing the natural world, and our place within it. 322) The legal debate pitting the unwritten doctrine of natural law against the positive written law, itself illustrative of the crisis of authority in the new nation, is satirized by writers like Irving. Irving set forth textual sources to document the authenticity of Rip van Winkle’s strange fate, only to use this citation to authoritative sources to stress their inherent unreliability. In these, and in ways that have not as yet been charted critically, the real setting of American gothic literature has been the American legal landscape.

## **Chapter One**

### **“Written with a Sunbeam”**

#### **Natural Law Doctrine and Its American Application**

**“Chaos was the law of nature; order was the dream of man.”**

**-Henry Adams**

The twentieth-century jurist, Benjamin Cardozo, once wrote, “In the law, we must be wary of metaphors, for while they begin by liberating the imagination, they may end by enslaving it” (173). This advice, to be sure, has come belatedly. Much of the philosophy of law is dependent upon metaphor for both its structure, and indirectly, its authority. Perhaps nowhere is this more true than in the doctrine of natural law. Natural law depends upon nature and natural imagery for the logic of its propositions. Metaphors, usually drawn from nature, supply the analogies by which natural law makes its claims of immutability, and eternal existence.

The legal commentator William Blackstone defined natural law as “the ultimate measure of obligation by which all legal precepts must be tried and from which they derive their whole force and authority” (Murphy 48). Such a sweeping characterization from so prudent a critic would raise the curiosity of even a casual observer of legal philosophy. This unequivocal pronouncement identifies natural law as the final arbiter of any legal precept. What Blackstone does not mention is that, unlike virtually every other source of legal authority, natural law has no text. It is both the “ultimate measure of obligation,” and it is the only legal source that

remains unwritten. As such, it provides something of a wild card in jurisprudential debate. It should come as no surprise that the doctrine of natural law in its American application has proven itself to be a remarkably plastic one. It was not only the guiding principle behind the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; it also provided justification for the growth of contract law; it supplied proof that slavery was ordained by the natural order (as well as providing a powerful argument to the contrary); and it has most recently been used to argue in favor of the pro-life movement, and to demonstrate that the Constitution sanctions the right to die.

Despite its many incarnations, at least one aspect of natural law remains constant. Natural law is always the rhetorical antagonist of positive, which is to say written law. It is this rhetorical opposition that has supplied the force behind many, if not most of our domestic legal controversies. The demise of the agrarian economy, the rise of laissez faire economics, the tortured history of slavery -- all these controversies have employed the rhetoric of natural law.

How did such a doctrine prove both so amenable and so potent? There is evidence in the constitutional debates to suggest that many convention delegates were well aware that natural law offered few fixed boundaries, and would therefore create problems for those whose task was to interpret its scope<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, James Whitman's article, "Why did the Revolutionary Lawyers Confuse Custom and Reason," *University of Chicago Law Review*, 1321-1365. Suzanna Sherry has presented a painstaking analysis of the degree to which the Founders intended for courts to look outside the Constitution in determining the law. in "The Founder's Unwritten Constitution, The University of Chicago Law Review," 1127-1175. Some of her conclusions are challenged by Helen Michaels in an article entitled, "The Role of Natural Law in Early American Constitutionalism: Did the Founders Contemplate Judicial Enforcement of "Unwritten" Individual Rights?" 69 *North Carolina Law Review*, 425-491.

Nevertheless, the necessity of finding a new egalitarian principle of authority overcame their reluctance.

The colonists, after all, found themselves in a world of their own making that they were obliged to make over. Critical to their task was the need to locate authority in a new source - monarchical and divine intervention would no longer bind the new nation. Nature itself provided the situs of this authority. Natural law held that all men were created equal, and invested them with certain inalienable rights. By inscribing these rights into a written document, the nation's founders set up a paradigm that would continue for centuries to come: the Constitution, as a written document, became positive, textual law, while the logical underpinning for the precepts it announced remained the unwritten law of nature.<sup>2</sup> The rhetorical *dramatis personae* of American legal debate were thus cast from the first. Natural law would always be the rhetorical antagonist of positive law.

Moreover, in constructing this new legal edifice of government, the colonists sought on the one hand to escape British authority; yet, they imported the British common law as the American system of jurisprudence. As one commentator succinctly noted, positive law comes from the top down, whereas common law comes from the bottom up (Cooter 947). In other words, positive law is imposed by the state. Common law is the judicial enforcement of accepted

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<sup>2</sup>The longevity of this paradigm can be witnessed in companion essays, by Justice William Brennan and former Attorney General Edward Meese, delivered at a symposium on legal interpretation. Brennan advocated the need to look outside the Constitution to find the ideals that form the foundation of our national aspirations. Meese countered by arguing that in the presence of a written Constitution, such casting about for extra-textual justification anchors the Constitution on only the personal consciences of jurists, and thereby creates "a chameleon jurisprudence, changing color and form in each era." (32)

social and legal norms. The common law system is by definition an endorsement of past practice as a means of defining present propriety. The common law system vests interpretation of what constitutes present propriety with the courts. Where positive law was silent, common law, through judicial interpretation, spoke.

Even after all the emblems of the British monarchy were banished, the common law system remained. Thus not only did the Constitution itself pit natural law against positive law; but the court system that was charged with interpreting this new document was itself a vestigial reminder of British legal rule. The battles between the unwritten natural law, and the new textual positive law, were to be settled within the traditional structure of common law interpretation. This rather incredible intersection, of natural, positive and common law, makes the American system of polity a clash between structures of authority that is unprecedented in history. It was not surprising that Thomas Paine would declare, "In America, law is king." It was equally unsurprising that Paine would also claim "The present state of America is truly alarming to every man capable of reflection. The institution is without precedent, the case never existed before and who can tell what may be the end" (32).

I recount this history to underline two key points. The first is to note that the paramount national trope of ethics was nature; natural law contained within it all of humanity's potential for normative behavior, and it would remain the extra-textual source of legal argument for centuries to come. Second, I want to note that from the start, the very method by which unwritten, natural law became an enshrined principle in the American system of polity was through the aegis of a written document. Natural law was, from the moment the Constitution was

ratified, one of several competing players in the drama of national political debate.

The great natural law theorist A.P. D'Entreves once observed, "There is not one tradition of natural law, but many." (17) Few legal doctrines have enjoyed the longevity of natural law. Moreover, unlike other sources of law that can be read and interpreted, natural law is "written in men's hearts" (Romans: 2-12-16), and has historically been as subject to permutation as this source would suggest.

Natural law had its formal beginnings in ancient Rome, where it was called the *jus gentium*. The *jus gentium* were laws that would apply to citizens and foreigners alike; citizenship was not required in order for the protections of these laws to apply (Sumner 42-44). The historical roots of natural law may be traced to Plato, Aristotle, Heraclitus and Cicero. For Aristotle, natural law provided both justice and universality, in contrast to laws of state, whose applicability depended both upon their enactment and jurisdiction. The doctrine is closely intertwined with Christian theological history, from St. Paul and Augustine, to Thomas Aquinas, and later Richard Hooker. For Aquinas, and later Hooker and Locke, reason was the first rule of the law of nature, and the means by which human moral obligation was discovered. Natural law, and its corollary right reason, figured prominently in the theological disputes of the Reformation, often providing a powerful protagonist against the Puritan claim that Scripture was the source of all binding legal authority.

Hugo Grotius, sometimes credited as the father of the modern natural law doctrine, made the revolutionary declaration that natural law would exist even if there were no God (d'Entreves 56,62 ). Grotius analogized natural law principles to mathematical principles – both were objectively verifiable, and neither required divine confirmation of their truth.

The contemporary distinction between natural law and natural science is not an accurate reflection of Enlightenment thought. Both law and science were empirically sought and known. Isaiah Berlin observed that even in so multifarious a movement as the Enlightenment, certain common beliefs united its many partisans. One such conviction was that the world was a single whole, subject to a single set of laws, discoverable by the human intellect. (27) In science, as in law, immutable principles were there to be discovered. Hugo Grotius declared that law is an *ordo ordinans* – an ordering order, not an ordered order. “Law is not simply the sum total of that which has been decreed and enacted; it is that which arranges things.” (Cassirer 240). Law was not a remedy to disorder, imposed to *repair* moral and social ills. Rather, it was a distillation of principles discoverable through human reason. The laws which governed the physical universe were thought to have analogues which governed spiritual nature as well. Human activity and impulse were governed by laws as immutable as gravity. Both nature and natural law presupposed order: law was ordered because it was a part of nature. Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau all began their search for the bedrock of morality *in nature*. Here was the enduring order – not in the

imposition of enacted royal decrees, but in a divinely ordered universe, knowable through right reason. Even Hobbes, whose focus was on a fallen nature, insisted on the reliability of scientific method to determine enduring principles of morality. Nature itself was the source for this study; both nature and law would reveal eternal truths.

The primary philosophers of natural law during the Enlightenment further expanded natural law doctrine from an inquiry into nature as an expression of divine will, to a philosophy of human rights within the natural world. As one commentator observed, "In the eighteenth century, God receded into the background; the individual with reason and conscience as his authorities, stepped forward, and human nature became the measure of existence and experience (Schneider 19).

The Framers of the American Constitution were profoundly effected by the theories of natural law and natural right that were articulated during the Enlightenment. Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, James Otis, and John Marshall were chief exponents of natural law doctrine in its specifically American application. Natural law theory fueled the debates about Revolution, both in the colonies and abroad. James Otis used natural law theory to argue against the Stamp Act, and noted that government was limited by the laws of nature and by God (Wright 65-67). Many of the debates surrounding ratification of the Constitution involved natural law theory. James Madison initially believed that no Bill of Rights ought to be appended to the Constitution, because natural law implied those rights (Wright 148). The natural law doctrine underwent significant

permutation when it became a standard in the adjudication of disputes in nineteenth-century American jurisprudence.<sup>3</sup>

While this telescopic view of natural law applications says little to its complex history, it does demonstrate both the vitality and the malleability of a doctrine that has no binding source. In fact, as one commentator has suggested, among natural laws adherents are thinkers who have virtually nothing else in common: Heraclitus and Cicero; Aquinas and Locke; Sophocles and Rousseau; Plato and Thomas Jefferson (Murphy 35). What is striking in each expression of natural law theory is the skeletal similarity between these arguments despite the variety in their history and presentation. That similarity reveals itself in the metaphorical structure that gives natural law doctrine both its force and its authority.

In his book, *The Declaration of Independence: a Study in the History of Political Ideas*, Carl Becker aptly notes that the American application of natural law is a part of the English philosophic tradition. Americans did not borrow natural law philosophy, he states, “they inherited it. The lineage is direct: Jefferson copied Locke, and Locke quoted Hooker.” Because that lineage is indeed so clear, it pays to begin this study with a brief passage from Richard

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<sup>3</sup> Gary L. McDowell has made the helpful observation that “the history of natural law in American political life is a history marked more by the utility of the phrase than by the moral certainty of the idea.(57). Further complicating this long history are the findings of Arthur O. Lovejoy, who has enumerated no less than sixty-six different meanings of the term nature, in philosophical, ethical and normative usage (447).

**Hooker on natural law. While this discussion is far from comprehensive, it will highlight a few critical points about natural law in its American incarnation.**

**Hooker formulated much of his theory on natural law during a time of religious and political upheaval. Hooker's religious education occurred in the context of the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559, and he has been characterized as its effective apologist (Wall 125). Hooker attempted to strengthen the position of the English Church and State against Puritan attack, and he provided powerful rhetorical ammunition in favor of a divine and natural law. In addressing his argument to the theological controversies that Calvinism unleashed, Hooker had to confront one of the chief problems of legal language: how does the law speak with authority? How does a statute compete with Scripture? In Hooker's world, the word of God or scripture is the all-powerful medium of authority. How can language that has not issued from this source attain a similar kind of force? Hooker is positioned at the precise interstice of man's law and God's dictates. Because of this, he addresses more directly the implicit problem that any theorist of natural law must address: what is the source of its authority?**

**Hooker's description of natural law provides a key example of how natural law, which has no text, is made to resemble scriptural arguments. Note that Hooker's description of natural law takes, as its starting principle, Scripture:**

**Moses , in describing the work of creation, attributeth speech unto God: God said, "Let there be light: let there be a firmament: let the waters under the heaven be gathered into one place: let the earth bring forth: let there be lights in the firmament of heaven." Was this only the intent of Moses, to signify the infinite greatness of**

**God's power by the easiness of his accomplishing such effects, without travail, pain or labor? Surely it seemeth that Moses had herein besides this a further purpose, namely, first to teach that God did not work as a necessary but a voluntary agent, intending beforehand and decreeing with himself that which outwardly did proceed from him: secondly, to shew that God did then institute a law natural to be observed by creatures, and therefore according to the manner of laws, the institution thereof is described, as being by solemn injunction. His commanding those things to be which are, and to be in such sort as they are, to keep that tenure and course which they do, importeth the establishment of nature's law. The world's first creation, and the preservation since of things created, what is it but only so far forth a manifestation by execution, what the eternal law of God is concerning things natural? And as it is cometh to pass in a kingdom rightly ordered, that after a law is once published, it presently takes effect far and wide, all states framing themselves thereunto; even so let us think it fareth in the natural course of the world...(113-114)**

**Hooker begins this search for a justification of natural law in the Bible, and he shows a hyperattentiveness to detail. He does not declare that God said, "let there be a firmament" but rather he notes that Moses attributed these words to**

him. He first appears to be punctiliously reporting the text of Scripture. But he then moves far beyond the evidence provided by Scripture. Hooker questions whether Moses could have intended only to demonstrate God's greatness by documenting such a feat. Hooker guides the reader to recognize that Moses had a greater purpose than simply to show God's omnipotence. God's real purpose, Hooker explains, was to institute a "law natural," that proceeds *as if* by "solemn injunction." All of nature has observed that injunction ever since. Hooker thus abandons pure textual description in favor of a figurative conceit. He even raises the pitch of this simile by adding that "as it come to pass in a kingdom rightly ordered, ...after a *law* is *once published*, it presently takes effect far and wide." Hooker can then perform his exegesis not on a principle of his own devise, but on one that he has likened to a "published law." So subtly have we moved from careful and accurate textual exegesis to simile that neither he nor the reader is likely to recognize that this law is figurative, and cannot be found in any text.

This reliance upon figurative tropes is at the heart of Hooker's (and I would add to any) argument in favor of the existence of natural law. Natural law becomes in effect, textual, and therefore authoritative, by means of simile. Indeed, natural law partakes of authority only to the extent that it can be likened to textual authority. Once the effects of natural law are felt, we must read backwards to find their source.

Using this trope of God's solemn injunction, Hooker continues his proof of the existence of natural law:

...since the time that God did first proclaim the edicts of his law upon it, heaven and earth have hearkened unto his voice and their

labor hath been to his will: He “made a law for the rain,” He gave his “decree unto the sea, that the waters should not pass his commandment.” Now if nature should intermit her course, and leave altogether, though it were but for a while, the observation of her own laws; if those principal and mother elements of the world, whereof all things in this lower world are made, should lose the qualities which they now have; if the frame of that heavenly arch erected over our heads should loosen and dissolve itself; if celestial spheres should forget their wonted motions, and by irregular volubility turn themselves any way as it might happen; if the prince of the lights of heaven, which now as a giant doth run his unwearied course, should as it were through a languishing faintness begin to stand and rest himself; if the moon should wander from her beaten way, the times and seasons of the year blend themselves by disordered and confused mixture, the winds breathe out their last gasp, the clouds yield no rain, the earth be defeated of heavenly influence, the fruits of the earth pine away as children at the withered breasts of their mother no longer able to yield them relief: what would become of man himself, whom these things now do all serve? See we not plainly that obedience of creatures unto the law of nature is the stay of the whole world?

(114)

This is one of the most lyrical and most frequently quoted passages of Hooker's entire work. It is of more than passing interest that this passage (beginning "Now if nature...") is a paraphrase from Arnobius, an early roman convert and rhetorician.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Hooker chose to rely upon this earlier formulation demonstrates how powerfully connected this argument is to the justification of natural law. Not only is this passage beautiful and stirring; it has been called one of the "classic citations to illustrate the Elizabethan sense of an ordered cosmos" (Edelen, 258-259).

We must remember, however, that this eloquence is not inspired by nature, but is more properly anti-mimetic. It is not a picture of the natural world, but rather a distortion of commonplace natural metaphors. The "frame of heavenly arch" loosens and dissolves; the prince of lights falls into a faint, the wind itself breathes its last. Earth becomes barren and chaotic. This apocalyptic vision is conscripted simply to show the force that presumably prevents it. Paul De Man observed, regarding another natural law theorist, Rousseau, that, "nature turns out to be a self-destructive term. It engenders endless other 'natures' in an eternally repeated pattern of regression." (249). De Man is reacting to a technique of argument common to many natural law proponents. With Hooker, as well as other natural law theorists, natural law becomes the stay against chaos. Without natural law, Hooker (and Arnobius) seem to be saying, all would fly into chaos. But is it really the workings of a law that we have seen, or is it more properly the effect of a powerful metaphor?

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussions of its origins, see Lee W. Gibbs, "The Source of the Most Famous Quotation from Richard Hooker's Laws," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 21:77-86.

This “proof” of natural law function, in preventing nature from dissolving into chaos, remains one of the most enduring in natural law doctrine, and surely a difficult argument to counter. Natural law is generally enlisted to support manmade agencies, not natural ones. Nevertheless, the metaphors of nature are often enlisted to demonstrate the propriety of human legal institutions. Blackstone, for instance, demonstrates the general structure of legal systems by analogizing them to a river: “the course of justice flowing in large streams from the king, as the fountain, to his superior courts of record; and being subdivided into smaller channels, till the whole and every part of the kingdom were plentifully watered and refreshed.” (Boorstin 43)

In the seventeenth century, nature began to replace Scripture as a source of ethical direction. Just as Hooker had analogized natural law to a published text, seventeenth century philosophers dedicated themselves to reading what this natural text presented. In many ways, Hooker’s metaphors allowed the shift from text to nature to appear less dramatic. In form if not in substance, Hooker provided John Locke the underpinning for some radical new claims about the natural world. Locke had issued a powerful new challenge to the accepted modes of philosophic reasoning:

It is an established opinion among some men, that there are in the understanding certain innate principles, some primary notions...stamped upon the mind of man, which the soule receives in its very first being, and brings into the world with it. It would be sufficient to convince unprejudiced readers of the falseness of this supposition, if I should only show...how men barely by the

use of their natural faculties, may attain to all the knowledge they have without the help of any innate impressions...For I imagine any one will easily grant that it would be impertinent to suppose the ideas of colours innate in a creature, to whom God hath given sight and power to receive them by the eyes, from external objects: and no less unreasonable would it be to attribute several truths to the impressions of nature, and innate characters, when we may observe on ourselves faculties fit to attain as easy and certain knowledge of them, as if they were imprinted on the mind. (Essay on Human Understanding, Book 1, sec.42.)

Locke proposed that the mind was a “white paper, void of all characters.” The repeated analogy of printing, or absence of print, to the workings of the mind, calls to mind Hooker’s first analogy of natural law to a “published injunction.” The persuasiveness of the written makes its way into even a consideration of the inner workings of the mind. The subrosa suggestion of authority in the analogy of a written work adds force to the image of the mind as white paper, about to receive the characters of its substance.

Locke has a different strategy for his argument than Hooker. Locke’s supposition that the mind is a tabula rasa leads to an altogether different assessment of nature. Locke claimed that the mind receives all knowledge “from experience.”

**Our observation employed about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected upon by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from which all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring. ...The “great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon the senses, and derived from them to the understanding, I call SENSATION.”(97-98) .**

**In vaunting sensation and experience as the two sources of human reasoning, Locke turned his scrutiny from the written world to the natural one. Sensory experience was granted a primacy in thought and reasoning that was hitherto unknown.**

**As much as Locke’s philosophy represented a break with history, it also provided a kind of continuity as well. Locke insisted that nature be scrutinized, and maintained the evidence this scrutiny would reveal would be divine order. In the same way that Christian tradition had dictated scrutiny of Scripture, Locke’s attention was now fixed on the sensory perceptions he would receive from the physical world. By the subtle combination of this divine tradition with the sensory, all experience was destined ultimately to be ordered, all sensation was destined to be to be harmonious.**

**Locke described the order in nature in language that would echo throughout American history.**

**The state of nature has a law to govern it which obliges every one and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions...In transgressing the law of nature, the offender declares himself to live by another rule than that of reason and common equity, which is the measure that God has set to the actions of men...(Of Civil Government, Bk II, sec. 4)**

**While this amalgamation of sensory perception and divine order allowed Locke to forge new paths of reasoning, it also presented new problems. If God had set a standard that was to govern human action, how could transgression be explained without upsetting the order of this system? Locke addresses this problem by ascribing transgression to a failure of reason. One of the great problems of natural law was how to explain the failure of a system that was divinely ordered; Locke explains it to be a failure of the human faculty of right reason. Nevertheless, this implicit problem of disorder within the natural order would not easily be quieted. This inherent contradiction foreshadows the debate upon which natural law would both flourish and founder in the American justice system.**

Many historians have correctly noted Jefferson's reliance on Locke's work, especially the *Second Treatise on Government*, in fashioning the documents that formed the American system of government.<sup>5</sup> Locke wrote:

To understand Political Power right, and derive from its Original, we must consider what State all Men are naturally in, and that is, a *State of perfect Freedom* to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they see think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave or depending upon the Will of any man. (265).

Compare this with the famed opening of the *Declaration of Independence*:

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Joseph J. Ellis' discussion in *American Sphinx*, or Pauline Maier's in *American Scripture*. Both observe that the doctrine of natural right as well as the endorsement of necessary revolution had Locke as one of its obvious sources. (Ellis, 66; Maier, 137). Garry Wills takes exception to the notion that Jefferson relied heavily on Locke in fashioning the Declaration. For a fuller discussion of critical thinking on Jefferson's reliance on Lockean principles, see Allen Jaynes, *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy and Theology*, p.40-61.

**are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. *U.S. Declaration of Independence.***

**Jefferson truly inherited the natural law tradition that became the bedrock of American government. The very freedoms found in nature, a nature without manmade law, became the centerpiece of American positive law. The significance of this reliance was profound, as Robert Ferguson observed in reviewing the preamble to the United States Constitution.**

**This new statement of purposes – the ongoing search for justice, domestic tranquility, common security, the general welfare, and the blessings of liberty- set forth the framers’ underlying rationale for change even as it reached for the fundamental law upon which all theorists based all government. Here within the minimal aims of social compact, was the nexus between natural law and the man-made or positive law, encouraged by Grotius, Burlamaqui, and others. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the legal commentators of the Enlightenment had moved from thinking of natural law as a collection of moral abstractions to which conduct should conform to a more particular assertion that natural law could be expressed in a body of legal precepts against which all positive law could then be measured. Special significance must be**

given to the confidence with which men reached from the general through the concrete. To the extent that positive law partook of the general, or represented a proposition espoused by everyone, it could be a manifestation of unchanging and universal reason. (*Law and Letters*, 62)

Ferguson aptly noted that the overlap of natural and positive law that began with the ratification of the Constitution, became the model of American jurisprudence. The lack of a clear boundary between natural and positive law, or even separate spheres of operation, insured that the content of natural law would expand to include matters never before considered within its purview.

It is fair to say that in addition to the substance of his argument, Jefferson also inherited a style of argument from both Hooker and Locke. In an opinion letter to President Washington, on whether the United States had a right to renounce its treaties with France, Jefferson argued that nations owe one another the same duties that individuals owe to each other. He relied on the rule that contracts between individuals and states may under some circumstances be voided:

When performance, for instance, becomes impossible, non-performance is not immoral. So if performance becomes self-destructive to the party, the law of self-preservation overrules the laws of obligation to others. For the reality of these principles I appeal to the true fountains of evidence, the head & heart of every

**rational and honest man. It is there that Nature has written her moral laws, and where every man may read them for himself.**

**(270)**

**Even in so politically charged a question as voiding treaties of defense with France, Jefferson uses the vocabulary of natural law to make his case incontrovertible. Once again, the moral law was authored by nature, and made legible as text, just as it was for both Hooker and Locke.**

**Jefferson was deeply convinced that the American landscape offered material proof of the nation's promise. In his single book-length work, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he suggests that with its open vistas and unspoiled atmosphere, Virginia offered greater prospects than the continent could supply. He voices skepticism about the economy of Europe, whose lands were "either cultivated or locked up against the cultivator," and he presented the following encomium to agrarian life:**

**It is best then that all our citizens should be employed in its improvement, or that one half should be called off from that to exercise manufacturers and handicraft arts for the other? Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which might otherwise escape from the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a**

phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their own subsistence, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances: but generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its healthy parts is a good-enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. (227)

Jefferson repeats a familiar American theme: the natural world is idealized and civilization denounced. He even relies on biblical references to emphasize the purity of farming life: farmers are “God’s chosen people,” their patient tillage keeps “the sacred fire” burning, and the dependence of complex capitalism “begets” venality. There are many images of the nation as garden, but surely this is one of the more biblically expressive.

However, as Leo Marx points out, this image is not simply a pious ideal of farming as social virtue; this passage is a literary pastoral (125-126). The appearance of this pastoral enclave in a work that describes Jefferson’s home state

is deeply revealing. The American experiment was fundamentally a test of civic virtue, and Jefferson located the source of such virtue in an idealized landscape. Marx notes, "To find an almost perfect model of the Jeffersonian economy, we need only recall the situation of the happy rustic in Virgil's eclogue. There too the economy makes possible the contained self-sufficiency of the pastoral community." Agrarian virtue must be preserved, and Jefferson sees part of his role as virtue's shepherd. The pastoral is not just a literary form, but finally a legal instrument. By uniting peace with nature, natural law's expositors are always trying to replicate an idealized peace.

In *The American Enlightenment*, Robert Ferguson notes the contradiction between American political aspirations and the American landscape that was said to have inspired them. He quotes a well-known passage from Publius in Federalist No.2:

... independent America was not composed of detached and distant territories, but that one connected, fertile, wide-spreading country was the portion of our Western sons of liberty...A succession of navigable waters forms a kind of chain round its borders, as if to bind it together, while the most noble rivers in the world, running at convenient distances, present them with highways for the easy communication of friendly aids.

Ferguson declares this description to be “fantasy,” and goes on to note that, “These devices...of contextualization within a theory of comprehensiveness – are conscious fabrications in the writer’s search for a higher truth, and they betray a willingness, even an eagerness, to reshape and gild the cruder facts with which they must contend.” (*The American Enlightenment*, 6)

Many of America’s first writers had to contend with these “cruder facts” of nature in the context of an idealized landscape. J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur presented in many ways the idealized nature that Publius describes – a nature at once comprehensive, commodious and fertile. In *Letters from an American Farmer*, he wrote, “We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of a mild government...” (Letter 3, 67). The fertile land of the new territory was hospitable to human cultivation as well. “Men are like plants, the goodness of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow....Here you will find but few crimes; these have acquired as yet no root among us.”(71)

But Crevecoeur presents evidence of a darker side of nature as well. In the chapter titled, “On Snakes and the Hummingbird,” the bucolic image gives way to one of hidden danger. He describes a farmer who stepped on a snake, but was apparently saved when one of the farmer’s Negroes sliced it in two before it had inflicted real harm. The farmer, however, died mysteriously the next day. The son, who inherited his father’s boots, died shortly thereafter. It was eventually discovered that “two fangs of the snake had been left in the leather [of the boot] after being wrenched out of their sockets by the strength with which the snake had drawn back its head. The bladder which contained the poison and

several of the small nerves were still fresh and had adhered to the boot.” (182)  
 Thus, the snake not only had its place in this garden, but even with prudent safeguards, its poison would still kill. Even cultivated nature could not conceal these cruder facts.

The powerful hold that the American land had on its citizens is amply demonstrated by the popularity of the genre, letters from a farmer. It mattered little that the authors were seldom farmers, but were members of the landed aristocracy. John Dickinson’s *Farmer’s Letters* were written in 1767-1768, and it became the most widely read pamphlet published in the colonies before 1776. Dickinson, who refused to sign the *Declaration of Independence*, believing it to be premature, chose not to rely on natural law principles but emphasized British rules of positive law. In his work *The Farmer Refuted*, a clear challenge to Dickinson’s conservative position, Alexander Hamilton wrote the following:

The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments or musty records. They are written with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of divinity itself, and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power. (Wright 90)

There are certain parallels between this argument and Arnobius’ eloquent rhetorical presentation of natural law’s power. The sheer beauty of the imagery makes its point somewhat irresistible. But what is its point? Again we see the familiar imagery of nature made textual: our sacred rights are written with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human history. This metaphor builds upon

Hooker's earlier analogy of a natural law "once published." Natural law doctrine again lays claim to eternal and immutable truths that resist human fallibility. The conclusions that Hamilton advances are thus immune to human error (presumably unlike Dickinson's). But once again, we are presented with a metaphor of a text that remains unwritten. Its rhetoric is authoritative, even incontrovertible, but its content is, in essence, what the author claims it to be. Natural law once again becomes the antagonist of the positive law it opposes.

This is the enduring conundrum of natural law: it is eternal and immutable on the one hand, and it supports changing political alliances on the other. It would be a mistake to think that the Founders were unaware of this contradiction. For example, as James Whitman points out, even during the constitutional debates, the supremacy of natural law was far from universally accepted. John Adams wrote in his diary "[one of t]he two points which was labored the most [was w]hether we should recur to the law of nature, as well as to the British constitution and our American charters and grants. Mr. Galloway and Mr. Duane were for excluding the law of nature. I was strenuous for retaining and insisting on it"(1324).

Most importantly, this conception of nature and normative ethics formed the powerful heritage that American political thinkers inherited. They adopted its vocabulary, its metaphors, its premises, and with these, its inherent contradictions. The problems that inhered within the law of nature, the problems that John Adams' opponents Galloway and Duane had been quick to perceive, would find their way into both American jurisprudence and American fiction.

The degree to which nature and natural law figured in legal disputes is difficult to quantify. According to Blackstone, natural law was superior to any other law. Because reading Blackstone was the primary source in reading for the law at the time Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving were admitted to the bar, it is worth observing that Blackstone exhorted his readers to study the natural law philosophers. It was only through careful examination of “the sound maxims of the law of nature, the best and most authentic foundation of human laws,” that law could be mastered (Miller 164).

Certainly in America, natural law took on even greater imperatives than it had in Blackstone’s England. As Perry Miller pointed out, jurists in the post-Revolutionary decades tended

to attribute a quite baffling comprehensiveness to the law of nature: it was not only the law of physical object, it was also the moral law promulgated by the Bible, the innermost prompting of natural conscience, a bald calculation of the benefits of ordered social intercourse and in addition – within cautious limits a vision of perfection to which this society might uniquely aspire (165).

The Federalist Period in American history heralds the beginning of what was to become American jurisprudence. The great weight of that task was clearly felt, and sometimes spoken of, by the justices. One the one hand, it was the task

of the judiciary to interpret the Constitution, an as yet untested document. On the other hand, it fell to the courts to adjudicate matters of state law, as well as the rights of private litigants. For the latter tasks, American courts relied on the time-honored tradition of English common law, and cited British judicial authority to prove their points. Thus, the newly emancipated American courts used precisely the same authorities as their British counterparts in deciding many legal matters. The American Revolution did little to change the rules or the terms of their decision-making (a conclusion later echoed by Rip van Winkle).

In both England and in the United States, law made its pronouncements by relying on previous precedent and authority. The common law system operates on the principle of *stare decisis*: the decision stands. In other words, present controversy was to be decided in accordance with past precedent. Originality or novelty was both structurally and substantively avoided in the law. Where no precedent was applicable, the law would seek analogies from previous cases and principles.

Constitutional questions were truly cases of first impression, and these demanded original interpretation. Justices, however, would often rely on common law principles to analyze the issues before them, since there was little authority upon which to draw. It was in this context that natural law doctrine played a key role. Not only was natural law consonant with the aims of the Constitution, but as a presumably higher authority than man-made law, it supplemented both the common law and the admittedly small body of colonial

and post-revolutionary judicial interpretations. Especially during the first few decades that the federal judicial system was in place, the courts were necessarily concerned with issues of both tradition and authority. It fell to them to announce the guidelines and principles that would guide the growth of the nation. Citation, or the reference to past decisions or commentators, was the form in which legal opinions were rendered. In a newly formed legal system, the need for tested authority that could command credibility could not have been greater.

In *Chisholm v. Georgia*, (21 U.S.419) a case decided in 1793, the Supreme Court was called upon to decide whether the state of Georgia could be sued by a private individual from another state. This was truly a case of first impression, with the Court called upon to decide a critical issue upon which the Constitution was ambiguous. At issue was whether the framers intended state sovereignty to insulate states from private lawsuits by citizens from other states. At the heart of this question was the degree to which states were to be extensions of their citizenry, or sacred unto themselves. The range of authority that the Court considers in reaching its decision illustrates how confounding these questions were.

One jurist asserts “The Constitution of the United States is the only fountain from which I shall draw; the only authority to which I shall appeal.” (605) Another cites Cicero: “Nothing, which is exhibited upon our globe, is more acceptable to that divinity, which governs the whole universe, than those

communities and assemblages of men, which, lawfully associated, are denominated STATES.”(613). That same justice goes on to cite Blackstone, ancient practice abroad, feudal practice in England and the U.S. Constitution. The Chief Justice, John Jay, analogizes Georgia’s current state to the position of the colonies prior to the revolution, to demonstrate that sovereignty of nations resides in the peoples of those nations. The court ultimately found that states may indeed be sued by private non-citizens, since the states themselves were an extension of the people, from who they derive their authority. In this single decision, however, the court includes citations to ancient Greece, metaphysics, feudal practice, Blackstone, Columbus, Bracton, divine providence and the U.S. Constitution. The difficulty of deciding the novel questions of a newly organized republic is palpable in these pages.

It is tempting to think that natural law necessarily yielded the divine answers that Blackstone had suggested, but American case law provides no evidence that it did. What it does show, however, is the degree to which nature was seen as a source of moral direction, and perhaps more potently, a powerful rhetorical aid. In all manner of cases, from admiralty law to bankruptcy, from contract law to citizenship, natural law is enlisted to strengthen a litigant’s claims before the court. Rarely is natural law’s content described, although Puffendorf, the Dutch commentator and author of *Law of Nature and Nations*, is frequently

cited as authority. More often, natural law's connection with divine reason lends a higher authority to whatever legal claim natural law is used to advance.

For instance, in *Laidlaw v. Organ*, (15 U.S. 262, 1808) one party had received goods in excess of those he had purchased. He was ready to pay in full for them, when the seller took them back. One of the litigants cited Cicero at length, as well as the Stoic philosophers, to support the proposition that a seller is not obliged to inform a buyer that a drop in the sales price of goods may be imminent (536). The Supreme Court ultimately agreed.

In *Vowles v. Craig*, (12 U.S. 371, 1814) the Court was called upon to determine whether a seller was entitled to relief if a survey of land underestimated the size of the property that was sold. Citing Puffendorf's *Law of Nature and Nations*, as well as other writers on natural law, the Court noted that "an error about a thing, or about its quality....renders the agreement or bargain void." (553) In the absence of any other authority, historically distant analysts of natural law became a part of American jurisprudence. Similarly, in *Green v. Biddle*, (21 U.S.1, 1823) the Court was asked to determine whether owners or tenants were entitled to the fruits of land whose ownership was in dispute. As one might suppose, the court referred to Locke's principal, that the individual who cultivates the land is entitled to its fruits, but went on to state the many refinements of that principle.

Puffendorf, indeed (citations omitted) lays it down in broad and general terms, that fruits of industry, as well as those of nature,

**belong to him who is master of the thing from which they flow.  
...But even these doctrines of the civil law, so much more  
favorable to the rights of the true owner of the land than the act  
under consideration, are not recognized by the common law of  
England. (467-468)**

**The Court thus struggles to find suitable analogies to fit the case before it, casting back to both natural law theorists and noted common law commentators to find its answer. Underlying these opinions is an almost desperate search for authority. To what could courts resort, in the absence of settled legal principles or even settled legal entities?**

**In all manner of cases, from state sovereignty to the interpretation of land treaties, from rights of citizenship to contract law, natural law principles found their way into judicial decision-making. In *Sturgis v. Crowninshield*, (17 U.S. 122, 1819) even in so prosaic a topic as personal bankruptcy, the Supreme Court relied on natural law not only as the basis for contract law, but for morality and charity as well. "Every contract must be subjected to limit, and interpreted by the law of nature, which every where forms a part, and the best part, of the municipal code; and it is the primary canon of that code." (507) Once again the unwritten natural law is held to be supreme to all other laws. The Court, however, then**

considered the conflict between the obligation of contract and the right of personal bankruptcy.

The obligation of natural law, and the injunctions of our religion, which religion is a part of our common law, imposes it as a duty that the wants of the poor should be relieved. Strange, indeed is it, that the laws should at the same moment press upon society two duties, so inconsistent and contradictory, as that of exacting payment of his debts, what the impoverished and imprisoned debtor has not; and obliging those who have something, to give him a share of what they have, to save him from suffering or death.(149)

The Court ultimately sided with the creditor, holding that a state could not pass bankruptcy laws that would impair the obligation of contracts, as they were recognized in the United States Constitution. The complete interconnectedness of these disparate theories -- Christian charity, natural law and contract theory -- all in the context of a single judicial decision, gives some sense of the many strands of philosophy, common law and religious rectitude that were entwined in legal reasoning.

No wonder Puffendorf suggested, not without irony, "That Notion of extracting the Law of Nature from the Manners and Customs of the World, is accompanied with this farther Inconvenience; that it is almost impossible to find

any Nation, which is govern'd purely by Natural Law." (Boorstin 59) The occasional confusion one feels in trying to comprehend natural law is not uncommon. The range of uses for which natural law was enlisted, especially during the first generation of judicial decision-making, was almost unbounded.

These judicial opinions demonstrate the currency with which nature and natural law principles were a part of the legal lexicon. Indeed, the law's reliance upon the Stoics, upon Cicero, Puffendorf, as well as common law commentators proves that philosophic sophistication was a key part of legal practice. It could be argued that the very newness of the American legal system made it more reliant on time-tested theorists of natural law. In addition, natural law was the very basis on which the American system had been developed. Students of the law were obliged to know these writers; their effectiveness as analysts and advocates depended in part upon their understanding of natural law philosophers.

Moreover, natural law presents nature that is in one sense unfallen. In other words, the world in which natural law precepts held sway was a harmonious one; law was not a remedy, but a rational explanation of how the world was intended to operate. Not unlike literary representations of the pastoral, the state of nature in law is ordered, harmonious, comprehensive and comprehensible. This image of nature had all the indicia of a lost world, and like many images of a lost past, it had particular resonance for at least two American gothic authors, Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Into Darkest Obscurity:**

#### **Charles Brockden Brown and the American Gothic**

**[Who knows] that emotions will not be re-awakened by my narrative,  
incompatible with order and coherence?**

***-Edgar Huntley***

**The first native-born American novelist wrote tales of horror. Charles Brockden Brown was a man well-schooled in the rationalist philosophic theory of the time. He was sufficiently engaged with the ethical and questions that it raised that his first works were political pamphlets. That a writer so involved in the political fortunes of the new nation should turn to gothic as the vehicle of his fiction suggests the allegorical potency of the gothic mode.**

**The gothic mode had become of course familiar, popularized by such writers as Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. Gothic tales by design invoked the past: the very term refers to medieval history, a term without palpable meaning in the new world. The conventions of the genre – the haunted castle, the ruined mansion, the faded aristocrats, and ghostly apparitions– did not easily translate to the new world. America’s pristine landscape, its open plains, its virtual**

emancipation from vicissitudes of European history were hardly evocative of the dark haunting of the gothic.

In fact, the standard imagery of the gothic genre seemed quite out of place in the land where, as Paine had decreed, law is king. The great project of the American republic, and indeed the Enlightenment itself, was founded on belief in the rational. Only through reliance upon “nature and reason” would solutions to the intrepid problems of self-governance be found.

Robert Ferguson has analyzed the dominant imagery of the Enlightenment, and he identifies light as one of its chief tropes. Pope’s epitaph for Isaac Newton, which Ferguson cites, bears repeating: “Nature and Nature’s Laws lay hid in Night/ God said, Let Newton be! And all was light.”(*The American Enlightenment*, 30) This emblematic quotation suggests the degree to which “nature and reason” combined to yield an almost divine certitude. The scientific discoveries of Newton launched an era of unprecedented faith in human reason. John Locke, who maintained that the law of nature was identical to the law of reason, explained that both were knowable by the *light* of nature; that is without the help of positive revelation” (Strauss 202). Intellect and reason provided the path through which deliverance could be sought and found. Jefferson called education the passing of light between two tapers, equating knowledge with light. And as Alexander Hamilton wrote, “the sacred rights of mankind were written with a sunbeam” (Wright 90). Even nature conspired to bring humanity into the light. As Ferguson notes, “...the Enlightenment ...secularizes the notion

of illumination to make vision a purely human understanding.” The prevalence of light metaphors in early American writing, even the term “Enlightenment,” underscores the power of this imagery.

How then to account for the dark gothic that Brockden Brown offered? Brown’s voice heralds a kind of domestic rebellion, a stark contrast to the images of light and reason that dominate the age. His characters are not redeemed by reason but rather doomed by their reliance upon it. Law, the foundation of the new republic and the fruit of the best minds of the age, was at best impotent in resolving the conflicts his novels raised. Brown insisted that true terror was just beneath the surface of the precarious order of the new world.

The term “gothic” was, in the eighteenth century, both a reference to past history and a largely pejorative term. Not only did it conjure the rude and harsh medieval period, but it also referred to any vestiges of behavior considered “unworthy of enlightened modernity” (Fiedler 137, Kilgour 14). The dark and unpredictable realm of the gothic, with its focus on primitive fears, was in many ways the antithesis of Enlightenment rationalism. Several critics have aptly noted that the gothic is a mode of recovering the past. In an important essay, Leslie Fiedler observes that behind the gothic is a theory of history, a particular sense of the past. He notes that the gothic always presents a “Then” and a “Now,” a past, irretrievably lost, and a dangerous and fraught present (136).

Other critics have noted that the gothic genre also called up images of a simpler past (Botting 5, Kilgour 10-15). Many gothic tales have a pastoral quality

(surely more apparent in a writer like Washington Irving than in Brown). In making the present time horrific, gothic tales implicitly idealize the past. The gothic thus necessarily looks backward. As Maggie Kilgour notes, the genre “becomes easily allied with Rousseauian primitivism, in which the past is seen as closer to nature than the present” (3).

This search for a more harmonious past, so much a part of the gothic tradition, is problematic in early American literature. The American Revolution instituted a new time line; Charles Brockden Brown was born just six years before the Revolutionary War began. Where does the early American writer look to find the lost past if not to the discredited precincts of the Old World? In many ways, Charles Brockden Brown faced a challenge similar to that of Framers. What would be the American voice if it could not speak in the language it had already learned? How could that language capture what was utterly new? What were the possible modes of structuring a legal system, or shaping a narrative but those already established by an Establishment now discredited? If, as Thomas Paine declared, early American history was a time of crisis, crisis was the mode in which Brown came of age.

The nation’s relation to the history that produced it was difficult from the start. An emancipated republic could look to no hallowed tradition of generations past, nor could its people wax nostalgic for the past it had just fought a war to escape. Charles Brockden Brown confronted this problem by forging a new reading of the past in order to alter the view of the present. In Brown’s hands, the

gothic form became a means of political and philosophic critique. Unlike earlier gothic authors, Brown lacked the estate of European history from which to conjure the dark images of gothic lore. Instead, he made the very invention of the new nation cause for alarm. Its premises, he suggested, were unreliable, its ideals dangerous. The new nation's reliance on natural law principles would make its future as unpredictable as nature herself. In Brown's hands, the gothic is not a genre of a distant past: its terrors are very close, in time and space, to the world his readers knew.

Leslie Fiedler offers perhaps the most trenchant reading of Brown's work within its American context. Remarking on the change from the European gothic to Brown's American version of it, he writes:

It should be noticed that the shift from the ruined castle of the European prototypes to the forest and cave of Brown involves a shift not just in the manner of saying what the author is after. The change of myth involved a profound change of meaning. In 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. (160)

What for Jefferson was nature's symbolic promise of peace and order becomes for Brown the trope of nature's perils. A faded aristocracy was not the symbol of gothic portent; that danger lay in the very real world that surrounded us. No

longer the repository of our fears about man and power, Brown's gothic locates terror in the one place from which we cannot escape: the natural world.

The very opening words of the *Declaration of Independence* announce the new nation's allegiance to the laws of nature:

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the change.

The emancipation from monarchy that made American self-government unique thus began with an incantation to the laws of nature. Time-honored and enduring as natural law was, this was the first time that it stood alone as sole the source of legal and moral authority. There was no divine right of kings from which all legal authority would flow. That was both the redemption and the crisis of American Independence.

Brown's work, as Fiedler implicitly recognized, was dependent upon the doctrine of natural law for both its symbols and its substance. As much as Locke and Jefferson saw in nature a promise of order, Brown saw the threat of disorder. In Brown's work, nature was transformed from the divinely ordered system that Jefferson celebrated to a chaotic and uncontrollable force. Natural law was the

regulating principle behind republican democracy. Brown used the association of natural order with democratic principles to raise vexing questions about the stability of the new order. Brown's gothic was not just a tale of psychological horror, as some critics have suggested. Brown's focussed his great terrors on the body politic. It was well -known that the newly united states were, in Paine's words, the great experiment; Brown was the first American writer to suggest the experiment had failed. In an age of scientific faith and classical form, Brown's voice was indeed subversive.

To fully understand how Brown transformed the gothic into a political critique, it will help to review some principles underlying Jefferson's view of nature. In a famous and enduring principle of natural law, Newton declared that "Nature is always in harmony with itself" (Cassirer 245). The Enlightenment conception of nature was first and foremost ordered. Nature had no renegades; it was legible, divisible and above all sensible. Taxonomy, the science of classification and Jefferson's great preoccupation, was premised on the idea that nature, carefully observed, would reveal its basic order. The study of nature is

thus an epistemically happy enterprise<sup>1</sup>: the examination of nature would always eventually produce intelligible results<sup>2</sup>.

The early proponents of modern natural law believed that the doctrine derived its order because nature was divinely created. Just as Hooker had written that natural law was “written on the bosome of God” (68), so, too, did later commentators base natural law theory on divine order. Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* is based on the premise that the divine order of the world was discernible through “right reason” (a view also held by Thomas Aquinas and Richard Hooker). And Jefferson invoked both the laws of nature and nature’s God in declaring the reasons for American independence from British rule. As much as the American project aimed to rid itself of divinely ordained rulers, the traditional link between divinity and order was difficult to sever. Divine order became an almost vestigial part of natural law, and a potent element of its rhetorical power. The conflation of natural law with God was an implicit element of natural law’s force. If natural law was ordered, it was because it had been divinely designed.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Tristram is the first person to have noted and named this phenomenon. His only published reference to this concept appears in a dictionary by Jack Hitt, entitled *In a Word*. He offers the following explanation of the term: “The epistemically happy man generally regards the spectrum of human knowledge encyclopedically, that is, as one large, ultimately consistent body of lore and his favorite provinces of knowledge are apt to be those displaying the highest degree of rationality and mathematical abstraction....” By contrast, the “epistemically gloomy man tends toward skepticism or at least empiricism”(59). On the last point I diverge somewhat from this definition. Gothic writers (a generally epistemically gloomy class) are not so much partisans of empiricism as they are dubious about the redemptive value of knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> Emerson’s opening injunction, “Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable,” is perhaps the nineteenth-century amanuensis of this idea.

Jefferson thought politics far less important than natural science. In a letter, he complained that “a life of continued occupation in civil concerns” had taken him away from natural science (quoted in Looby, *The Constitution of Nature*, 261-262). Charles A. Miller remarks on Jefferson’s preoccupation with issues of natural history and science. “Jefferson came to know nature in the way that Thoreau said he came to “know” beans at Walden Pond, by working with it day after day” (3). Jefferson devoted many years of his life to painstaking study of the natural world. This encyclopedic approach to nature is a key part of the Enlightenment view: its parts remain divisible, and above all, carefully ordered. Jefferson’s single book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, is largely a scientific study of Virginia plant and animal life. Although it is ordered as answers to questions posed by French naturalist de Buffon, it is an encyclopedic examination of Jefferson’s home state.

Jefferson’s method is empirical. One of the precepts of *Notes* is the uniformity of natural processes: he did not believe that one set of rules applied on one continent and not on another. Therefore, his painstaking search of Virginia is both particular and general. Virginia simply furnishes the laboratory for his research; his subject remained *all* natural processes. In refuting a theory of Voltaire’s, that shells can be grown without animal vessels, Jefferson chides Voltaire for failure to allow others to test his hypothesis. “Ignorance is preferable to error. And he is less remote from the truth who believes nothing, than he who believes what is wrong” (63).

Even in so vast a subject as the estate of animal life, Jefferson insisted on the efficacy of empirical study. Count de Buffon, the French naturalist, had claimed that animals common to both the old and new world are smaller in the new world, and that animals which have been domesticated in both worlds degenerated in America. Jefferson developed tables of quadrupeds, listing the weight of each, to refute de Buffon's claim. These tables of quadruped weights, while hardly comprehensive, were nevertheless sufficient proof for Jefferson to conclude that, if anything, American animals may be larger. Nature was not so capricious as to degenerate in the new world.

Looby notes that Jefferson includes in his categories of animal life the mammoth, an extinct animal. He explains, "It may be asked why I insert the Mammoth, as if it still existed? I ask in return, why should I omit it, as if it did not exist? Such is the economy of nature, that no instance can be produced of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken" (253-254). Jeffersonian nature is fixed and perfect, not unlike the chain he uses to imagine it. Although empirically absent, the apparently extinct Mammoth must "hold" its place in nature, because like all systematic knowledge, one missing link can cause the chain to fail. Such a result was unconscionable.

As Looby points out, during the early national period, "an automatic metaphorical exchange" takes place between images of natural order and ideas of social and political order. In other words, the scientific examination of nature was

translated, almost imperceptibly, into a presumably scientific examination of social order. Looby writes:

**A society that is in need of a collective self-conception will ordinarily find some ready-made structure close at hand that can provide a model of coherence – a form that, when apprehended, can be transferred to society itself. ...[a]fter the American revolution, men like Jefferson, Peale and Bartram found such a structure in nature; or to be more precise, they found it in the taxonomic order that they represented nature as exhibiting (255).**

The need to find a coherent structure, both internally and externally, was particularly acute after the war. The nation's roots had been upended. For over a century, British rule had defined colonial identity. The nation created by the *Declaration of Independence* was not even sure what to call itself. The almost accidental sobriquet, these united States, remained a descriptive, not a proper name, until the Civil War (McPherson viii). The social and political structures that gave stability to the pre-revolutionary government were thrown into question, and the social cohesion of the new nation was hardly a foregone conclusion. Even Jefferson admitted the precariousness of the republic's position. "...[T]he time for fixing ever essential right on a legal basis is while our rulers are honest, and ourselves united. From the conclusion of this war we shall surely be going down

hill.” Jefferson’s prediction proved accurate. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signatory to the Declaration, wrote:

The termination of the war by 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 that could not be removed by reason nor restrained by government (quoted in Davidson, 216).

The Revolution was indeed a time of crisis – a crisis that did not end with the war. The enormous political and social upheaval of the revolutionary period was hardly settled by the end of the war. More than a decade later, the Constitutional debates were still raging<sup>3</sup>.

The comprehensive unity that early naturalists saw represented in nature was translated into a trope for social unity, especially for writers who saw the defining structures of colonial life dismantled. This preoccupation with order was not only at the root of Jefferson’s structure of government; it was also one of its articles of faith. In fact, the *Declaration of Independence* had in common with *Notes on the State of Virginia* a systematic representation of the state of natural law. Jefferson’s draft duly recites the properties of natural law just as Locke had

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<sup>3</sup> See Emory Elliott’s *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810* for a fuller discussion of the depths of these difficulties.

framed them. Consider this passage from Locke against Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*.

To understand Political Power right, and derive it from its Original, we must consider what State all Men are naturally in, and that is, a State of perfect Freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave or depending on the will of any other Man. (Second Treatise, chapter 11, p. 269)

This is an intimation of the Declaration's famous right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Locke speaks of deriving political power from "its Original"; its original is the state of nature. Of course, as several commentators have pointed out, the state of nature becomes significant only as counterpoint to *man made* legal controversy. The "Original" Locke attempts to read is, in effect, the fiction of nature. It is an idealized view in which humans are utterly unfettered. It does not exist in nature as Locke knew it, and it is finally an entirely human invention of nature. At its center is the conviction that if all humanly made structures were to disappear, natural law would maintain a kind of utopian perfect freedom.

Jefferson effectively based his life's work upon the study of idealized nature. Like his fellow naturalists, he shared this expectation of nature: it was not a world in flux he sought to capture but a world in balance. *Notes on the State of Virginia* presents a kind of biological ideal of natural law. Its many charts and

graphs, its painstaking observations and classifications show Jefferson's faith in order. Each chapter begins by breaking down the natural world into small categories of division, and carefully charting the results. Even the section on laws opens by charting the *divisions* of counties in the state. The throbbing flux of nature that the New World presented becomes unitary, clear, and above all, legible. Here was nature in its Original; here was the environment in which Locke's ideals of natural law and political power had found their proper habitat. Jefferson shows his legal training by relying on what Robert Ferguson calls a "lawyer's faith in universally applicable forms." Ferguson names this penchant for categories and imposed order Jefferson's "legal aesthetic." (*Law and Letters*, 33). Jefferson's imposed his legal aesthetic upon a fluid and harmonious natural landscape. The fault lines of *Notes* appear when Jefferson tackles topics that suggest disunity. Note the way in which Jefferson considers the Negro Albino.

To this catalogue of our indigenous animals I will add a short account taking place sometimes in the race of Negroes brought from Africa, who, though black themselves, have in rare instances, white children called Albinos. I have known four of these myself, and have faithful accounts of three others. ... They are of pallid cadaverous white, untinged with red, without any coloured spots or seams, their hair of the same kind of white, short coarse and curled as is that of the negro. All of them well-formed, strong, healthy, perfect in their senses, except that of sight, and born of parents

who had no mixture of white blood....Whatever be the cause of the disease in the skin, or in its colouring matter, which produces this change, it seems more incident to the female than male sex. To these I may add the mention of a negroe within my own knowledge, born black, and of black parents; on whose chin, when a boy, a white spot appeared. This continued to increase till he became a man, by which time it had extended over his chin, lips, one cheek, the under jaw, and neck on that side. It is of Albino white, without any mixture of red, and has for several years been stationary (104-105).

This almost mathematical fixation on cataloging race suggests that the subject may well be eluding Jefferson's understanding. He retreats to his table of indigenous animals as a dodge against the discomfort of the underlying premise that race itself may not be quite as categorical as his categories imply. Looby remarks that Jefferson's taxonomic perception of nature expressed a wish more than a reality, a wish no doubt borne out of the chaos of social disunity endemic to revolutionary America (259). Jefferson's penchant for cataloging every anomaly barely masks a more disturbing hypothesis: what if race itself was mutable? His careful parsing of natural order almost never countenanced the idea that he might be superimposing an order that was not there.

It was against the backdrop of an ordered and divisible world, empirically known and knowable that Brown composed his fiction. In many ways, his novels were marked by the profound hope behind the Revolution. Trained as a lawyer, Brown practiced his profession unhappily in the years before he turned to novel writing. Both his disposition and his training led him to extended reflection on the mechanics of government. His political concerns, notably a devotion to the writing of Charles Godwin, and to his Utopian politics, are especially apparent in his early writing. Like all Utopian visions, Brown's ideals presented an implicit critique of current society.

Brown's first novel, *Wieland or The Transformation*, was published in 1798. Brown sent then Vice-President Thomas Jefferson a copy of the novel, and many critics have remarked on the significance of this fact. (See e.g. Clemmit 113, Davidson 224) Jane Tompkins suggests that Brown sought to "influence public policy" by disguising as a novel a political tract" (43). She suggests that the novel is a thinly veiled appeal to Jefferson to pay heed to some of the more disturbing consequences of independence (44). Christopher Looby strongly disagrees, arguing that Tompkins' interpretation misses both the tone and the artistic complexity of the novel. "To write a gothic romance in the land of the Enlightenment is already a reactionary move; to send it to the leading American *philosophe* is practically an insult (*Voicing America* 194).

At a minimum, it seems clear that Brown's "gift" to Jefferson was not without some irony. Nevertheless, it is easy to see why Tompkins thought of the

novel chiefly in its political ramifications. The full title of the novel, *Wieland, or The Transformation, an American Tale*, announced that it was intended as a national drama. Brown opened the novel with a brief letter to the reader, in which he referred to himself as author in the third person. "His purpose is neither selfish nor temporary, but aims at the illustration of some important branches of the moral constitution of man." Brown's purpose in fiction writing was hardly to amuse; his aim was to scale the branches of human morality. In a much-quoted phrase, Brown claims "it is the business of moral painters to exhibit their subject in its most instructive and memorable form." Brown's "business," as it were, paints a picture of irredeemable immorality. As a moral painter, his hues were dark and shadowy. Gothic fiction was by its nature subversive to the idea of individual freedom and liberty. The gothic frequently attacked "the modern liberal assumption that the individual is a self-regulating autonomous entity who is able to govern his own passions rationally without the help, or hindrance, of external restraints." (Kilgour 11) It is the manner, however, of Brown's attack that distinguishes it; it is peculiarly aimed at the very foundation upon which the American republic was based<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The introduction also refers to the case upon which the novel is based, and which is discussed in Looby's *Voicing America*. There was indeed a multiple family murder, committed by the father and reported extensively in newspapers. Brown also tries to authenticate biloquism in his introduction – "it is hoped that intelligent readers will not disapprove of the manner in which appearances are solved, but that the solution will be found to correspond with the known principles of human nature." Cathy Davidson points out that novel writing was suspect in Federalist America, and Brown clearly tries, like many fiction writers of the time, to suggest his work has both didactic purpose and a basis in fact. Nevertheless, Brown intends the novel as allegory, and announces his intention to search for the "known purposes of human nature." The

*Wieland's* plot is dense and complex, and it may help to briefly recount it here. Clara and Theodore are the children of a religious missionary, recently arrived from Germany to the Schuylkill region of Pennsylvania. Their father is burned in a mysterious conflagration while praying in his temple, and his children eventually convert the temple to a secular place of study. Theodore Wieland marries Catherine and they have four children. Together with Catherine's brother, Henry Pleyel, the four adults share passion for poetry, philosophy and music. A stranger with a mellifluous voice, known as Carwin, enters their small circle, and their arcadian life is disturbed when strange events begin to occur. First, Theodore is called back from the temple by a voice that appears to be Catherine's, but, it becomes clear, could not have been Catherine's. Pleyel also hears the voice, again under circumstances in which Catherine could not have spoken to them. Clara is also confronted with this strange phenomenon, when a few days later, she is awakened by whispering voices in her closet. In each instance, the character accepts the sensory impression he or she has received despite its logical impossibility. Pleyel is the most rational of the characters, and yet he believes without question that voices he overhears belong to Clara and her lover. Notwithstanding his long knowledge of her character, Pleyel concludes that she and Carwin are having an affair, and interprets footsteps he hears late at night as her return from a clandestine meeting with her lover.

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link between human aims and morality is the animus of the novel.

The reliability of sensory impressions, so important to the philosophy of John Locke, lies at the heart of the novel. Each of the characters has been misled by Carwin the bilquist, the mellifluous speaker who it turns out is adept at ventriloquism. His ability to throw his voice and mimic the voices of others has led these characters to misapprehend what they know. Clara's upright character is no evidence against the supposition that she has a secret lover. The novel's protagonists are misled by Carwin's ability to imitate the voice of others. They repeatedly use their sensory impressions to misapprehend the world around them.

Carwin's ventriloquism, the logical explanation for some of the bizarre events of the story, does not explain its final and most horrific scenes. Theodore Wieland, perhaps made acutely sensitive to the supernatural by his father's strange fate, has difficulty reconciling himself to the logical impossibility of hearing Catherine's voice at a time when she could not have spoken to him. He soon begins to hear other voices, which he mistakes as divine commands. The voice tells him to kill his wife and children, and he complies, believing he is following divine injunction. Carwin steadfastly denies responsibility for this voice. Wieland's next victim, whom he escapes from prison to attack, is his sister Clara. Carwin, imitating the supposedly heavenly voice Wieland has heard, tells him to stop.

When Wieland realizes his error, that he has not been acting under divine guidance, he takes his life. Clara, spirited away to Europe by her benevolent uncle, is re-united with Pleyel, whom she eventually marries. Far from a happy

ending, this gothic resolution leaves the baleful narrator ruing “the errors of the sufferers.”

The novel’s heroine and chief narrator is Clara, whose letters furnish the basis of this novel. She advises the reader at the outset, “If my testimony were without corroboration, you would reject it as incredible.” Her opening reliance on the legal language of proof and evidence institutes a pattern in the novel. Like the nation of its title, this “American Tale” is fittingly dependent upon the language of the law for its story.

Her family’s history presents a kind of miniature of American identity. Her father came from Saxon nobility on the paternal side, and a merchant’s family on the maternal side. Her grandfather, a composer, was one of the founders of the German Theatre and shares ancestry with the German poet Wieland. Their son, orphaned at an early age, was apprenticed to a London trader. This duality recreates the nation’s beginnings created from the noble achievements of Saxon England and the commercial acumen of Yankee traders.

The elder Wieland finds a text on the doctrine of a sect of Camissards that so inflames him that, under what he believes to be “the will of heaven,” he leaves for North America to become a missionary to its Indian population (9). This first transformation of the novel is accomplished by means of a *text*, purporting to express the will of heaven. Several commentators have noted that the elder Wieland’s religious zeal mirrors that of the Puritan settlers ( Fliegelman viii, Ringe 45). While this inference seems undeniable, it should also not obscure the

fact that Wieland's noble enterprise is inspired by a "text" of a "doctrine" said to express the will of heaven. As we have seen, the doctrine that inspired the nation, the doctrine of natural law, was also a text said to express the will of heaven. The power of heavenly dictates have been impressed upon both the religion and the politics of this new enterprise.

In the New World, the elder Wieland finds prosperity. "The cheapness of land, and the service of African slaves, which were then in general use, gave him who was poor in Europe all the advantages of wealth" (9). The fluidity of place in the New World allows this merchant's apprentice to enjoy aristocratic life. His missionary work, however, meets with less success and he soon withdraws into solitary worship in a specially built temple. It is while worshipping in this temple that the elder Wieland appears inexplicably to spontaneously combust.

The prelusive gleam, the blow upon his arm, the fatal spark, the explosion heard so far, the fiery cloud that environed him without detriment though composed of combustible materials, the structure, the sudden vanishing of this cloud at my uncle's approach – what is the inference to be drawn from these facts? Their truth cannot be doubted. My uncle's testimony is peculiarly worthy of credit, because no man's temper is more skeptical and his belief is unalterably attached to natural causes (17).

All narration in this novel becomes a form of testimony, as if each speaker was on trial. The “natural causes” subscribed to by the uncle, who is a doctor by profession, stand in contrast to the supernatural belief of the father. The narrator asks if this bizarre event can somehow be ascribed to science (there is even a footnote to a medical history said to mirror this event), and then asks whether the Divine Ruler had intervened to assert his supremacy. Under these competing arguments of science versus faith, of modernity versus religious zealotry, the drama of the novel unfolds. With this conflagration, *Wieland's* pilgrim disappears from American life, leaving only his temple in his stead.

The temple marks the transformation of this family from religious adherents to enlightened secular citizens. Once an austere place of worship, it becomes an Arcadian retreat. *Wieland* bears some similarity to his father: “Their characters were similar but the mind of the son was enriched by science and embellished with literature” (26). In other words, the junior *Wieland* was a modern thinker, a paragon of Enlightenment values. Theodore, whose “fortune exempted him from the necessity of personal labor,” (20) chooses agriculture as his profession, becoming not unlike the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal (“Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made a peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue<sup>5</sup>” (Jefferson, *Notes*, 217.)

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter One for a discussion of Jefferson’s agrarian idealism and Leo Marx’ theory of its importance.

At the center of this holy site is a bust of Cicero, an accomplished Roman orator and proponent of natural law. Cicero, not unlike Moses, is the giver of laws in this secular temple. "My brother was an indefatigable student. The authors whom he read were numerous, but the chief object of his veneration was Cicero" (23). Cicero was the American lawyer's ideal, a master orator and philosopher. Several critics have remarked on the meaning of Cicero's presence in the novel. Robert Ferguson notes that for American lawyers, Cicero was both "reference and inspiration"<sup>6</sup> (76). Cicero had great symbolic value to lawyers of the early republic. His rhetorical skill, and fame as an advocate, earned him a great following within the bar. Christopher Looby reads Brown's reference to Cicero slightly more critically. Looby sees Brown's use of Cicero as a way of questioning the morality of advocacy. He notes the intellectually dishonest practices in one of Cicero's celebrated orations, an oration that provokes some disagreement between Wieland and Pleyel. Cicero successfully defends a remarkably weak case by "throwing dust in the eyes of the jury" (161). According to Looby, Brown's skepticism of the bar and of advocacy in general prompt him to cite Ciceronian elocution with some irony: it was not a skill to be venerated but a example of the counterfeit voice that spoke in the new nation. Both Looby and Ferguson thus enunciate an important layer of meaning in Cicero's presence in the

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<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of the importance of Cicero to the American lawyer, see Robert Ferguson, *Law and Letters*, 74-76.

novel; Cicero was indeed a central figure, in both stature and practice, to American jurisprudence.

Still, Cicero brings more weight to this story than simply his rhetorical skill and veneration by the legal profession. His elevation to the altar of this new temple is important on several levels, but most importantly, Cicero is in many ways the father of natural law. The phrase “natural law” comes into parlance only after Cicero described the distinction between natural and positive law (Weinreb 44). To omit that critical aspect of Cicero’s meaning is to diminish the power of the novel. Natural law and its premises figure profoundly in a work that aims to illustrate the “moral constitution of man.” Natural law scholar Lloyd Weinreb credits Cicero with being the first to present natural law as a distinct philosophic doctrine (39). He advocated the union of philosophy and rhetoric, believing that rhetoric should be in service to the highest ideals of the mind. Cicero believed that philosophy and intellectual inquiry were useless without the rhetorical persuasion to make them effective (DeLacy 114). He also believed that natural law had its basis in a divine order. (That feature of Ciceronian philosophy, finding natural law to be a reflection of divine order, was adopted by Jefferson, and incorporated into the *Declaration*.) As a consequence, natural law was objectively true, not subjectively believed. (See *Republic*, III, *Laws*, I) A classic formulation of Cicero’s natural law theory appears in the *Republic* (a title clearly taken from Plato).

True law is right reason in agreement with nature. It is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting; it summons to duty by its commands, and averts from wrongdoing by its prohibitions. And it does not lay its commands or prohibitions upon good men in vain, though neither have any effect on the wicked. It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal any part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely. We cannot be freed from its obligations by senate or people, and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of it. And there will not be different laws at Rome or Athens, or different law now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations at all times, and there will be one master and ruler, that is, God, over us all, for he is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. Whoever is disobedient is fleeing from himself and denying his human nature, and by reason of this very fact he will suffer the worst penalties, even if he escapes what is commonly considered punishment<sup>7</sup> (Book 3, chapter 22, sec. 33).

The careful reader will note the similarity of this definition to John Locke's. Locke had also defined law as right reason in agreement with nature; its

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<sup>7</sup> This is of course Greek cosmology, not Christian divinity that is referred to. The Christian natural law theorists easily adapted Cicero's principles.

principles, Locke declared were immutable and unchangeable. Cicero is important to this novel not only as an advocate, but as *the* advocate of the foundation of American government. Cicero's definition of natural law articulates its most salient features: it is eternal, immutable and inescapable. Ciceronian virtue is a matter hotly debated in the temple. In many ways Cicero's formulation becomes a kind of template for Wieland's fate, and the difficulty of discerning this "true law" is one of the central dramas of the novel. The divine genesis of natural law gives it both force, and finally inscrutability (just as the divine genesis of the voice Wieland heard, inscrutable though it was, commanded him to commit his fatal acts). One is reminded that several of the speakers during the constitutional debates were leery of the amorphous quality of natural law<sup>8</sup>. This difficulty, of "divining" the meaning of nature, is further complicated by the expression of natural law's dictates in words, hardly immutable carriers of meaning. Moreover, this is not the only controversy that Ciceronian thought

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion of the disagreements about natural law theory during the constitutional debates, see James Q. Whitman "Why Did the Revolutionary Lawyers Confuse Reason and Custom." *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 1321-1367.

brings to the novel. Pleyel and Wieland disagree about a passage in Cicero's *Cluentius*<sup>9</sup>:

We females were busy at the needle, while my brother and Pleyel were bandying orations and syllogisms. The point discussed was the merit of the oration for Cluentius, as descriptive, first, of the genius of the speaker; and secondly, of the manner of the times. Pleyel labored to extenuate both these species of merit, and tasked his ingenuity, to shew that the orator had embraced a bad cause; or, at least, a doubtful one. He urged that to rely on the exaggerations of an advocate, or to make the picture of a single family a model from which to sketch the condition of a nation was absurd (34).

In the *Republic*, Cicero wrote, "What is true of individuals is also true of nations" (Book 3, sec. 28). Clearly the author of this "American Tale" subscribed to this view; the story of the Wieland family is intended after all to mirror the nation's. But Cicero's comparison of families with nations is intended to prove a

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<sup>9</sup> Looby presents a more comprehensive discussion of the legal subterfuges Cicero employs in the Oration of Cluentius than I will. Both he and Ferguson discuss Brown's antipathy for the practice of presenting an argument one does not truly believe, a lawyer's stock in trade. I will not repeat those arguments here, though they are valid and important. An important corollary to Brown's distaste for the legal profession is his use ventriloquism as both source and symbol of the perniciousness of the law. The construction of an argument without having one's heart in it is quite close to what Carwin does with his voice: he puts it where his body is not. Carwin's biloquism is closely allied to the practice of law – he becomes a stand-in for his principle, a representation of someone not himself. It is Carwin's biloquism, his representative status, that, at

larger point. The passage immediately preceding it contrasts wisdom (which is equated with attaining personal power) with justice (which places the good of others over personal gain). To illustrate the point, the speaker presents the following contrast:

Let us imagine two people – one a man of the highest character, wholly fair-minded and just and exceptionally reliable, the other a man of remarkable wickedness and effrontery. And let us assume that a country is so mistaken as to think the good man is wicked, villainous and evil, while believing that the vicious man is entirely blameless and honest. Let us suppose that, in keeping with this misconception which is shared by all citizens, the good man is harassed, seized, his hands cut off and his eyes gouged out; he is then condemned, clapped in irons, branded, expelled, suffers destitution, and finally, for the best of reasons, is regarded by all as utterly wretched. The villain, on the other hand, is praised, made much of, universally adored; offices, military commands, wealth, and riches of every kind are heaped upon him; in a word he is judged by everyone to be supremely good and eminently worthy of all the gifts of fortune (Republic, Book 3, sec.27).

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a minimum, begets the undoing of the Arcadian harmony that opens the novel.

Brown clearly had this example in mind when he plotted Wieland's strange fate. Theodore Wieland is a truly fair-minded and just character who is clapped in irons and ends in utter wretchedness. Carwin, of course, fares far better, if not up to the great heights that Cicero's villain reaches, surely he escapes culpability for his misdeeds. But at the heart of both the novel and of Cicero's argument is the great difficulty of discernment, the correct apprehension of good and evil. Ciceronian justice and morality are analyzed within the context of the *polis*, the city-state of the empire. Brown's focus for his American tale is also on the body politic (as it is in this family, so it is in the nation). His examination fails to yield the objective standard of justice that Cicero championed. Instead, where Cicero found natural law to be objectively true, Brown finds the perilous absence of absolute categories of good and evil in the Enlightenment's wake. In fact, Brown uses Lockean psychology to prove the impossibility of Ciceronian justice. If "law in the proper sense is right reason in harmony with nature" how is "right reason" determined? Locke would have that determination made through the evidence of our sensations. But as Carwin's activities demonstrate, that formulation is inherently unreliable. *Wieland* is an argument against the very epistemological premises upon which the nation's government was based. The divinity of natural law dictates was impossible to prove. Its "immutability" was hostage to the subjective permutations of human perception. Finally, the enormous difficulty of discerning, through the imperfect medium of our senses, the contours of "right reason" made natural law's ambiguity downright

dangerous. Natural law's fatal deficiencies are symbolized in Cicero's elevation to the altar of the temple, and it is a point overlooked by some of Brown's most astute critics. But there are still more parallels to Ciceronian natural law in this text.

Looby points out the reliance on textual authority that appears as a leitmotif throughout the novel. "Reading" the world is one of the central problems of the novel. The contrasting characters of Pleyel and Wieland are alike in their attention to texts, but dissimilar in their orientation to the texts they read. Of Wieland we are told, "Moral necessity and Calvinistic inspiration, were the props on which my brother sought to repose." Wieland is morally attuned to the Puritan habit of "reading" nature for divine symbols. Pleyel, on the other hand, was a "champion of intellectual liberty" who "rejected all guidance but that of his reason" (28). Pleyel challenges that which Wieland holds sacred: "even the divinity of Cicero" was contested. Looby has suggested that these two characters represent "the most conspicuous ideological oppositions within the political culture of the new nation: on the one hand, the rather literal classical republicanism in alliance with a residual Puritanism, and on the other hand, the radical freethinking of the secular Enlightenment" (160). There is yet another meaning behind Wieland's belief in the divinity of Cicero.

Natural law was knowable through right reason; indeed, this was one of Cicero's (and Locke's) key premises. Many critics have noted that Wieland's tragic murders are the result of an inherited depravity, the Calvinist connection

that remains from his family history (Clemit 131, Ziff 72). Undoubtedly this is one element of the narrative's meaning. But there are still others. Wieland, it has been established, is highly rational and almost legalistic in his attention to text. We have seen him argue about a passage from Cicero, seeking to find the author's intention from his words. This is quite like the work of the lawyer, whose reliance on text to find the correct answer to questions of justice and ethics Wieland mimics. The unjust result of Wieland's rational reliance on his ability to "read" the signs around him suggests the futility of the legal enterprise.

Moreover, and this is a key and as yet unconsidered element, natural law itself was discernible because it was part of the *divine* plan of nature. That is why the Enlightenment was preoccupied with reading nature: it would reveal the essential harmony and order of the world. Cicero sits at the altar of the temple because natural law is the new divine of the American republic. The Puritan divine Alexander Richardson wrote: "The World is like a book wherein God's wisdom is written" (Miller, *The New England Mind*, 162). Just as Puritan typology was forever trying to "read" the meaning of nature, so, too, were the architects of the new secular order. Wieland's link to his ancestry is revealed by his repetitive argument with Pleyel – it is Wieland who insists on the divinity of Cicero (28).

The voice Wieland hears is presumably God's; so, too, was the voice of natural law: it was true because it was part of the divine plan. Just as the Puritan had tried to read nature for God's wisdom, just as Jefferson invoked nature's laws

and nature's God to develop a new form of government so, too, does Wieland rely upon God's voice to wreak a new kind of destruction. The chilling implication of *Wieland's* American tale is that we may well have mistaken the divine plan that speaks through nature. The entire premise upon which the independent nation has been built may be a chimerical notion that the Framers have mistakenly apprehended.

The textual disagreements between Pleyel and Wieland do not end with Cicero. The passage above where Pleyel and Wieland disagree about a passage in Cicero, leads to yet another question that demands recourse to a text. Major Stuart had written a letter to Theodore about his travels through the South, and included a moving description about a waterfall on the Monongahela River. A dispute (unknown to the reader) about some particular of the description arises, and the narrator explains, "To settle the dispute which thence arose, it was proposed to have recourse to the letter." In this instance, however, the issue is not about textual authority but about nature itself. Not only are morality and justice impossible to discern; the physical world, too, is open to question. Even the "text" that natural law reads is uncertain. In this passage, nature itself is represented in words (by Stuart's letter), just as natural law doctrine was. The letter – the text of which will settle this dispute, lies on the altar of the new temple. Here is the new sacred text – the writing that is intended to mirror nature. The parallel is clear – natural law doctrine, the method of "reading" nature to find our moral way – lies on the altar of this secular temple. But as the dispute about

the letter shows, even when language seeks simply to describe the visual world, two people do not read the account in the same way. The symbolic representation of nature is both unstable and finally (because of Carwin's intervention) irretrievable.

One of the truly gothic aspects of the novel is the failure of every method of discernment. Each character falls prey to fatal misconceptions. From the upright Wieland to the rational Pleyel, to the honest Clara-- every character in the novel has his or her most characteristic virtue undone by Carwin's biloquism. Carwin is the instigator of these errors, but he is not their sole cause. Although the suggestion is made that Carwin may have been responsible for the divine commands Wieland heard, an equally plausible possibility is that they were truly the figment of Wieland's inflamed imagination. While Carwin indeed makes mischief, it is difficult to assign him ultimate blame for the tragic aspects of the family's fate. That is part of the conundrum posed by Carwin and his biloquism -- his agency, when his voice operates is at a remove from his body, is almost impossible to trace.

Cathy Davidson finds in Carwin a symbol for the United States legislature, a body which "spoke" for another. Carwin escapes culpability by distancing himself from his voice, just as the electorate of the nation can be said to do by acting through representatives. As a symbol of representative government, and a key part of the checks and balances of government, the legislature would save the

republic from the excesses of monarchy that history had witnessed. Carwin suggests that symbolic representation was anything but redemptive. It might just as easily diffuse culpability for the same kinds of evils. Robert Ferguson sees in Carwin the emblem of the artist, who had no place in the increasingly commercial economy. "There is no legitimate vehicle for Carwin's talents," Ferguson writes, "he represents the entrapped figure that Brown felt himself to be" (141). Both critics correctly identify the disembodied voice of the modern era as a source of danger.

Part of the novel's achievement, and part of its frustration for readers as well, is its ability to put into play so many competing meanings in the single symbol of the biloquist. Appended to the novel is the incomplete autobiography of Carwin, known as the *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*. In the *Memoirs*, Carwin is referred to as both a clown and a demon, Utopian in his ideals and dystopian in his effects. Notwithstanding his many tantalizing meanings, Carwin, however, is not the source of evil in the novel, but only its facilitator. Carwin may have the power to mesmerize with the melodiousness of his own voice, but his siren song is dangerous even to those unaffected by it. It bears noting that Pleyel, that most rational of men, is the one most deceived with least reason to be. The majority of the misperceptions he develops about Clara are the result of a misimpression of his own senses. While he claims to reject "any testimony but that of his senses" (94), his interpretation of what he sees and hears is contrary to what he has reason to know. He begins to suspect Clara when he hears what he

thinks is Clara and Carwin's voice late at night at her home. While Carwin may have set these assumptions in motion, it is Pleyel who mistakenly believes the woman's voice belongs to Clara (it is Judith, Clara's servant). He mistakes words written in Clara's personal journal as a reference to an assignation (143).

Although Clara justly offers "the tenor of my life" as proof against his suspicions that she is carrying on a clandestine love affair with Carwin, Pleyel chooses to favor the "evidence" of his senses. Pleyel's reliance on reason, and his dependence on the evidence of his senses, results in uniformly wrong judgments. Locke's assumptions are refuted, somewhat cunningly, by his ardent acolyte. Pleyel, the tabula rasa upon which sensation has written, has misbegotten that which was closest to him.

Pleyel's castigation of Clara, however, reveals that far more is at stake in this deception than simply Clara's chastity. Consider his first confession of disappointment:

Here said I is the being after whom sages may model their transcendent intelligence, and painters their ideal beauty. Here is exemplified that union between intellect and form which has hitherto existed only in the conceptions of the poet, I have watched your eyes; my attention has hung upon your lips. I have questioned whether the enchantments of your voice were more conspicuous in the intricacies of melody or the emphasis of

rhetoric. I have marked the transitions of your discourse, the felicities of your expression, your refined argumentation and glowing imagery; and been forced to acknowledge, that all delights were meager and contemptible compared with those connected with the audience and sight of you. I have contemplated your principles, and been astonished at the solidity of their foundation and the perfection of their structure (139).

These encomiums to Clara are hardly conventional declarations of love. Clara presents a “union of intellect and form” whose voice is distinguished by “the emphasis of [its] rhetoric. Her chief points of attraction include the transitions of her discourse, her refined argumentation and glowing imagery. Her lover, in contemplating her principles, finds their foundation solid and their structure perfect. Clara is hardly idealized femininity here – she is really the body politic<sup>10</sup>. Clara is the embodiment of the nation, and this imagery, while stilted for a woman is a fitting description of the natural law doctrine that governed the nation.

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<sup>10</sup> The reliability of Clara as narrator, or lack thereof, is a subject that many critics have attended to. Norman Grabo finds that the entire novel is a product of Clara’s disturbed mind. While it is possible to read the novel as an excursion into the deeply troubled mind of an unreliable narrator, it significantly weakens the novel to do so. If Clara is simply unreliable, then the novel has far less to say. What are we to make of Carwin’s role as bilquist if he is Clara’s imaginary invention? What significance can we attach to the divine inspiration of Clara’s father if his divine inspiration is only her misapprehension? If Clara is a disturbed heroine whose incestuous urges “write” the novel, the novel loses its political implications, and becomes a far less interesting work.

As doctrine, however, Clara is appealing, sound and solid. Clara is the personification of the rhetorical birth of the nation. Her features of voice in particular have attracted the attention of her admirer (“I have questioned whether *the enchantments of your voice* were more conspicuous in the *intricacies of melody* or the *emphasis of rhetoric*.) Not unlike Carwin, Clara’s talent for rhetoric and oratory seems irresistible to her listener. The degree to which rhetorical supremacy masks something sinister is a recurring motif of the novel. The greater the rhetoric, the further we are from truth. The reader is therefore thrown off balance –where is the authority in this narration? Pleyel, that most rational of men, believes Clara faithless, dishonest and corrupt. Sensory evidence is an infirm basis on which to make judgements. Pleyel’s ability to misread evidence throws all the narration into question. Is Clara in fact corrupt? Is the rational Pleyel irrational ? Who possesses the accurate story? Not only must the reader question the narrator, but as Pleyel proves, we must question narration entirely. Whose is the authoritative voice? Where is authority in the novel (or more aptly, outside of it)?

In the nation where “law is king,” such a capitulation had radical implications. As clearly as the parallel between family and nation has been drawn, we must now conclude that the nation itself is imperiled. The promise of order that reliance on right reason would ensure is nowhere to be found. Nature was to be the source for authority in the new world, but how clearly did nature speak? Most critically, perhaps, the law appeared unable to ensure the order it was

vouchsafed to protect. Pleyel notes that Carwin “wages a perpetual war against the happiness of mankind.” The natural right to the pursuit of happiness, enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, meets its antithesis in Carwin. As Madison wrote in Letter #10 of *The Federalist Papers*, “The instability, injustice and confusion introduced into the public councils have in truth been mortal diseases under which popular governments everywhere have perished.” Carwin merely introduces instability and confusion into the bucolic serenity of the Wieland temple – that is all that is needed to insure its instability.

Early in the novel, Wieland learns he has inherited land in the Old World from Saxon ancestors. Pleyel urges him to assume ownership, but he declines, explaining that “The law is a system of expense, delay and uncertainty.” This pronouncement, is made in reference to an important feature of legal debate: the laws of inheritance. The centrality of law, not just in providing order but in defining place, remains in effect even in this new world. During the course of the novel, Wieland inherits not one but two estates (one in the Old World) by primogeniture. Against Pleyel’s advice, he declines accepting his inheritance in the Old World, thereby rejecting Old World aristocratic status and championing Jefferson’s position that “the earth belongs in usufruct to the living.”

However, this new system of egalitarian laws and free alienation is hardly more effective than the inequitable system of the past. As Wieland’s unfortunate transformation proves, the law cannot protect the innocent against evil. Even when the law managed to arrest the progress of Wieland’s family massacre, his

capture was at best temporary. Wrongdoers can escape the chains of the law with relative ease; even jail cannot hold the transgressor, as we see when Wieland attacks Clara for the final time. Theodore, as representative of the new world values, with his rational faith and enlightened principles has wrought greater destruction than his zealously Calvinist progenitor. The man who revered Cicero above all else, wills the destruction of his own family, and as we have been told, as it is with families so it is with nations. The Wielands' story, after all, was written just after passage of *The Alien and Sedition Act* of 1798. The idealized republic, founded on the power of law to insure personal freedom, made it a crime to defame the newly inaugurated government. The nation that enthroned law as its king began to re-enact the very oppression its founders sought to escape.

The language of law, a powerful theme even in the novel's opening scene, only added to obfuscation. When Wieland addresses the court, he is eloquent and vigorous in his defense of himself and his unspeakable crimes.

I opened my eyes and found all about me luminous and glowing. It was the element of heaven that flowed around. Nothing but a fiery stream was at first visible; but anon, a shrill voice called me to attend. I turned: It is forbidden to describe what I saw: Words, indeed, would be wanting to the task. The lineaments of that vision, whose veil was now lifted, and whose visage beamed upon my sight, no hues of pencil or of language can portray (190).

Theodore is practically speechless at what he thinks is the face of the divine. He presumably looks into the divine face of nature and can barely express what it says. His eloquence almost makes understandable the vile acts he has committed. But his basic assumption, that he is under divine guidance, while rhetorically moving, is nevertheless false. Like the other “double-tongued deceiver,” Theodore Wieland is not a man whose word can be relied upon. The very individual who knew the law so well that he rehearsed Cicero’s cadences, this very able exegetist of the law is its most base transgressor. Cicero’s notion that natural law was objectively true *because* it was divine has failed to consider the subjective reading of mortals. Theodore Wieland can argue forcefully on his own behalf, but the real danger is to believe him. Like Carwin and even Clara, the ability to move with words is not an august accomplishment, but a fatal power. Language itself has proven dangerous weapon.

Unlike the resolution of other literary forms, gothic endings leave us in a much worse place than the one we entered. The unspeakable has occurred, and there is no escape from it. Nor is there any moment of redemption in *Wieland*, nor any saving moral lesson. Even the one Clara offers perfunctorily at the end is no consolation because it is so clearly untrue. The truly horrific aspect of Brown’s gothic (and later made even more desolating in Poe’s gothic) is the utter absence of any saving grace. Clara’s “escape” to the Old World hardly restores

any of the survivors to a shadow of their former peace. Like the eponymous hero, transformed to a man of sorrows, Clara can offer little consolation: "That virtue should become the victim of treachery is no doubt, a mournful consideration; but it will not escape your notice, that the evils of which Carwin and Maxwell were the authors, owed their existence to the errors of the sufferers"<sup>11</sup> (278).

This explanation, offered with so little conviction or proof, leaves the reader knowing that from this strange world, there is no escape. The traditional means with which the new world sought to impress and maintain order – right reason and the law of nature – have been found impotent in this American tale.

The dangers that inhered in natural law doctrine are at the heart of Brown's novel. But *Wieland* was not Brown's last word on the subject. In *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, Brown returns to the theme of nature, but in even more stark terms than his engagement with natural law doctrine in *Wieland*. This novel does not deal as exclusively with natural law themes as *Wieland* did, but it warrants some attention because it completes Brown's rejection of the Jeffersonian view of nature.

If *Wieland* sought to dramatize the theories of Locke, Edgar Huntley looks at nature from the point of view of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' idea of the state of nature, or the state in which humans find themselves in the absence of law, is far less harmonious than Locke's view. Locke saw the law of nature as a declaration

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<sup>11</sup> Maxwell makes a brief and some have suggested obligatory appearance, to round out the subplot begun but not advanced in the first section, which was apparently put into proofs before the

of God's will. It was divinely ordered, immutable and knowable through "right reason." Hobbes' presentation of humankind in its natural state, on the other hand, was dark, forbidding and even, one might say, gothic.

In Hobbes' view, the first law of nature was self-preservation, and it held dominion over every other human inclination. "Every man shuns death; and this he doth, by a certain impulsion of nature, no less than whereby a stone moves downward" (*Leviathan*, 2). The individual in a state of nature was moved only by the force of his or her appetites and aversions; chief among these was the law of self-preservation. Hobbes describes the state of nature in bleak terms:

[There would be] no place for Industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities imported by Sea; no commodious building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all continual feare, and danger of violent death: And the life of man solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short. (*Leviathan*, Chapter 13, 62)

His was a perspective altogether different from that of Locke. Where Locke was concerned with finding ways to preserve human's natural freedom,

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second half of the novel was complete.

Hobbes was concerned with the preservation of sovereign power. Hobbes was first and foremost an analyst of power, and his main thrust in *Leviathan* was to justify the need for perpetual sovereign power.

The unfettered American wilderness suggested to some a world that could mirror the Lockean ideal. Jefferson's call to "nature's nation" was to begin a government enlightened enough to be of, by, and for the people. As one critic has noted, for Jefferson "nature was America" (Charles Miller 3). For Charles Brockden Brown, the American wilderness became Hobbesian nature come alive – nasty, dark, and brutish. In *Edgar Huntley*, Brown implicitly attacks Jeffersonian nature. Huntley's world is beset by bestial impulses and naked aggression; self-preservation is indeed the order of the day, and often the only perceptible order.

Edgar Huntley is a student of nature, but clearly of a different temperament from other naturalists of his day. "A nocturnal journey in districts so romantic and wild as these, through which lay my road, was more congenial to my temper than a noon-day ramble" (7). The secrets of nature were hardly "written with a sunbeam" in Huntley's world. Huntley is a happy denizen of darkness, "devoted" as he says, to "the gloom" of the forest.

*Edgar Huntley* is in many ways a less successful novel than *Wieland*, and its many turns of plot make it a somewhat clumsy work. Edgar Huntley's friend Waldegrave has been murdered, and he begins a search for his killer. He discovers a mysterious stranger digging by the tree where Waldegrave has been

buried. Intent on capturing the perceived killer, Huntley pursues him into the wilderness. He eventually confronts the suspect and discovers he is an Irish immigrant named Clithero, who may have been sleepwalking at the grave site.

Clithero was raised as the companion of a young boy, and lived in a manner far above his own family's rank and station. His employer, Mrs. Lorimar, invested him with her trust, and he fell in love with her niece, the daughter of Mrs. Lorimar's evil twin brother Wiatte. By a strange coincidence (and there are many in this novel), Mrs. Lorimar's first love was a man named Sarsefeld, a naturalist who was later mentor and friend to Huntley. (Sarsefeld's romance with Mrs. Lorimar ended abruptly when Mrs. Lorimar's brother convinced their parents to object to the union.) One evening, Clithero, who has become a trusted employee, was carrying a sum of money for Mrs. Lorimar when he is attacked. He kills his assailant only to discover it was Mrs. Lorimar's evil brother. (Wiatte, unbeknownst to his assailant, actually lives, but this is the first in a series on deaths where the victims don't actually die). Afraid of Mrs. Lorimar's reaction, Clithero wants to save her from the knowledge of her brother's death, and he resolves to kill her. Just when he is about to stab her, he is diverted from stabbing her niece, his fiancée, who was sleeping in her aunt's bed. Mrs. Lorimar faints, and Clithero, convinced she is dead, flees and eventually arrives in America.

Huntley is deeply affected by Clithero's story (notwithstanding his bizarre decision to save his employer the knowledge of her brother's death by murdering her). Clithero flees into the wilderness, and Huntley follows him. The next

section of the book documents Huntley's strange sojourn in the wilderness. Among other experiences, he awakens in a cave, unsure of how he arrived there, and is seized by powerful feelings of hunger and thirst. His own bestial urges are paralleled when he is attacked by a panther, which he manages to kill, and then devour. He is then attacked by Indians, and only narrowly escapes. He is almost rescued, but faints when his compatriots arrive, and they mistakenly leave him for dead. The journey through the wilderness is thus marked by almost constant misperception of reality – the dead live, friends are foes, foes are friends. Huntley at one point fires his gun at what he thinks is an Indian assailant, narrowly missing his mentor and friend, Sarsefeld, who has come to rescue him. Even when he escapes the dark wilderness, Huntley does not see the light. He still believes in his friend Clithero, who, it turns out, is a maniac intent on destroying Mrs. Lorimar, who is now the wife of Sarsefeld. The novel ends when news of Clithero's escape from captivity reaches Mrs. Lorimar, by means of a letter Huntley sent to Sarsefeld. The shock that Huntley, the man who tried to take her life still lives, causes her to lose the child she is carrying. Like *Wieland*, this story is full of the mistakes of perception that imprison and imperil the protagonists. Edgar Huntley's wilderness is the great metaphor for nature – its dark inscrutability and fatal skirmishes form the heart of the American gothic landscape.

This novel, like *Wieland*, opens with yet another echo of Cicero.

Huntley's first destination, he explains, is an ancient Elm tree, the site of the

unsolved murder of his friend, Waldegrave. Book I of Cicero's *Laws* also opens with a description and exploration of a tree, an oak, said to be the oak that the Latin writer Marius described in a poem. One of the speakers raises the question: was it the verses that planted the oak, or was the poet transcribing something he had witnessed? (98-99). Cicero's *Laws* thus opens with a timeless question of aesthetics and perception. Does the artist create the image he makes, or does he simply transcribe what is already there? This critical question of perception and reality, of art versus nature, was the starting point for Cicero's consideration of where to look to find justice. Does one begin by studying law, that system designed in effect to preserve justice, or by studying the "nature of man"? (Laws101-102) In other words, are laws those dictates that have been written, or are there laws that need no transcription to exist? This is a cunning representation of the argument between natural law and positive law. By invoking Cicero's *Laws* at the outset of this story, Brown suggests that *Edgar Huntley* is about to address the same question Cicero raises: what is the source of moral law?

The idea that Edgar Huntley's search for justice recalls Cicero's oak gains credence in Sidney Krause's discovery that Brown's Elm tree was originally an oak in an earlier version of the Huntley story, *Somnambulism: A Fragment*. Krause provides an excellent reading that *Edgar Huntley's* Elm is intended to symbolize the *Treaty Elm* under which William Penn signed a treaty with the Leni Lenape

tribe of the region<sup>12</sup>. Krause notes that this treaty was legend in Pennsylvania as the site where William Penn negotiated a treaty of friendship Indian tribe. In the novel, the Quaker historical site becomes a burial site --the place where Waldegrave is buried. With him, the peace Penn and his fellow signatories attempted to preserve is similarly interred. The parallel to Cicero's *Laws* in no way diminishes Krause's convincing scholarship on this point, but may add yet another dimension of legal and moral significance to the novel. Cicero's *Laws*, like the novel, begins with a search for justice. However, Huntley's search leads the protagonist into a Hobbesian jungle. Such a search is doomed to be solitary, nasty, brutish and its reward dubious.

Huntley's quest for his friend's killer takes him on a tour of the wilderness. Clithero, an Irish immigrant with a complex past, may or may not have murdered Huntley's friend. He admits however, to killing in self-defense (the first of many echoes of the Hobbesian law of self-preservation) the evil Wiatte. Huntley, despite his suspicions, fears that Clithero's recollections of his past (which include a failed attempt to kill his benevolent employer Mrs. Lorimar), will take his own life. Huntley follows him into the forest, and embarks on his own "errand into the wilderness," that is, a suicide watch that becomes a savage fight for survival.

During the course of his journey, Huntley is beset by danger, attacked by Indians, engaged in a fight to the death with a panther, left for dead, and trapped

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<sup>12</sup> For a fuller discussion, see *Penn's Elm and Edgar Huntley: Dark Instruction to the Heart*.

in a wilderness abyss. The Hobbesian instincts of appetite and aversion play out in a brutal natural landscape. We learn Sarsefeld, who plays a recurrent and coincidental role in the narrative as both the lover of the Clithero's kind employer, and Huntley's mentor is also, significantly a naturalist. Huntley has been trained in this art as well. "Perhaps no one was more acquainted with this wilderness than I, but my knowledge was extremely imperfect. ... When Sarsefeld came among us, I became his favorite scholar and the companion of all his pedestrian excursions" (92). The focus of Huntley's studies, however, differs markedly from other studies of nature. He is able to describe with encyclopedic care the contours and contents of the forest:

Wherever nature left a flat it is made rugged and scarcely passable by enormous and fallen trunks, accumulated by the storms of ages, and forming, by their slow, a moss-colored soil, the haunt of rabbits and lizards. These spots are obscured by the melancholy umbrage of pines, whose eternal murmurs are in unison with vacancy and solitude, with the reverberations of the torrents and the whistling of the blasts. Hickory and poplar, which abound in the lowlands, find here no fostering elements (92).

Here is a kind of inverse "*Notes on the State of Virginia*." Through Huntley, Brown presents a painstaking study of the dark crevices of nature. Huntley notes that while every new excursion added to his knowledge, "they

always terminated in the prospect of limits that could not be overleaped” (93). Rather than opening new vistas, scrutiny of nature closes them. This new science demonstrates only its limits. Here is a subtle refutation of the taxonomical study of nature. Cataloging nature does not yield an expansive and comprehensive order but an encounter with “dullest obscurity.” Jefferson’s enterprise was an epistemically happy one: knowledge led to progress. The optimistic expanse that Jefferson defined and celebrated in Virginia is recast here as a melancholy and encroaching cave from which there is little hope for escape. The images one receives from it are not unlike the images of Plato’s cave- mere shadows that we mistake for reality.

To suggest that science led to darkness, not to light was to threaten the entire system of belief that authored the new nation. Huntley’s errand into the wilderness leads from one calamity to another. Each encounter he has tests yet another Hobbesian imperative. Huntley tries to lure Clithero from his cave with food; he wrestles with a panther and then devours his kill. The appetite and aversion that Hobbes claimed created human will is the inescapable condition of the American wilderness. Huntley, whose parents were killed by Indians, has several nearly fatal encounters with Indians. The indigenous population that the settlers found, like many features of its landscape, haunts the mind and security of

its settlers.<sup>13</sup> The native and the settler remain locked in a perpetual battle of will.

For Hobbes, there was no natural harmony between the human mind and the universe (Strauss 175). The desire for self preservation was the sole root of justice and morality. The opening burial site at Penn's Elm contains a treaty of peace, as well as an echo of Cicero's search for justice. Like Waldegrave, both Penn's peace and Ciceronian justice are dead before the novel begins.

Once again, Brown uses the unreliable voice of a narrator to question the nature of authority itself. All we know of this story is what Huntley recounts, but we are given increasingly to suspect that he is not a reliable witness. His behavior as he enters the wilderness becomes increasingly bizarre – after all, why has he followed this stranger? His fear that Clithero is about to take his own life has little justification. Huntley's love of gloom and melancholy is itself strange. The suggestion that the Edgar and Clithero may be sleep-walking, not unlike Carwin's biloquism, uses science (sleepwalking and biloquism were the subjects of medical study) to imply all perception and description in the narrative were untrustworthy. In the end, Huntley has mistaken the very nature of the man he sought first to capture and then to save. Clithero is not a wronged individual, but a dangerous

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<sup>13</sup> Some critics have ascribed to Brown a forward-looking sense of the injustices perpetrated on the indigenous population. It is difficult to fully credit such a view, when there is little to flesh it. Only Queen Mab, after all, is given any real character in the novel. As in the Hobbesian universe, all parties are chiefly after their own power and survival. In reading with fidelity to the text, these brief entrances of Indian Americans do not subvert cultural refernces, but tend simply to allude to and reinforce them. Huntley's parents, after all, were murdered by members of an Indian tribe. It seems more apt to say that these skirmishes are yet another example of the fight for power of the

maniac, intent on harming the benevolent Mrs. Lorimar and Sarsefeld. Not unlike Wieland and Pleyel, Huntley's methodical and scientific attention to perception has proved both wrong and dangerous. He has failed to "read" the world around him.

Brown's novels often do not unfold with hoped-for clarity, a feature that has stymied many critics and it is safe to say, many readers. (See e.g., Baym 88-95; Fiedler 154-156). One critic chastises Brown for his style, characterizing his prose as "embedded in a kind of latinate glue," an often just charge (Lewis 97). William Hazlitt offered some dubious praise of Brown's fiction: "[H]is genius was not seconded by early habit, or by surrounding sympathy. His story and interests are not wrought out, therefore, in the course of nature, but are, like the monster in Frankenstein, a man made by art and determined will" (60). This criticism might well have pleased Brown, because he sensed keenly that "the course of nature" was more problematic than many of his contemporaries realized.

As he wrote in the preface to *Edgar Huntley*, "America has opened new views to the naturalist and politician, but has seldom furnished themes to the moral painter" (3). In his fiction, Brown pointedly asked moral questions of a legal and political system founded on nature and right reason. In so doing, Brown transformed the gothic into a truly American genre, and presented a new rendering of nature. His first work sought to discredit Locke, on whom so much

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American landscape, not a plea for the native American.

of the nation's political architecture rested. His last revived the work of Hobbes, who believed that the true source of law was power. Brown became the first American artist to raise the subversive notion that nature was mute until we spoke for it. He recognized that in nature we invented a construct, often as subjective and unreliable as ourselves. His novels demonstrate that the very methods of scientific exploration, the means by which we would learn nature's secrets, were profoundly fallible. His characters test Lockean hypotheses and find them unsupportable. Pleyel's senses deceive him; Huntley cannot find his way out of the wilderness, literally or figuratively. Wieland's attention to the doctrinal purity of natural law cannot prevent him from committing unspeakably immoral acts. As his protagonists learn, our senses cannot be trusted. Nature and right reason were to be the twin pillars of the enlightened American government. In Brown's work, the "light" of our reason casts unfathomable shadows. Nature's nation might well be a jungle where the only immutable law was self-preservation.

### Chapter Three

#### **“I Don’t Believe One-Half of it Myself”: Nature and the Pastoral in Washington Irving**

Washington Irving is today known primarily as the author of two famous gothic tales: “Rip van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” That his literary reputation rests largely on these two works is intriguing, not only because he wrote so many, more complex works, but because these two stories were not original; they were copied from German texts. Quite contrary to the claims of editors of American literary anthologies,<sup>1</sup> neither “Rip van Winkle” nor “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is American in origin. “Rip van Winkle” is taken from a rather obscure German folktale, and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” that emblem of American revolutionary folklore, was originally set in the Bavarian hills long before the American Revolution took place. Of course, Irving recast

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, in *The Oxford Book of Short Stories*, names Irving as the first American writer to achieve a distinguished international reputation, and she credits these two short stories as the source of his great appeal; Wallace and Mary Stegner reach the same conclusion in *Great American Short Stories*.

these stories in the foothills of the Hudson River, where they have clearly taken root. Notwithstanding the continental origins of these famous short stories, they now seem endemically American. They have fertilized the imaginations of countless schoolchildren, and tantalized some of America's leading critics and writers.

In the classic work *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx examined the pastoral myths of American fiction. He chose as the title of his first chapter, "Sleepy Hollow." His reference was *not* to the famous gothic tale (which is quoted briefly as an opening epigram), but rather to a short work, entitled "Sleepy Hollow," by Nathaniel Hawthorne. (It is interesting to note that three layers of American writing are invoked by this title alone.) Marx highlights Hawthorne's sketch as a classic example of the American pastoral. Written in 1844, some 24 years after "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" was first published, Hawthorne's work has nothing to do with the actual place, Sleepy Hollow. His choice of this famous title for his work shows the degree to which Irving is associated with the *idea* of the American landscape. Indeed, Irving's Sleepy Hollow becomes a kind of odd echo, somewhat more audible in Hawthorne's work than in Marx' analysis of it.

Hawthorne describes an excursion into the woods, where he tries to transcribe in minute detail the sights and sounds that envelop him. His reverie is disturbed by the sound of a train whistle, which in Marx's reading, becomes the classic invasion of the machine into the garden. It is more than a little ironic that

the title of a gothic tale is made to stand in for an Edenic view of nature. Marx writes, "The noise of the train, as Hawthorne describes it, is a cause of alienation in the root sense of the word: it makes inaudible the pleasing sounds to which he had been attending, and so it estranges him from the immediate source of meaning and value in Sleepy Hollow" (27).

It bears noting that Irving's Sleepy Hollow landscape, from which these two writers take their title, is far from a bucolic paradise, and its meaning and value are somewhat problematic. In the third paragraph of the story, Irving describes Sleepy Hollow as being bewitched by an old German doctor, or under the spell of an old Indian chief – hardly the benign view of nature untouched. By page two, even before Irving describes the "peaceful spot" known as Sleepy Hollow, we are told, "The dominant spirit, that haunts this enchanted region is...the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head" (1059). Irving's nature is haunted even before its peace is established. It remains odd that this feature of Irving's pastoral has been ignored. Indeed, Irving's presentation of Sleepy Hollow has to some degree been obscured by the many borrowings and misprisonings of so many later readers, who themselves take the story of *The Sketch Book* out of its context, and invest it with new meanings, as Hawthorne and Marx do. Irving, the progenitor of the true Sleepy Hollow, gives us a deeply troubling and problematic image of "pristine nature" than the one that has taken hold so deeply in the American mind and memory. Nature for Irving is invaded

not only by a different machine than the industrial force that Marx posits—one could say Irving’s nature is set in a wholly different garden.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Irving’s view of nature is considerably more complex than familiarity with his two most famous tales would suggest. For one thing, the gothic tales in *The Sketch Book* act in concert with its other stories to suggest more about nature and art than these two tales can convey. Critics have described Irving’s gothic tales as playful or “sportive,” and surely Irving’s touch is lighter than the foreboding Ann Radclyff, or Charles Brockden Brown. Nevertheless, Irving’s gothic tales may finally be more unnerving in part because they are commentary *about* the gothic genre as much as they are contributions to them. “Rip van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” are as much about fiction as they are about ghosts. That is undoubtedly part of the reason they continue to haunt American literature.

For Irving, the haunting presence in nature was not the industrial machine that came to dominate later nineteenth-century fiction; the specter in Nature was all too human. For Irving, nature held a different set of associations than it does for today’s reader. The contemporary reader must struggle to imagine nature

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that Marx’ analysis of the works he considers is not apt. In fact, Irving’s work is only mentioned tangentially by Marx. Irving does in fact usher quite a few invaders into Sleepy Hollow --the narrator’s opening rifle shots that disturb the Sabbath peace, the noisome Brom Bones, and of course the headless horseman, to name just a few. But it is equally true that the presence of trouble is established so early on in the story that Sleepy Hollow’s peace is at best temporary, and more profoundly, fictional. Marx’ central thesis, regarding the distinction between sentimental and complex pastoralism, and the relation of pastoralism to history, does

unremarked by Thoreau, unimagined by Emerson, or even uninvasioned by industry. Far more audible to Irving than to contemporary readers was Jefferson's injunction that America was "nature's nation."

For Irving's contemporaries, nature evoked a different set of meanings and values than those with which we invest the term today. For one thing, America inherited a long tradition of contemplating nature that was part of the English literary legacy. The pastoral tradition, with its studied contemplation of rural life and utopian nostalgia, was a time-honored form. With the pastoral convention came the universal conflicts between art and nature. The weight of that tradition, with its pastoral ideals and mortal fears, figures prominently in *The Sketch Book*. Moreover, nature was an important arbiter in the legal world, and that, too, contributed to the comprehensiveness of the term. As a student of law, Irving was keenly aware of the claims of natural law philosophers, and the divine justice they promised. In his earlier work, Irving showed intimate familiarity with their work, and often seized upon the sizeable gap between the theory and the practice. One of the challenges in reading Irving today is to restore some sense of the textual complexity that nature evoked. To do so will be one of the aims of this chapter.

Natural law presents nature that is in one sense unfallen. In other words, the world in which natural law precepts hold sway is a harmonious one; law is not

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indeed have relevance for Irving, as the rest of this chapter may suggest.

a remedy to discord, but a rational explanation of how the world is intended to operate. For Irving, this sense of nature with its promise of accord and order had all the indicia of a past now irretrievably lost.

Irving had been born with the American Revolution, and by the time of his legal apprenticeship, many of the noble ideals of the revolution had begun to pale in practice. *The Alien and Sedition Act* showed that the principle of free speech and natural liberty meant little when applied to domestic politics. The ascendance of commercial interests and the consequent regulation of state commerce had made formidable changes in the economy, making international trade even more uncertain. On more than one occasion, commercial regulation had damaged the Irving family's interests. Moreover, Irving's federalist leanings made him skeptical of Jefferson and other advocates of natural rights.

Irving had studied law, reviewing the works of Blackstone, Locke, Puffendorf, Coke, etc., as was then required and had been admitted to the bar. He had worked as a law clerk and briefly practiced law with his older brother, John Treat Irving. His career brought him little satisfaction, and he apparently vacillated between fear that he would never succeed in the profession, and disdain for the law itself<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of this aspect of Irving's biography, see Robert Ferguson's *Law and Letters in American Culture*, p.151-159.

In 1808, Irving began work on *A History of New York* in secret, during his employment in the law firm of Josiah Ogden Hoffman. Hoffman was not only his employer, but was also the father of Matilda Hoffman, the woman Irving hoped to marry. Irving applied himself with fervor to the practice of law, notwithstanding his many objections to the profession. His clandestine literary work was undoubtedly a quiet rebellion against his obligation to earn a living in a dependable profession. Irving's career with the law firm, however, was short-lived; Matilda died suddenly of consumption in the spring of 1809. Robert Ferguson writes that Irving apparently threw himself into his writing as solace. (*Law and Letters*, 154). This assumption may well be correct, but it hardly prepares one to read *A History of New York*. It is difficult to imagine a man in mourning throwing himself into the ribald satire and humor of this work.

In *A History of New York*, Irving's legal training and practice combined with his literary talent to produce a work of sharp satire. Some critics have called it his best work. Though it shares with *The Sketch Book* a preoccupation with literary history and tradition, it is set in a very different tenor from the later work. *A History* is a work of ribald comedy, indebted to both Sterne and Rabelais for its often absurd and burlesque humor. In his writing, Irving was able to express some of his frustration with both the legal profession, and with the historical and political ramifications of American law. He enthusiastically gives vent to the absurdities of American legal practice. Most particularly, he shows an almost

radical skepticism for the ideals of natural law upon which the constitutional system was based.

Irving understood natural law writers sufficiently well to use them to great advantage. Not only had his legal training enhanced his knowledge of natural law theory; his political skepticism attached itself with relish to the vagaries of natural law theory. It had not escaped his notice that natural law and right reason had not spoken as universally as many had expected. The persistent reference to natural law authority did little to elevate the law, and he complained in his letters about “this wrangling driving unmerciful profession” (*Law and Letters*, 151). His disenchantment with the law, which of course echoes Brockden Brown’s frustrations, would be especially apparent in his first major work.

Written as a merciless spoof of other heroic epics, *A History of New York* offers a parody of both Irving’s writing contemporaries, and of the epic tradition he adopts. A deliberate imitation of the Augustan epic, Irving borrows this form, and infuses it with irony. Many writers of the period, such as Joel Barlow, Philip Freneau and Timothy Dwight, had attempted to romanticize American nationalism, likening the founding of the nation to the founding of Rome in the Aeneid, or the great battles of Troy in *The Iliad*.<sup>4</sup> The poet Philip Freneau in particular often located American ideals mid-way between earth and heaven.

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion, see William P. Kelly’s Introduction to *Selected Writings of Washington Irving*, The Modern Library College Edition, Random House, xix-xxi.

Irving relished pricking these conceits. His heroes are always eager to sit down, preferably by the fire, and care little for the battlefield. One searches this epic in vain for high-minded heroism, or idealistic sacrifice. The history Irving recounts devotes equal time to debunking epic convention and political figures. None of the Founding Fathers merit much credit (Thomas Jefferson is the pompous and crotchety William the Testy), and only the original Dutch founders offer a vision of the now long-absent, golden age of New York.

The lost golden age is a defining convention of the pastoral mode, and a key part of *A History of New York*. Like the natural law doctrine itself, the pastoral convention presents nature as unfallen. As Michael Squires observes about nineteenth-century British writers, “the pastoral novel attempts to create a feeling of wholeness in those whose lives have been fragmented in urban centers” (11). Irving, in a sense, does this one better, by demonstrating that the imagined wholeness of a past life is purely imaginary. The golden age that writers traditionally invoke and wax nostalgic for is not only absent, but by implication has never existed. In *A History of New York*, the pliant image of nature, which brought both harmonious legal doctrine and spiritual promise, is a play of words.

*A History of New York* opens with a device typical of Irving: the story is narrated by the fictional persona of the historian Diedrich Knickerbocker. As Philip Lopate remarks, Irving seems to do his best work through the alter ego of Diedrich Knickerbocker. In fact, in *A History*, like many of Irving’s works, we have a narration within a narration. The story opens with a brief explanation from

Seth Handaside, Knickerbocker's landlord. Knickerbocker, it seems, left without paying the rent, leaving behind a manuscript that Handaside has had published, in the hope that it will defray some of Knickerbocker's debt. The manuscript itself is the work of this absent tenant, a narrator who, as we learn in the opening, is not wholly reliable.

This kaleidoscopic narration within a narration is a technique Irving relies on repeatedly, and it serves several functions. For one thing, it distances the author from both the reader and from the very work he creates, a useful device for a work begun in secret. Irving's narrators are themselves biloquists, and he can throw his voice into their own without accepting full responsibility for their more impolitic assertions. Irving's somewhat dubious characters have all the speaking parts, and he is therefore relieved of responsibility for what they say. Moreover, the impossibility of creating a literary tradition, or more accurately, continuing one is a theme that entrances Irving; only the philistine Handaside and the unreliable Knickerbocker are left to carry on this noble art. By placing his fiction in their hands, Irving can wink at the very enterprise he pursues.

Diedrich Knickerbocker sets up a conspiracy with the reader that persistently pokes fun at his own text. In Book I, he advises the reader that like all introductions to American histories, this one is "learned, sagacious and adds nothing at all to the purpose," and suggests that the idle reader may totally overlook it.

Except for the persistent snickering in the background (of which the above is a single example), Knickerbocker's undertaking is a serious one. Irving attempts to write *A History of New York* that begins not with any colonial arrival, but with the Creation of the World. Knickerbocker compares himself to Thucydides, Tacitus, Livy, and his favorite, Herodotus, explaining that without historians, empires are nothing. Irving's sense of history is completely circumscribed by literary events. As Martin Roth points out, *A History of New York* is a chronicle of recorded literature more than recorded life (115). Here, then, is truly a world of words. *A History of New York* attempts to place the discovery of New York within the context of a timeline that begins with Greek cosmology and the Bible. As much as Virgil's *Aeneid* shows how all of history culminated in the founding of Rome, Knickerbocker is clearly leading up to the founding of New Amsterdam as an epic event. The inflated tone insures not only high comedy, but an immediate sense of failure as well.

After reviewing several thousand years of cosmology (in three pages), and introducing the rather dim Professor Von Poddingcroft (Puffendorf?) the narrator declares:

It is a mortifying circumstance, which greatly perplexes many a pains taking philosopher, that nature often refuses to second his most profound and elaborate efforts; so that often after having invented one of the most ingenious and natural theories imaginable, she will have the perverseness to act directly in the

teeth of this system, and flatly contradict his most favourite positions. This is a manifest and unmerited grievance, since it throws the censure of the vulgar and unlearned entirely upon the philosopher; whereas the fault is not to be ascribed to his theory, which is unquestionably correct, but to the waywardness of dame nature, who with the proverbial fickleness of her sex, is continually indulging in coquetries and caprices, and seems really to take pleasure in violating all philosophic rules, and jilting the most learned and indefatigable of her adorers. (389)

Here Irving inverts the familiar paradigm of the philosopher “reading” nature to find its divine order. Irving’s philosopher is presumably infallible; it is nature that is replete with error.

Irving’s familiarity with legal writing fuels *A History of New York*. *A History* offers a parody of footnotes, sophistry and analogy, employing its bent logic as an antidote to Enlightenment reason. This reliance upon citation, an endemic feature of legal writing, formed a key part of Irving’s authorial strategy in both *A History* and *The Sketch Book*. Each work relies upon citation to a supposedly indisputable authority who, we readily see, is wholly unreliable. As William Hedges points out,

With its remarkable slipperiness of tone and viewpoint, [*A History*] firmly resists being defined as the coherently developed expression

or elaboration of any topic, idea or conviction. Sustaining itself as neither history or allegory, it is held together only by its contradictions. The confused and confusing Diedrich Knickerbocker is one of the great contrivances of American fictions, an almost totally unreliable narrator whom we yet keep trying one way or another to rely on. (163)

This invented persona, with his love of citation and footnote and his reliance on goofy logic, manages to skewer enlightenment reason and the forms with which it governed. As Robert Ferguson notes, “Irving deliberately apes the strategies employed by Grotius, Pufendorf and other legal philosophers to achieve intellectual order.... [Knickerbocker] seizes upon the standard Enlightenment technique with hilarious energy in a *reductio ad absurdum*” (*Law and Letters*, 160).

The Dutch natural law theorist Puffendorf had written, “There seems no way so directly leading to the Discovery of the Law of Nature, as is the accurate Contemplation of our Natural condition and Propensions.” Compare this with Diedrich Knickerbocker’s explanation of how the first settlers in America came to take possession of the land.

“The first source of right, by which property is acquired in a country, is DISCOVERY. For as all mankind have an equal right to anything, which has never been appropriated, so any nation, that discovers an uninhabited country, and takes possession thereof, is considered as enjoying full property, unquestionable

empire therein" (413). The chapter, which is replete with citations to Grotius, Puffendorf, Vattel, and Blackstone, manages to mistate and lampoon every basic principle of natural law doctrine, as well as the sense of entitlement it gave to inhabitants of the new empire. Knickerbocker concludes by explicating the last right by which the settlers could assert authority over the new nation. With reference to Blackstone, Knickerbocker concludes his inquiry into the right of the settlers by declaring "the last right may be entitled, THE RIGHT BY EXTERMINATION, or in other words, the RIGHT BY GUNPOWDER." In this chapter alone, Irving manages a ribald rebuke of six natural law theorists, Locke, Blackstone, and the Bill of Rights. Irving may well have had his fill of law and lawyers, and in *A History* he exacted his revenge.

*A History of New York* has a clear sense of loss, but exactly what has been lost is somewhat difficult to determine. New Amsterdam had much to offer before the ascendance of British rule. Irving names the reign of Walter the Doubter as the golden age of Mannahata, but even this idyllic period is ironically drawn.

In this dulcet period of my history, when the beauteous island of Mannahata presented a scene, the very counterpart of those glowing pictures drawn by old Hesiod of the golden reign of Saturn, there was a happy ignorance, an honest simplicity prevalent among its inhabitants which were I even able to depict, would be but little understood by the degenerate age for which I

am doomed to write...Thrice happy, and never to be forgotten age!  
 When every thing was better than it has ever been since, or will  
 ever be again-- when Buttermilk channel was quite dry at low  
 water -when the shad in the Hudson were all salmon, and when  
 the moon shone with a pure and resplendent whiteness, instead of  
 that melancholy yellow light, which is the consequence of her  
 sickening at the abominations she every night witnesses in this  
 degenerate city. (483, 487)

This manic rapture for Manhattan's golden age is pure literary parody -  
 although it is difficult to see just which side Knickerbocker is on. The linguistic  
 nonsense of this thrice happy age reduces the golden age to a dream. Some critics  
 claim that *A History of New York* is simply juvenile, but I would argue that Irving  
 is quite in control of this wit. He takes commonplace metaphors, and undoes  
 them. In this golden age, the shad in the Hudson in this happy past were not  
 running, they were salmon. Because *A History* is really a book about literature, it  
 is the golden age of literary art that is lost. In Knickerbocker's hands, we must  
 wonder if there ever was such a thing, a sentiment echoed more seriously by  
 Geoffrey Crayon in *The Sketch Book*.

Even the most lyrical description of nature cannot be taken at face value.  
 Just before the appearance of the Yankees, Knickerbocker indulges in a rare  
 excursion into physical pleasure.

It was one of those rich autumnal days which heaven particularly bestows upon the beautiful island of Mannahata and its vicinity – not a floating cloud obscured the azure firmament – the sun, rolling in glorious splendour through his ethereal course, seemed to expand his honest dutch countenance into an unusual expression of benevolence, as he smiled his evening salutation upon a city, which he delights to visit with his most bounteous beams – the very winds seemed to hold their breaths in mute attention, lest they should ruffle the tranquility of the hour – and the waveless bosom of the bay presented a polished mirror, in which nature beheld herself and smiled! (490)

Just when the reader might have thought Knickerbocker had at last presented a simple tranquil moment, the narrator winks. This lyric scene is metaphor run amok. A tempest is brewing, and after a full paragraph's description of its attendant metaphors, Knickerbocker tells the reader

It is possible that [the reader] may be a little perplexed also, to know the reason why I introduced this most tremendous and unheard of tempest, to disturb the serenity of my work... The panorama view of the battery was given, merely to gratify the reader with a correct description of that celebrated place, and the parts adjacent- secondly, the storm played off, partly to give a little

life to this tranquil part of my work, and to keep my drowsy readers from falling asleep – and partly to serve as a preparation, or rather an overture, to the tempestuous times, that are about to assail Nieuw Netherland – and that overhang the slumbrous administration of the renowned Wouter van Twiller. (491)

The self-consciousness of this writing gives an almost *trompe l'oeille* narrative view. On the one hand, a pastoral vision of nature is offered, and then revealed, like the storm, as a literary device. The narrator's elbowing presence in his narrative – to wake the reader up by means of a little thunder – points up the constructed nature of this tale, and shows Knickerbocker to be playing with his audience. The final simile --that the storm heralds the tempestuous times to follow-- give us the full pathetic fallacy. Even smiling nature is, at bottom, a construct of the author, and perhaps always was. Beneath the hilarity of this chapter is a sense of irremediable emptiness, as if the literary touchstones of the past have been exposed as merely formal devices, without content.

The tempest of course ushers in the unfortunate reign of William the Testy, the narrator's relentless parody of Thomas Jefferson. The architect of the new republic is introduced a man who had "so confused his brain with abstract speculations which he could not comprehend, and artificial distinctions which he could not realize, that he could never think clearly on any subject however simple, throughout the whole course of his life afterward" (514). If there were ever

anything laudable in this administration, it is nowhere apparent here. As governor, Testy

conceived that the true policy of a legislator was to multiply laws, and thus secure the property, the persons and the morals of the people, by surrounding them in a manner with men traps and spring guns, and besetting even the wet sequestered walks of private life, with hedges, so that a man could scarcely turn without the risk of encountering some of these pestiferous protectors. Thus he was continually coining petty laws for every petty offense that occurred, until in time they became too numerous to be remembered, and remained like those of certain modern legislators, in a manner of dead letters – revived occasionally for the purpose of individual oppression, or to entrap ignorant offenders. (540)

The man who had declared America to be nature's nation is no friend to the empire Knickerbocker describes. The bold architect of the Revolution is henpecked by his wife. The agrarian paradise described by Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia* is here is encumbered by senseless division and petty oppression. In fact, to the degree that Jefferson had portrayed the new world as a virgin landscape, Irving gives him no quarter—William the Testy is a chief despoiler. As Martin Roth notes, during the reign of William the Testy, there are

almost no descriptions of nature (126). His rule is marked by inner disintegration and outer barrenness.

At the bottom of *A History* is the clear sense of a failed experiment, one that was perhaps doomed from the start. The impossibility of real redemption through law or reason hovers on every page. One of the slippery features of *A History* is that even the ideal is not ennobling. There is no place of grace in *A History of New York*. In a well-known essay, Allen Guttman comments on Irving's political conservatism and federalist leanings, but in fact, the slippery Knickerbocker is difficult to characterize and has enough opprobrium for all sides of the political spectrum (only the Dutch settlers, banished long before questions of federalism could arise, emerge unscathed).

More than any coherent political view, and notwithstanding its humor, *A History of New York* conveys an abiding sense of loss. Of this dark mood, Philip Lopate remarks "that persistent undertow of gravity and melancholy in a work intended to be comic, is not the least of its attractions for the reader of today" (220). It remains to determine the source of this undertow. Irving repeatedly upends the familiar figures of speech, and discovers they are empty. The homocentric arguments of historians, the images of a lost pastoral world, the *noblesse oblige* of leadership – all these become the stuff of satire. Irving pricks the familiar conceits, and then finds nothing to replace them with. It is as if he has discovered that the familiar landscapes of history were simply storyboards. Knickerbocker has great fun aping the authors of these fictive constructs, but

finally the redemptive feature of their art must elude him. The air of mourning that hangs over this comedy is quite real. Irving's first major work was fundamentally about the new nation: its law, its myths, its heroes. The barrenness of the new world was his commentary on the "great experiment." Roth has commented that *A History of New York* is really a search for a literary golden age, but it is a futile search. As much as *A History* is concerned with questions of political probity and artistic representation, it can take no satisfaction in any of the versions it mimics.

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Modern scholarship has found *A History of New York* more rewarding reading than the later works.<sup>5</sup> With its shifting narrative voice, its unsentimental humor, its always ironic truth, its appeal to the post-modern ear is understandable. The work that made Irving's fame and fortune, however, is *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* This was the book that finally emancipated him from the need to practice law, and established him a valued American writer.

First and foremost, *The Sketch Book* is a book about books. It is both a celebration of literature, and a rebuke of literary pretension. Geoffrey Crayon

makes a pilgrimage to England, as a curious traveler. In the guise of a travelogue, *The Sketch Book* presents the author's musings on the English literary legacy. In many ways the real journey of *The Sketch Book* is a search through English fiction, in a quest to find a living truth. It subtly considers how a literary heritage that is by now moribund might be revived. The convention which dominates *The Sketch Book* is unquestionably the pastoral. With its emphasis on rural over city life, and its lauding of the past over the present, the pastoral allows Irving to critique British manners and mores in the polite guise of a conventional mode.

With this work, Irving would prove to the English reader that an American writer could indeed produce a book of literary merit. The book was enormously successful on both sides of the Atlantic. Tellingly, however, this English pilgrimage has an American destination in mind: it was *The Sketch Book* that introduced those two indelible American characters, Rip van Winkle and Ichabod Crane.

This work has received its fair share of censure – it has been labeled “coy,” “sentimental” and “syrupy” (Miller, *Afterword*, 374; Lopate, 204). Even the most sympathetic of modern critics cannot avoid sounding less than enraptured by Irving's sometimes stolid prose (Guttman 132). It is sometimes hard to believe that these two works share the same author. The ribald iconoclasm

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, Philip Lopate's essay, “The Days of the Patriarchs: Washington Irving's A History of New York,” and William Hedges, “The Knickerbocker History as Knickerbocker's

of *A History of New York* appears to have little in common with the retiring politesse of *The Sketch Book*.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, a careful reading shows that the themes of Knickerbocker's history appear, in a clearly different and more muted tone, in Crayon's *Sketch Book*. In fact, one reason for including consideration of *A History of New York* here is the symmetry of its concerns with those of *The Sketch Book*; both are entranced by loss—political, emotional, and artistic. Both works show a preoccupation with history and authority. Both narrators are careful students of literary tradition. Both are entranced by art, even if impatient with its pretensions. Both works show an abiding concern for politics, and a deep skepticism about power. Finally, both works reveal a profound concern with the image of nature: nature as a lost paradise, nature as a source of ethics, and most important, nature as the confluence of art and the real world. If *A History* is really an allegorical search for a lost literary golden age, *The Sketch Book* is a pilgrimage in search of a new one. Moreover, if *A History* is concerned with exposing the fictions of history, *The Sketch Book* attempts to discover what is left in their wake.

*The Sketch Book* offers a continuation of Irving's earlier discussion of nature, but this time Irving's focus is on nature as pastoral. In one of the more

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"History."

familiar definitions, this convention is said to present a “contrast, implicit or expressed, between pastoral life and some more complex type of civilization” (Greg 4). The pastoral almost always presents what one writer has called a double viewpoint (Squires 13). Two points in time are usually contrasted: a more perfect past with a highly flawed present. In fact, the pastoral usually reverts to a golden age, to a former life of simplicity, and a memory of harmony of the individual in nature. The pastoral is the artistic vehicle of nostalgia, and as such can fairly be said to be a highly fictional mode.

The pastoral serves several key functions in *The Sketch Book*. The pastoral mode posits a place where things were better than they are now, and presents a fictional golden age for which Crayon clearly longs. It also allows Crayon’s journey to be temporal as well as spatial – Crayon’s happier sketches may take place in the present but always hark back to a fading past. Even the more elegiac sketches use the pastoral to invoke the simple happiness which the characters have now lost ( i.e., “The Broken Heart,” “The Pride of the Village”). The pastoral thus links American writing to its literary heritage, and allows the author to collapse historical time into the classic pastoral temporality: now and then. Like all pastoral, it presents the golden age at the same time it confirms its loss.

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<sup>6</sup> Of course much could be made (and perhaps should be made) of the differences between the alter egos, the bombastic, slightly daft Diedrich Knickerbocker and the gentlemanly Geoffrey Crayon. These different voices are no doubt responsible for the differences in tone between the two works. Arguably, the substance of these works, as I will try to demonstrate, is remarkably similar.

Moreover, Irving, as he proved in *A History*, understood the social construction of nature. He saw keenly the ease with which metaphors about nature overtook the reality nature offered, and developed a life of their own. While *A History* was especially concerned with images of nature drawn from natural law arguments, the fictional aspect of these representations was not just about law. The pastoral convention was one of the earliest literary conventions in Western literature. Theocritus and Virgil, summoned in the early pages of *A History*, were among the first to present the shepherd in an idealized view of country life. Virgil, in particular, used the pastoral as a vehicle of social critique, presenting a golden "Then," and fallen "Now." By invoking this literary form in a new guise, *The Sketchbook* is making an immediate analogy to the past, and questioning the possibility of recasting ancient lore to a provincial present.

The English itinerary Crayon has chosen, as well as the opening epigrams that begin each sketch, indicate the author's preoccupation with English literary legacy. England's history remains throughout *The Sketch Book* a haunting presence. It has dwarfed the possibility of a true American literature. A history that is "full of fable" is what America lacks; America's severance from the old world has left it adrift from both history and art. It will be the work of Crayon (and to some degree Knickerbocker) to re-connect to that legacy, and more importantly to revive the "legendary lore" that it implies. The fiction of the pastoral mode was the underlying sorrow at the heart of *A History of New York*. *The Sketch Book* in many ways attempts to repair that emptiness. Irving's peculiar

marriage of the pastoral and gothic modes allows him to re-unite the enchantment of fiction with the prosaic reality of the new world.

*The Sketch Book* is not a miscellany of unrelated sketches; it is a carefully constructed arrangement of short works, where each entry is calibrated to fit within a larger scheme. Contrary both to Crayon's ingenuously modest assertion and the conclusion of a host of critics, *The Sketch Book* is no random assortment of unrelated observations. The work is painstakingly constructed, with each tale answering, or challenging, what has preceded it.

*The Sketch Book* is primarily concerned with three kinds of tales. There are literary histories (like "Roscoe," "The Mutability of Literature" and "Stratford on Avon") which consider the English literary tradition in one form or another. These are balanced and often used in counterpoint with sentimental pastoral tales of human devotion, such as "The Wife," "Rural Funerals," "The Pride of the Village." *The Sketch Book* is punctuated at three key points by gothic stories of unabashed invention. How these stories function *against* one another is an integral part of the meaning of *The Sketch Book*.

*The Sketch Book* is further unified by a complex constellation of epigrams and allusions from a pantheon of English writers. As Jeffrey Rubin-Dworsky notes,

Every sketch, essay or tale in the collection bore an epigraph derived either from some antiquated English lyric, ballad, song or essay, or from the writing of major British authors...Although the

elaborate framework of allusion, the use of direct quotation and indirect reference, and the melding of the sentiments of previous writers into the texture of *The Sketch Book* were all part of a deliberate, compelling strategy – to place his book within the time-honored traditions in English literature –Irving worried that he would be perceived as an American impersonation of the revered English writers who had focused on native scenes (55).

The epigrams that begin each sketch are a part of a strategy to place the book within the English literary heritage from which this book self-consciously descends. While Irving may well have worried that his talents did not entitle him to enter into such revered company, I would suggest that Irving's intent is not quite as diffident as Rubin –Dworsky suggests.<sup>7</sup> As much as Irving grants reverence to the English literary past, he also provides ample evidence that this history is no longer vital or alive. (Here it pays to recall that Crayon is a creation of the same author that gave us the highly irreverent *History of New York*. His politesse may mask a more profound meaning. )

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<sup>7</sup> Rubin Dworsky, who presents a brilliant reading of this work, asserts that the tales of *The Sketch Book* are held together by a unifying anxiety about identity. While many issues he raises in this line of inquiry are trenchant and revealing, I cannot fully accept this premise. In my reading, Irving is self-consciously in control of the book's construction.

In his opening introduction, Geoffrey Crayon's tone is markedly more genteel than Knickerbocker as he announces the reason for his voyage. For pure natural grandeur, no place would equal his homeland. "for on no country have the charms of nature been more prodigally lavished" (744). However, these bucolic charms alone are not enough.

My native country was full of youthful promise; Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle. I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement – to tread as it were in the footsteps of antiquity- to loiter about the ruined castle – to meditate on the falling tower- to escape in short, from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself in the grandeurs of the past (744).

Irving, through Crayon, seeks the great cultivation of the continent. He is quick to note the famed remark of de Buffon, that man has degenerated in the new world<sup>8</sup>, and he is anxious to meet the truly great men of the earth. However, as the pilgrimage begins, the first thing that Crayon encounters on his transatlantic voyage is a shipwreck. His search for the grandeur of the past is marked early on by ruin and decay. In an echo of the emptiness of *A History of New York, The*

*Sketch Book* suggests that the quest for Old World cultivation is a search for the dead.

As soon as his boat has reached the shore, Crayon's very first stop is the Liverpool Athenaeum – a library. Here he sees Roscoe, a genius of literary glory and celebrity, a man of Roman profile who is clearly heroic. "Born in a place apparently uncongenial to the growth of literary talent, in the very market place of trade; without fortune, family connections or patronage, self-prompted, self-sustained and almost self-taught, he has conquered every obstacle..." (753). Notwithstanding these impediments, Roscoe emerges as the *genius loci* of his native land, not by assiduous scholarly pursuit, but by direct engagement within his own community.

He has shown how much may be done for a place in hours of leisure by one master spirit, and how completely it can give its own impress to surrounding objects. Like his own Lorenzo de' Medici, on whom he seems to have fixed his eye as on a pure model of antiquity, he has interwoven the history of his life with the history of his native town, and has made foundations of its fame the monuments of his virtues. Wherever you go in Liverpool, you perceive traces of his footsteps in all that is elegant

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<sup>8</sup> It was this remark of de Buffon, that all mammals appear to have degenerated in North America, that spurred Jefferson's argument to the contrary in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. See Chapter

and liberal. He found the tide of wealth flowing merely in the channels of traffic; he has diverted from it invigorating rills to refresh the garden of literature. By his own example and constant exertions he has effected that union of commerce and the intellectual pursuits...(754).

Here is the idealized artist of the old world. The world he has created is in pastoral convention a *locus amoenus*—Roscoe has diverted mere traffic into a fertile ground for creativity. He is a historian intent on rendering the past glories of the Medicis. Not unlike Irving, Roscoe goes to a sacred past to reveal its meaning to his own community. His efforts not only enrich literary tradition, but they improve the lives of his fellow citizens. “He has opened pure fountains where the laboring man may turn aside from the dust and heat of the day, and drink of the living streams of knowledge.” The marriage of commerce and art, a union that Roscoe exemplifies, brings together the highest achievements of humanity.

In Roscoe’s case, that union has proved barren. Roscoe has suffered severe financial reversals, necessitating the auction of his celebrated library. His home, which had been the seat of “elegant hospitality and literary retirement” is silent, deserted, and beset with what appear to be retainers of the law. “It was like

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visiting some sacred shade, but finding it dry and dusty, with the lizard and the toad brooding over the shattered marbles” (756).

It is no accident that this is Crayon’s very first stop in the old world. As Roscoe is to the Medicis and Liverpool, so, Irving will be to the English masters, and to his fellow countrymen. Irving presents Roscoe as the ideal version of the artist: imbued with both a sense of history and community, a devotion to the past masters and to the present citizens who are the beneficiaries of his good works. He is the humanist artist, the classicist whose art nourishes the laborer, and puts his very city on the map.

However, Roscoe’s library is scattered, his fountains have run dry. The supposed union of art and commerce has bankrupted his rich palace. The chapter closes with a kind of pastoral elegy directed not to the writer Roscoe, but to his *books*, which have been scattered under the auctioneer’s gavel. The single transcendent image of this past glory is to be found only in books, and even these have been sold off. So begins Crayon’s great pilgrimage –the great library he sought as his first stop in the old world can be elegized, but not found.

The very next entry in Irving’s tale of a pilgrimage takes place in an unspecified location. “The Wife” tells of the financial reversals of the narrator’s friend, Leslie. Leslie had recently married a woman of “fashionable background,” but not independently wealthy. His love for her was great, and he declared at the beginning of their marriage, “her life shall be like a fairy tale” (760). Very soon after, the husband suffers financial reversals not unlike the previous tale’s Roscoe,

but with a very different outcome. In his newly straitened circumstances, Leslie despairs of the deprivations his wife will have to suffer, and at first tries to conceal the truth from her. This proves impossible when Leslie must sell his home. The narrator and Leslie approach Leslie's newly acquired cottage, which is "humble enough in its appearance for the most pastoral poet" (765). Here, the wife has created a pastoral paradise, of flowers, foliage, and music. Delicious strawberries and cream await them in a scene vastly different from the dry and dusty mansion Roscoe has deserted.

In "The Wife," domestic love becomes the avenue of rebirth. The revival of the pastoral, in the wife's cottage retreat, is achieved not with books or history, but by human devotion. It could be said that Leslie suffers from too much myth: Leslie wanted his wife's life to be "like a fairy tale"; he worried that she knew of poverty only through books. The vicissitudes of real life, and his wife's ability to rise to its challenges, redeem them both.

In "The Wife," however, we are never told where we are; indeed, it is a tale of domestic life, and its focus is private, and human, not national or public. In a book that begins by declaring its intention to chronicle a trip to the old world, this non-specified setting is surprising. Crayon's silence about whether we are in the old world or the new is no accident. The regained pastoral of "The Wife" leads directly to "Rip van Winkle," clearly a tale of the new world, uncovered by that chronicler of New York, Diedrich Knickerbocker. "The Wife" forms the bridge between Roscoe's barren library and Knickerbocker's history, or more

aptly, the old world and the new. Human connection is the bridge between the old world and the new. Geoffrey Crayon has summoned the crusty Diedrich Knickerbocker ; this old world chronicle, in only its third sketch, lands in the American colonial past.

By reprising his alter ego in *A History of New York*, Irving also echoes some of the ironic jibes of his previous work. Of Knickerbocker's Dutch history of New York, the narrator declares,

There have been various opinions as to the literary character of his work, and to tell the truth, it is not a whit better than it should be. Its chief merit is its scrupulous accuracy, which indeed was a little questioned on its first appearance, but has since been completely established, and it is now admitted into all historical collections as a book of unquestionable authority (767).

Why this return to colonial concerns at this early juncture in Crayon's old world pilgrimage? The tongue-in-cheek tone of *A History* continues (in the judgment that the book is not a whit better than it ought to be) but also allows Irving to offer an apologia of sorts. Of his alter ego Knickerbocker, Irving admits that "he might have been better employed in weightier labors." While Knickerbocker did now and then "kick up a little dust in they eyes of his neighbors and grieve the spirit of some friends" his errors, the narrator concludes, may be remembered more "in sorrow than in anger" (767). Irving thus distances

himself somewhat from the dubious Knickerbocker, but cannot give him up altogether.

Of Knickerbocker's study, we are told, "his historical researches did not lie so much among books as among men, for the former are lamentably scanty on his favorite subjects, whereas he found the old burghers, and still more their wives, rich in that legendary lore so invaluable to true history" (767). Here then, is that "legendary lore," of place, not unlike Roscoe's contribution as the literary landmark of the Mersey.<sup>9</sup>

"Rip Van Winkle" is set at the foot of these "fairy mountains, The Kaatskills. Here is pristine nature, with the Kaatskill mountain summits lit up by the setting sun like a "crown of glory." We are at a distant point in time and space from where our narrator Geoffrey Crayon left us. It is in this colonial village that Irving's signature playful gothic makes its first appearance. The entrance of the supernatural in *The Sketch Book* coincides with the return to a colonial setting. This is not to say that Irving's New World is haunted (although if it is, it is by the combined weight of old world tradition and new world promise). It would be more apt to say that Irving offers these colonial fictions as a way to reclaim the "legendary lore of place" that Knickerbocker sought.

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<sup>9</sup> Washington Irving in some ways presciently predicted his own fate as a writer. He did indeed become the Roscoe of the Hudson . He truly invested the Hudson with legend, just as Roscoe had done for the Mersey. In many ways, this was the great quest of *The Sketch Book*, and it is fair to say the plan succeeded perhaps beyond the author's fondest hopes.

Unlike other gothic tales, the appearance of the inexplicable in Rip van Winkle is not frightening; it is heartening. And this is a key to Irving's use of the genre. On the one hand, Irving's gothic suggests nature holds within it things beyond our comprehension. However, unlike other gothic authors, for Irving, these irrational elements are more likely to supply redemption than doom. (After all, Rip's life after his enchantment is far better than the one he left.) The inexplicable part of nature is not diabolical; it will not cause great damage. It will however tantalize the intellect. And that is perhaps one of the key functions of both fiction and art for Irving.

It is these qualities – its redemptive and intellectually tantalizing features – that Irving's gothic celebrates. This is why Irving manages to meld gothic with pastoral imagery – both are patent fiction, yet the familiar fictions of the pastoral make the unfamiliar events of the gothic easier to digest. This is not gothic that seeks to unsettle; with the restoration of a pastoral image it truly seeks to re-settle this place. In Rip van Winkle, the imagination that was so weary of fiction in *A History of New York* is restored. It is no accident that Rip is a man who has been emancipated from history. Irving's profound skepticism about nature and natural law, so profound in *A History of New York*, takes a clear turn with this sketch. The skepticism is still present, but it is now leavened with the pure pleasure of story-telling.

Rip himself, who has “an insuperable aversion to all forms of work,” was well-liked by all the good wives of the village except his own. As Perry Miller

says, Rip is the most henpecked of American husbands and yet, he remains, as many critics have noted, a prototype for the American artist. His aversion to commerce, his idleness, and his story-telling suggest that while he may not succeed as a husband or farmer, he is not without other resources to offer. Rip's escape to the mountains becomes quintessentially a mode of forgetting.<sup>10</sup>

Rip's nap of twenty years duration coincides with the American Revolution. Washington Irving, (who was born in 1783 may have been said to have "slept through" the revolution), makes a point of noting that the sweeping pronouncements of the founding fathers may in fact have changed little. As Rip approaches the village inn, he recognizes

the ruby face of King George, under which he had smoked so many a peaceful pipe; but even this was singularly metamorphosed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the hand instead of a scepter, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, George Washington" (779).

Irving (and of course Knickerbocker) cannot resist a return to the political jibes of *A History of New York*. During Rip's twenty-year absence, as the narrator

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<sup>10</sup> As Philip Lopate notes, all of Irving's best work is about forgetting. "Irving's central theme is American amnesia; his work is a reproach to it" (209).

makes clear, the great revolution may have changed the identity of those in power, but it seemingly changed little else.<sup>11</sup>

The real hero of Rip's tale, however, is once again the historian. Knickerbocker's earlier quip (that every true age requires a historian) is confirmed by the appearance of Peter Vanderdonk. Vanderdonk, a descendant of the region's first historian, corroborates the fantastic elements of Rip's story and allows him to re-integrate into the community. In other words, the historian reconnects the man ripped from history back into it. Interestingly, it is the historian of fact who finally confirms the viability of fable.

At the conclusion of Rip's story, a note appended explains that while the tale might have some connection to a German superstition about Emperor Frederick der Rothbart (and here Irving appears to acknowledge the source of the story), Diedrich Knickerbocker has included confirmation of this incredible tale. He even states that he has seen a certificate "taken by a country justice and signed with a cross, in the justice's own handwriting." He concludes by stating, "The story, therefore, is beyond the possibility of doubt" (784).

Immediately following this endorsement is a postscript, which purports to be traveling notes from a memorandum book of Mr. Knickerbocker. They identify the Catskill Mountains as a "region full of fable." The notes go on to

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<sup>11</sup> For an excellent study of Dutch and English rule during this period of New York history, see Robert V. Wells, "While Rip Napped: Social Change in Late Eighteenth Century New York."

describe “a kind of Manitou or Spirit” that resides in this area, and took pleasure in wreaking mischief throughout the Catskill Mountains. Once upon a time, the story continues, a hunter who had lost his way found the Garden rock, the favorite place of this Manitou. He took a gourd from many lodged in the trees, and let it fall upon the rocks, whereupon a great gush of water swept him down a precipice where he drowned. The stream made its way to the Hudson, and became known, as it still is today, as the Kaaters-kill (784-785).

On one hand, the footnotes that frame Rip’s story reveal Irving’s legal training. Legal language derives authority in part through citation (a practice Knickerbocker often spoofed in *A History of New York*.) Irving spent long hours studying the sometimes tenuous claims of jurists.<sup>12</sup> Their arguments were granted authority through the use of citation and footnote, as is Rip’s story. However, rather than bolster the credibility or authority of the speaker, in *Rip*, the footnotes throw both into question.

Still, this pure fable, appended to a footnote vouching for the veracity of Rip’s tale, adds a curious note of uncertainty. Where is fact and fable in this story, or even in these postscripts? The supposed resolution of *Rip* which seems to confirm that a man might be bewitched into losing twenty years of life, has received confirmation by a country judge (albeit one of questionable literacy). This absolute truth is then amplified by a supernatural tale of the region’s

**mischievous spirit-deity. Irving's frame within a frame device undoes the resolution the story's conclusion purports to supply.**

**Each note bolsters the veracity of a fantastical story with such vociferousness that it raises, not quiets, the reader's doubts. Like his earlier incarnation in *A History – Knickerbocker* cannot present his story without ushering in several competing voices that tear it down just as he builds it up. Truth is a difficult commodity to weigh and authority in this new age is always suspect. Why does Irving play with fiction and fact in this way?**

**The curious reprisal of Diedrich Knickerbocker in this chronicle of old world sketches suggest that the author's true destination is close to home. The author of *A History of New York*, whose skepticism was endemic to his work, is now the purveyor of fiction claiming to be fact. In *Rip*, it is the historian who truly authorizes and in a sense resolves the story. A search for the "legendary lore" with which the historian began *Rip's* story is the animating principle in *Crayon's* pilgrimage. *Crayon's* travels are in search not of history but of human connection, and the animating legends of the old world. To be sure, he finds many of his visits barren ("Roscoe" and "The Boars Head Tavern, Eastcheap," for example). But he also revives the sentiment behind the legendary English literary heritage by incursions into the pastoral. It is in rural simplicity that the narrator revives both himself and his metaphors.**

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<sup>12</sup> Those claims are exemplified in the judicial opinions cited in Chapter One.

It is no accident that Rip's legend brings us back to colonial shores. Legendary lore is intimately connected to a place and its people; that is what Roscoe created for his community. Crayon's pilgrimage seems to be in search of an animating legend that will supply what was missing in *A History of New York*: a coherent sense of itself. Whether this is possible remains a question of both fact and fable.

That an American literary identity was paramount to *The Sketch Book* is suggested by the very next entry after Rip: "English Writers on America." Its opening epigram ties the legend of Rip to implied greatness. "Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks: methinks I see her as an eagle, mewing her mighty youth and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full mid-day beam." (786) This sleeping nation, as emblemized by the sleeping Rip, may well prove to deliver great things. That Irving had hope and regard for the possibility of American letters can hardly be doubted after this opening, and the chastisement of British critics of American writing that follows is pale by comparison. Crayon remonstrates the British press for its dismissal of American writers and writing, noting the promise the new nation offers to the literary world. "Over no nation does the press hold a more absolute control than over the people of America, for the universal education of the poorest classes makes every individual a reader." Crayon may be writing from the Old World, but his concerns assuredly lay in the new.

The two sketches that immediately follow, however, are clearly about English life. "Rural Life in England" extols the virtues of the English countryside, praising both the gardens and the literature that has memorialized them. Crayon praises the English scenery for "its moral feeling," and finds it associated in the mind with ideas of order" (800). He observes, "The pastoral writers of other countries appear as if they had paid nature an occasional visit, and become acquainted with her general charms, but the British poets have lived and reveled with her. They have wooed her in her most secret haunts—they have watched her minutest caprices"<sup>13</sup> (799).

Immediately after this encomium to the British pastoral writer, Crayon effectively attempts a pastoral of his own. The elegiac tribute to the young widow in "The Broken Heart" paints a vivid, almost melodramatic picture of the confines of feminine life:

...a woman's whole life is her world: it is there her ambition  
 strives for empire; it is there her avarice seeks for hidden treasures.  
 She sends forth her sympathies on adventure; she embarks her

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<sup>13</sup> Rubin-Dworsky observes that this chapter ought not to be taken only at face value. He notes that the cultivation of the English countryside serves as a metaphor for the way the English control their world.

whole soul in the traffic of affection; and if it is shipwrecked, her case is hopeless – for it is a bankruptcy of the heart <sup>14</sup> (802).

The story is the sad history of a young woman, married to an Irish officer who was executed for treason. Crayon quotes the Irish poet Moore, appending a poem that appears to mirror the story he has just recounted. The elegy for the young widow is completed through the lines of the poet, which celebrates her sleep “from her own island of sorrow” (807). Moore’s words become part of Crayon’s narration. Crayon’s careful selection matches a rural homily with a literary selection that mirrors it.

The telling epigram of the next sketch provides a kind of light-hearted assessment of what the author has thus far attempted. “The Art of Bookmaking,” a satire on books and the literary tradition, opens with this epigram from Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*: “If that severe doom of Synesius be true – ‘It is a greater offense to steal dead men’s labor, than their clothes’ what shall become of most writer’s?” (808) This jibe at writers also serves to mask the author’s confession. The narrator himself has stolen quite a few of these sketches. Even the preceding tale takes Moore’s lines and attaches them to the tale of the short-

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<sup>14</sup> Here is yet another example of the repetitive imagery of shipwreck and bankruptcy, echoing the opening vision of the shipwreck that arrested Crayon’s attention at the start of his journey, and the bankruptcy of the great Roscoe, that met him on arrival. These twin images – of wreckage and bankruptcy – become leit motifs in Crayon’s travels.

lived widow, a tale that was similarly recounted to him. By uniting this story with Moore's poetry, the narrator effectively aggrandizes both.

In fact, the formula of the opening epigram in many ways authorizes much of the narrative strategy, and in "The Art of Bookmaking," Crayon acknowledges as much. He finds himself in the reading room of The British Library, observing the tweedy and dry scholars in what he describes as "that hollowness and flatulency incident to learned research." As Crayon observes the writers at work, he considers an extended metaphor, comparing the "pilfering disposition" of authors, who take from one another, to Nature's conveyance of seeds and its regenerative capabilities.

We see that nature has wisely, though whimsically, provided for the conveyance of seeds from clime to clime, in the maws of certain birds, so that animals which, in themselves, are little better than carrion, and apparently the lawless plunderers of the orchard and cornfield, are in fact, Nature's carriers to disperse and perpetuate her blessings. In like manner, the beauties and fine thoughts of ancient and obsolete authors are caught up by these flights of predatory authors and cast forth again to flourish and bear fruit in a remote and distant tract of time. Many of their works also undergo a kind of metempsychosis and spring up under new forms. What was formerly a ponderous history revives in the shape of a romance, an old legend changes into a modern play,

and a sober philosophical treatise furnishes a body for a whole series of bouncing and sparkling essays. Thus it is in the clearing of our American woodlands; where we burn down a forest of stately pines, a progeny of dwarf oaks start up in their place, and we never see the prostrate trunk of a tree moldering into soil, but it gives birth to a whole tribe of fungi. Let us not then lament over the decay and oblivion into which ancient writers descend; they do but submit to the great law of nature, which declares all sublunary shapes of matter shall be of limited duration, but which decrees also that their elements shall never perish. Generation after generation, both in animal and vegetable life, passes away, but the vital principle is transmitted to posterity and the species continue to flourish. Thus also do authors beget authors, and having produced a numerous progeny, in a good old age they sleep with their fathers, that is to say, with the authors from whom they had stolen (810-811).

This is a remarkable passage, as much for its intricate metaphorical structure as for its anticipation of an anxiety of influence. The violent image of the burning of American woodland rehearses the revolution, and thereby suggests again that American literature will bear fruit. Nature here is considerably rehabilitated from its skeptical presentation in *A History of New York*. The law of

nature, while not entirely benign, is also not without its occasional rewards. Its redemptive qualities, while likening fruit to fungus, are nevertheless regenerative.

In fact, part of what makes *The Sketch Book* so different in tone and design from *A History of New York* is the narrator's willingness to believe in fiction, to accept metaphorical constructs and to allow them to authorize what he has to say. The jaundiced Knickerbocker of *A History* could not quite suspend his disbelief; Crayon is willing to do so. In fact, Crayon seems not only to accept not the necessity of fiction, he longs for it. *The Sketch Book* prizes poetry and art almost beyond anything else, and fiction is the key to their endurance. He writes in "A Royal Poet," "[L]et us not, however, reject every romantic incident as incompatible with real life, but let us sometime take the poet at his word" (824).

Crayon thus willingly accepts the metaphor that permits nature to function as a law. In fact, Crayon allows that fiction is as paramount to history as it is to art and poetry.<sup>15</sup> While Knickerbocker presented a jaundiced view of the past, *The Sketchbook's* Geoffrey Crayon is in search on an enchanted one, and he needs fiction to realize this goal.

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<sup>15</sup> Some of Knickerbocker's skepticism remains even in Crayon's more decorous tone. The narrator lapses into a fantasy in which authors appear dressed in the style of the writer they have aped, creating a parade of literary scarecrows. This image throws Crayon into a fit of laughter, and prompts the librarian to demand his card of admission. Crayon discovers the reading room is "a kind of literary preserve," subject to game laws, and he was an arrant poacher (814). Crayon's real target is British literary pomposity, however; the narrator remains the Yankee, plain-spoken voice of reason.

Crayon follows a loose pattern similar to the trilogy that opens *The Sketch Book*; the pilgrimage to Roscoe's barren library, the devotional tale of "The Wife," and the playful fiction of Rip van Winkle form a repetitive scheme. Crayon portrays the British literary world as dry and decaying. True vitality is found in pastoralism: in simple villages, in intimate connections. The simple truths of country life are played against the exaggerated sophistry of literary scholarship. Crayon's pilgrimage, which began in search of art, founders in libraries and flourishes in rural life.

In tale after tale, as Crayon continues his pilgrimage, from "The Art of Bookmaking" to the anti-scholarly "The Boars Head Tavern, Eastcheap," Crayon seems to eschew the old masters, their dusty books and tired pedantry in favor of those intimate human connections the author chronicles. In "The Boar's Head Tavern," Crayon makes a pilgrimage to the tavern once patronized by Falstaff in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. He takes pleasure in pricking the pursuit of scholars, preferring a savory lamb to further researches on the descendants of Falstaff and company.

The tales that follow, such as "Rural Funerals" and "The Widow and her Son," focus on family sentiment, loss and mourning. Each of these stories takes as its starting place the English countryside. In keeping with classical pastoral forms, death intrudes into each of these pastoral scenes. The viability of this classical form, with its mourning for a lost golden age, seems to have particular

resonance as Crayon continues his pilgrimage. They make clear, however, that Crayon prizes literary art, even if he denigrates its scholars.

In fact, *The Sketch Book* is as much about story-telling as it is about books. The second gothic tale of *The Sketch Book*, "The Spector Bridegroom," takes place in the Bavarian mountains and it is freely borrowed, as the author acknowledges, from an old Swiss tale. Unlike *The Sketch Book's* gothic tales that are set along the Hudson, this story presents the classic features of gothic literature. The foreign climes, the mountainous setting, the isolated castle, now somewhat decayed, the nobility, fallen on hard times, all these are classic indicia of the gothic. The narrator has great fun in presenting these frightening features somewhat ironically. The beautiful daughter, a prodigy, "could even spell her name without missing a letter." Even the characters family name, duly translated in a footnote, as Cat's Elbow, sets the tone of playfulness. It is clear that in this tale, told by the fireside, all is in fun, all is fiction.

"The Spector Bridegroom" is a genre tale of mistaken identity.<sup>16</sup> The baron arranges a marriage for his only daughter, but the groom is killed by robbers enroute to the wedding. His comrade, who attempts to deliver the bad news, is unable to get a word in edgewise, and is mistaken for the groom. When, accepting their error, he exasperatedly exclaims, I am a dead man, he is taken at his word, and is assumed to be a ghost. Eventually, the truth becomes clear,

domestic harmony is restored, with the only note of discord belonging to the bride's aunt, who regrets that her ghost story has been marred.

"The Specter Bridegroom" is pure story-telling, and as a gothic tale is not only ironic but fairly lumpen as well. It is explicitly a fireside tale, and functions both as interlude, and as a change in the direction of the narrative. Irving uses this rather obvious story as a link between gothic fiction and an ironic rendering of nature, similar to that of *Diedrich Knickerbocker's*; both invite disbelief.

After this tale, the stories of *The Sketch Book* become darker. They focus on graves, tombs and in many ways, a lost world. The story that immediately follows is *Westminster Abbey*, a tour of the famous London tombs. In the halls of these monuments to the dead, Crayon finds Ozymandian futility: "Thus man passes away; his name perishes from record and recollection; his history is as a tale that is told, and his very monument becomes a ruin."

The next section of *The Sketch Book* is fittingly elegiac, although it clearly has a less doleful tone. The Christmas section charts an England of tradition and rural custom, now almost vanished. Crayon's brief excursion in *London Antiques* lands him in a charitable Charter House, home to eighty-eight "broken down men." Even the visit to Shakespeare's birthplace at Stratford-on-Avon is more a story of tombs than a celebration of poetry. Crayon seems to be searching the

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<sup>16</sup> In this and in its other gothic trappings, it freely borrows from Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*.

English landscape for a usable past. Like the shipwreck he encountered when he first set sail, he finds scant vitality in the storied London of literary renown.

This search leads him, curiously enough, to the American landscape. Two tales, published earlier in *Analectic* during Irving's tenure as its editor, are reprised here. Both concern the American Indian, and as Rubin-Dworsky points out, they illustrate Irving's admiration for the Indian's resolve to safeguard their traditions. Philip of Pakonoket is unusual as the only depiction of war and bloodshed in the book, and it takes place on American shores, allowing Irving a way to speak of a history of American violence without directly confronting The Revolutionary War.

Irving, however, at last does discuss the war in the two final tales of *The Sketch Book*. While they have never before been considered companion tales, "The Angler" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" complete the carefully organized plan of *The Sketch Book*. They are in many respects mirror images of one another, and together demonstrate two opposing views of nature, and consequently, of the art that celebrates it.

Just as the writer Roscoe prompted Crayon's first excursion, it is a book that authorizes the story of The Angler. Having read Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, the narrator and his friends are smitten with "angling mania...[A]s soon as the weather was auspicious...we took rod in hand and sallied into the country, as stark mad as was ever Don Quixote from reading books of chivalry." This "madness" is inspired by Walton's *book*. Written in 1653, it is a virtual

encyclopedia of angling, noting various techniques, and the fish that will respond to them. More generally, *The Compleat Angler* offers opinions on the moral virtues of fishing, as well as a paean to English rural life. It features a hunter and a fisherman, Venator and Piscator (one of Virgil's interlocutors in the Eclogues), respectively, who leave London and enter a dream world of fishing. Much of the book is in the form of dialogue and it consciously echoes the famous dialogues of Plato, as well as Virgil's famous bucolic poetry.<sup>17</sup> Crayon freely admits he can't perform Walton's angling feats: "I hooked myself instead of the fish, tangled my line in every tree, lost my bait, broke my rod; until I gave up the attempt in despair and passed the day under the trees reading old Izaak, satisfied that it was his fascinating vein of honest simplicity and rural feeling that had bewitched me, not a passion for angling" (1050).

As the narrator confesses his lack of dexterity, he maintains that according to Walton, "angling is something like poetry- a man must be born to it"(1050). If the reader had failed to recognize the idealized pastoral simplicity of this setting, the narrator notes that the surrounding landscape with its rolling hills and clear water "was that pastoral kind which Walton is fond of describing" (1052). This "honest simplicity and rural feeling" have been the real treasure for which Irving has mined the English countryside. In fact, Crayon speaks of the rivers of

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<sup>17</sup> For an excellent assessment of Walton work, and the viability of such a pastoral retreat in contemporary life, see James Prosek's *The Complete Angler: A Connecticut Yankee Follows in the*

England as “veins of silver” and he has clearly followed their paths, from the trip up the Mersey (where he found Roscoe’s library) to the River Wye that is home to The Angler. By mining those “silver veins” of the old world, Crayon, and by extension Irving, found a usable past, suitable to “bewitch” his sketches. In the Angler, Irving has found his oaten flute.

The angler, himself a kind of *genius loci* not altogether unlike the native hero Roscoe, was finally enjoying a well-earned retirement.

He had been much of a rambler in his day and had passed some years of his youth in America, particularly in Savannah, where he had entered into trade, and had been ruined by the indiscretion of a partner. He had afterward experienced many ups and downs in life until he got into the navy, where his leg was carried away by a cannon ball at the battle of Camperdown. This was the only real stroke of real good fortune he had ever experienced, for it got him a pension, which together with some small paternal property, brought him in a revenue of nearly forty pounds. On this he retired to his native village, where he lived quietly and independently and devoted the remainder of his life to the noble art of angling (1053).

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*Footsteps of Walton.*

**Compare the description of the Angler with that of The Headless**

**Horsemen.**

**The dominant spirit, however, that haunts this enchanted region and seem to be commander- in -chief of all the powers in the air is the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon ball, in some nameless battle during the Revolutionary War (1059).**

**Here is the reverse image of the Angler, with his head being lost in cannon fire rather than his leg. The jovial character of the Angler, given financial independence by the war, is at peace with himself in the English countryside. His counterpart is recast in the next chapter as the ghost haunting the landscape of the new world. In a sense, both figures haunt Irving's landscape: the powerful attraction of the fading pastoral world, and the new world ghost of the Revolution.**

**The Angler, however, is not above seeking advantage where he can. He instructs the son of the local Innkeeper in fishing, in the hope of keeping a privileged corner at the bar. The Angler, we are told, had "the good-humored air of a constitutional philosopher, disposed to take the world as it went" (1056). The Angler is Locke's man in nature. To be sure, he is no fool, but he takes what he needs for himself and no more. He understands nature's bounty, and how to benefit from it without depleting it.**

If the Angler presented nature in terms of pastoral harmony, Sleepy Hollow gives us nature bewitched. While the Angler offers us a rural escape from a life at its twilight, Sleepy Hollow presents a town very much alive and in its prime. With the final appearance of Diedrich Knickerbocker's papers in which is found "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," American literature receives one of its best-known towns.

From the listless repose of the place, and the peculiar character of its inhabitants, who are descendants from the original Dutch settlers, this sequestered glen has long been known as Sleepy Hollow, and its rustic lads are called the Sleepy Hollow boys throughout all the neighboring country. A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere. Some say that the place was bewitched by a German doctor during the early days of the settlement; others that an old Indian chief, the prophet or wizard of his tribe, held hid powows there before the country was discovered by Master Hendrick Hudson. Certain it is, the place still continues under the sway of some witching power, that holds a spell over the minds of the good people, causing them to walk in a continual reverie. They are given to all kinds of marvelous beliefs, are subject to trances and

visions, and frequently see strange sights, and hear music and voices in the air (1059).

These presumed sources of this enchantment recall previous moments of *The Sketch Book*: the German doctor, an echo of *The Spector Bridegroom's* germanic setting, and the Indian chief, recalling the two tales of Indian heroism. This pastoral enclave is immediately converted into a scene of the supernatural. The eponymous legend provides the means by which nature is artfully constructed. Michael Squires notes that “the pastoral...provides a retreat through time and space...to recover the lost unity of human and natural worlds” (13). In many ways, this is what Irving’s peculiar marriage of pastoral and gothic modes in this final tale has achieved: it has re-united invention with convention, fiction with fact, legend with the land. It has provided a unique sense of history and identity to a place, to a very American place. This is the fitting conclusion to Crayon’s pilgrimage: he has inculcated his own home with the legendary lore of an absent past. In the shadow of the Hudson, Irving has found a “silver vein” to mine on American shores.

Ichabod Crane and the Angler are both instructors, and both are storytellers, but with differing messages. The Angler “delighted the rustics with his songs and, like Sinbad, astonished them with his stories of strange lands and shipwrecks” (1056). Ichabod, the local schoolmaster, is a devotee of Cotton Mather, fond of his stories of witchcraft, which Ichabod used to solidify his

position with the ladies of Sleepy Hollow, on whom he depended for his meals. A man of large appetite, Crane liked stories as much as food, both of which he “swallows whole” (1063). In fact, another of Mather’s works eponymously recalls this hero; it is entitled, *Ichabod, or a discourse shewing what cause there is to fear that the glory of the Lord is departing from New England*. Irving makes little effort to glorify Crane. The former resident of Connecticut has adopted none of Mather’s piety, but his superstition will prompt him to depart Sleepy Hollow.

Crane has a particular taste for the riches of the Hudson valley. He is in love with Katerina van Tassel. “[H]is heart yearned after the damsel who was to inherit these domains, and his imagination expanded with the idea, how they might readily be turned into cash, and the money invested in immense tracts of wild land, and shingle palaces in the wilderness” (1067). Where the Angler was Locke’s man in nature, Crane is Yankee appetitiveness, greedy and unsatisfied.

Martin Roth argues convincingly that Ichabod is not a stand-in for the artist, but rather is his antithesis.

It has been argued by several critics that Sleepy Hollow dramatizes the conflict between the active and the imaginative life, and that Ichabod, despite the ridiculous figure he is made to cut, is a Quixotic projection of the artist – deliberately ridiculous as an emblem of the slightly comic figure of the artist in America. If, after fifteen years of trying, Irving finally managed to paint this enemy in rich colors, this can hardly be taken as evidence of an

awakened sympathy for the type. For Ichabod Crane is definitely the enemy. Crane is not only a Yankee of Franklin's stamp, he also possesses many of the qualities of his earlier Puritan ancestors. Both attitudes involve a manipulation of nature, one for the purpose of accumulating material wealth and the other for arousing piety through terror (63).

It would not be an exaggeration to add a third unfortunate manipulation of nature which Ichabod is guilty. After Ichabod, terrified by his encounter with The Headless Horseman, disappears, we learn he has "studied law, had been admitted to the bar, turned politician, electioneered, written for the newspapers, and finally had been made a justice of The Ten Pound Court" (1086). In short, Ichabod becomes Washington Irving in reverse, embracing all that Irving fled from. Not incidental to the life Irving turned away from was the legal manipulation of nature as an ethical source. Here is the third and final manipulation of nature that Ichabod Crane endorses, and Washington Irving sought to upend. Crane, as small town jurist, is now free to make of nature what he will. He has the power to enlist nature as the "arbiter" of his decisions, just as Blackstone had decreed. The empty metaphors of *A History of New York* will undoubtedly live on in the work of the credulous Yankee, Ichabod Crane.

The last and very curious line of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” echoes the dubious footnotes of Rip van Winkle. At the tale’s conclusion, the storyteller is questioned by a skeptical listener, who suggests he had a few doubts on one or two. The storyteller then avows, “Faith, sir, as to that matter, I don’t believe one-half of it myself.” As to this very irresolute conclusion, Roth offers “It would be tempting to hear Irving defending his Dutch American vision as American imagining, made up in defiance of American fact but still meaningful” (167-68).

Indeed, Roth backs away from that conclusion without warrant. So much of *The Sketch Book* is devoted to the idea of fiction, and the creation of legend. Crayon’s pilgrimage has been in search of the “legendary lore” that animates and revives its surroundings. From the opening scene of Roscoe’s Liverpool library to the final penultimate chapters –there has been a battle of tradition versus vitality, convention versus invention. Crayon has found most of the English literary world barren, and yet he cannot resist story-telling. *Sleepy Hollow*, and *The Sketchbook*, have been haunted – haunted by a promise of an idealized view of the past, and a search for the pastoral version of nature. “I don’t believe one half of it myself” is finally the author’s confession, acknowledging the falseness of his fiction, as well as its necessity. Without the constructive metaphor of nature, with all its ennobling and idealizing components, we are left with the empty metaphors of *A History of New York*. Irving grants that Knickerbocker’s merciless skepticism is not far from the truth, but without it, there is no possibility of art. The sportive gothic that Irving employs allows him to tantalize with an

admittedly false story. Like the reveries of the Sleepy Hollow inhabitants, or even the wine of Knickerbocker's final companions, the author offers some respite from Yankee literalism. The golden age never was, and yet the mourning for it is real enough.

In "The Royal Poet," Irving wrote,

There is a charm about a spot that has been printed by the footprints of departed beauty and consecrated by the inspirations of the poet which is heightened, rather than impaired, by the lapse of ages. It is, indeed, the gift of poetry to hallow every place in which it moves, to breathe around nature an odor more exquisite than the perfume of the rose, and to shed over it a tint more magical than the blush of morning ( 827).

Sleepy Hollow is enchanted precisely because it is haunted.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Edgar Allan Poe and “The Walls of the Universe”: Nature Becomes Claustrophobic**

**“Horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity.”**

**– “Berenice”**

**Edgar Allan Poe is the American master of the tale of terror. He not only embraced the gothic as his chosen form; in some ways he re-invented it. Shortly after his death, *The Southern Literary Messenger* eulogized him as “the true head of American literature” (Goddu 77). Their verdict has not necessarily been shared by Poe’s contemporaries, or our own. Yet it is undisputed that his effect upon both American and European writers has been profound. Poe introduced a new image of American space that no other author had envisioned.**

**Poe is both similar to, and unlike his fellow American gothic authors. A profound faith in human reason was one of the bedrock principles of constitutional democracy, and it is safe to say that all American gothic authors, Poe especially, suggested this faith was misplaced. Unlike both Brown and Irving, however, Poe was not a lawyer. While he does not tackle specifically**

legal issues in the way Federalist attorney-writers do, he in effect builds upon their work by challenging the underlying assumptions of the Enlightenment.

Like Brown and Irving, Poe was fascinated with the supernatural as a literary device. However, Poe did not use the gothic as a means of largely political critique (although there are many overlooked political comments in his stories). Brown was quite pointed in his discussions of nature as a trope of philosophic debate: he presented nature as a Jeffersonian arcadia, or a Hobbesian field of terror. These symbolic renderings of nature of course had profound implications for a nation built upon natural law, and Brown's gothic was specifically targeted at exposing these fallacies. Poe was far less literal in discussing nature as a philosophic domain. In Poe, the natural world is always, and self-consciously artificial. Nevertheless, Poe's insistently dangerous and unreliable world extends Brown's questions beyond where Brown allowed them to go. For Poe, the reliability of our sensations was not a hypothesis to be disproved; the unreliability of our senses was a condition from which we could not escape.

Unlike Irving, on the other hand, Poe was not fixed upon exposing the fiction of idealized views of natural world. He is never elegiac about the English literary heritage he inherited, nor is he sentimental for its past glory. Poe saw no golden age now lost, nor the possibility of its restoration. While Irving was pointedly speaking to the British literary heritage that preceded him, Poe was

engaging centuries of consideration of art and cosmology. While Brown tried in his fiction to contain the body politic, in his tales, Poe exploded human reason.

Poe's gothic stories are thus both less and more than his predecessors'. They are less pointedly about political assumptions, and more concerned with human concourse. They are less concerned with literary history and more concerned with classic questions of aesthetics. Curiously, although Poe's work often takes place in an unnamed locale, at an unspecified point in time, few writers have better captured their particular social moment. All the terrors of the modern world seem to reside in his stories. The advent of the city, the crowd, the growth of industrial capitalism, the fluidity of economic position and the alienation of the individual from the social world — all these events echo in his stories. His fiction is resolutely a part of mid-nineteenth-century America.

Indeed, few critics have recognized that Poe was deeply concerned with articulating an American literary voice. He took up the charge that America had produced no writers worth reading and offered potent evidence against it, both in his own work, and in the authors about whom he chose to write. He became a self-appointed arbiter of American literary merit. Like Irving, he took national literature seriously, and his own American origins animated his search for the discovery of an American literary voice. While many of Poe's reviews of his colleagues' work were unfavorable, his aesthetic concerns centered around the quality of American art. This Southern native was not attempting to enter the

estate of British heritage; as his literary criticism shows, Poe was trying to demonstrate the primacy and possibility of American literature.

There is considerable divergence on Poe's merit as a critic and writer. Poe was famously relegated to a footnote in F.O. Matthiessen's seminal *American Renaissance*, and only resurrected much later, with the help of continental writers who championed his work. One commentator has suggested that some dismiss Poe's stories as a complicated way of saying boo (Wilbur 99). Henry James thought Poe deeply imaginative but unable to sustain throughout his fiction the inventiveness of his ideas. Harold Bloom finds Poe's prose so labored that he declares, "Even translation into his own language benefits Poe" (8). And Poe's rather explicit derogatory ideas about Jews and African Americans have kept him outside at least some canons of American literature. Nevertheless, Poe's work continues to generate imitation, as well as thousands of works of critical analysis. His influence haunts American culture, both high and low.

Poe's life is well documented and he has been well served by recent biographers. A few facts are worth repeating because they bear so forcefully on his writing. He was born in 1809 to a young and well-known English actress, Elizabeth Arnold Poe. His father, David Poe, was a young former law student from a good Baltimore family who, somewhat uncharacteristically, had recently joined Elizabeth Arnold's acting company. When Edgar Allan Poe was two years old, his mother died of tuberculosis; his father died shortly thereafter (although there is some disagreement as to whether the elder Poe died that very week or

some two years later). Each of the Poe's three children was sent to live with different families. Edgar, their middle child, was "adopted" (though his status was never legalized) by a childless, upper middle class Southern couple. Poe's adoptive father, a tobacco merchant named John Allan, went on to make a small fortune, and Edgar was raised in privilege. After living with the Allans in London for five years, Poe enrolled at the University of Virginia at age sixteen. Money was the basis of some tension between Poe and his adoptive father, and their relationship grew fraught. After only a year, Poe had run up so many debts (many from gambling) that he was forced to leave the University. He managed to obtain a commission to West Point, but left there prematurely after incurring enough disciplinary infractions to warrant being court-martialed. When his adoptive mother died, John Allan remarried and he and his second wife had children of their own. Eventually, John Allan refused to have anything further to do with Poe. Although Poe was intermittently employed by various American literary journals, he was to fight poverty for the rest of his life. After leaving West Point, Poe turned to his father's side of the family, eventually marrying his thirteen-year old cousin. He lived with his young wife and his aunt until his wife's death from tuberculosis at age 24. She was the same age as Poe's mother when she died, and both died of the same disease. The themes of death, loss, the loss of social position and the infernal return of the dead were thus well inscribed in Poe's early history even before he picked up a pen.

While Poe's biography serves as a gloss to some of the stories, part of what makes them interesting is that none of these facts begin to explain them. The stories remain outside his biography, outside any known realm. Poe's universe looks like nothing we have seen, and yet it is remarkably familiar. Poe's depiction of nature is quintessentially unnatural: it neither looks nor sounds like anything American literature had produced. While generations of American writers had depicted nature as a matrix of value, in Poe nature becomes a trope of indecipherable meaning. The physical world had been completely domesticated, and yet it offered no repose. Most notably, Poe's world foreclosed any avenue of escape. Poe's presentation of nature was a radical departure from any previous depiction of nature in American literature.

One of Poe's ablest critics, Richard Wilbur, hones in on this feature in his reading. He notes, "The narrative of William Wilson conducts the hero from Stoke Newton to Eton, from Eton to Oxford, and then to Rome by way of Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, Naples, and Egypt: and yet, for all his travels, Wilson never seems to set foot out of doors" (Wilbur, "The House of Poe," 104). In "William Wilson," as in many of Poe's tales, you don't seem to know where you are even when you have been told.

Moreover, Poe rarely placed his stories in a recognizably American locale<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Landor's Cottage" is a notable exception, and is set in the Hudson valley as a critique of Washington Irving's best-selling work.

Famous European capitals are nominally the setting for many of the stories, but as Wilbur points out, the characters almost always remain indoors. It hardly matters where they are. This absence of a particular American locus in Poe's tales was a striking change in the national literature of his day. In one way or another the American landscape had played a prominent role in almost all the literature the new nation had produced. From to the poetry of John Cullen Bryant to the allegorical tales of Cooper's Natty Bumppo, the American landscape was a featured aspect in nineteenth-century American fiction and poetry. Even the best-selling seduction novels of Hannah Webster Foster and Susana Rowson, which examined the confines of the "woman's sphere," have a particularly American caste.<sup>2</sup>

For authors like Irving and Brown, the setting of their gothic tales had to be American if their stories were to have meaning. Place was intimately connected with "that legendary lore" upon which Irving's literary pilgrimage in *The Sketchbook* depended. "Rip van Winkle" would have little resonance outside of the Hudson valley --Rip had to have slept through the American Revolution if the tale is to have its proper political thrust. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," set in the Bavarian foothills as it once was, is not the same story without a specter from the American Revolutionary War. Similarly, Brown's novels would have a

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<sup>2</sup> Foster's *The Coquette* takes place in Massachusetts, while Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* is set in colonial New York at the time of the Revolutionary War. Each of these novels takes as its setting a former colony, now a state. The transportation of the English novel of seduction to American shores is thus made explicit. The liberation of the colonies effects no similar emancipation for the women that helped to settle them.

wholly different subject matter if they were set in some European locale. The fact that Clara Wieland survives by fleeing to Europe is bleak commentary on Brown's view of America's future.

Yet, Poe consciously eschews an identifiable locale. In fact, this ambiguity of place is one of Poe's hallmarks as a gothic writer. His is a world of enclosure, not expanse. His literary vision is confined. His action takes place indoors, and very often the walls themselves are closing in. For American literature of the 1830's and 1840's, this absence of a bucolic American setting was more than a throwback to the European gothic. For the first time in its literature, American space became claustrophobic.

As Robert L. Carringer pointed out, "Most key moments of action in Poe conspicuously involve severely restrictive enclosures, from stuffy Gothic rooms to deep dark pits to damp, musty caves to whirlpools, coffins, tombs, and various kinds of secret recesses within a wall or underneath a floor" (20). In fact, even when Poe's stories are set in their most limitless expanse, the sea, his protagonists remain confined in creaking vessels that threaten to become coffins.

In "MS. Found in a Bottle," the narrator opens the story by placing the reader in limbo. "Of my country and my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other" (189). From this typically ambiguous and unknown beginning, the protagonist embarks on a sea voyage, prompted, "by a kind of nervousness that haunted me as a fiend." A blast shatters the ship, and the narrator is unaccountably catapulted to

another vessel, where none of the crew seems to see him, although he passes directly before them. Equally fabulous, the narrator absentmindedly dabs a tar brush along the edges of a folded sail, only to see when the sail is unfurled that his tar painting has spelled out the word, "Discovery." The vessel itself calls to mind "indistinct shadows of recollection, an unaccountable memory of old foreign chronicles and ages long ago" (196). This echo of New World discovery becomes all the more chilling when the narrator turns to the expanse of sea around him:

"All in the immediate vicinity of the ship is the blackness of eternal night, and a chaos of foamless water; but about a league on either side of us, may be seen, indistinctly and at intervals, stupendous ramparts of ice, towering into the desolate sky, and looking like the walls of the universe" (198). In what ought to be the vast expanse of the discoverable universe, Poe has contracted its very walls. The story drives to its inevitable end by plunging the ancient vessel into a downward whirlpool, leaving only the manuscript in a bottle to record the fate of the narrator.

This brief story is emblematic of the claustrophobia that characterizes Poe's depiction of nature. Both the sea and the earth seemingly confine. There is no space that is not somehow imprisoning. Poe is masterful at creating a sense of familiarity at the same time he cloaks his settings and characters in obscurity. The subsurface reverberations in Poe's gothic help make these stories resonate. For instance, the echoes of the voyage of discovery call to mind the New World without in any way depicting it. The inability of the crew to see the stowaway

even when he stands before them suggests that something profound has been shrouded from view; the parallel between this voyage and the discovery of the new world suggests deeper consequence to this blindness. This inability to see our way, to connect with where we are, is what makes Poe's gothic unique.

At the same time, it would be incorrect to suggest that Poe was not deeply involved in how American literary identity had been, and would be formed. He includes in the second edition of his poetry an open letter that raises the difficult status of the American writer: "You are aware of the great barrier in the path of an American writer. He is read, if at all, in preference to the combined and established wit of the world. I say established; for it is with literature as with law or empire – an established name is an estate in tenure or a throne in possession" (11). In an essay entitled, "Poe and Tradition," Brian M. Barbour notes that Poe's creative years coincided with the Age of Jackson. To the degree that this period represented a triumph of the individual and a celebration of liberated autonomy, Barbour points out that Poe's most valuable stories embody a critique of this tradition (64-65). It pays to recall, by way of counterpoint, that Emerson published "The American Scholar" in the same year that Poe published *Lygia* and the first installments of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Although Poe and Emerson agreed on the need for a distinctly American art, they shared little else.

To review a passage from “The American Scholar” may help illustrate the great divide between Emersonian nature, and Poe’s connection to the physical world.

The first in time and the first in importance of the influence of the mind is that of nature. Every day the sun; and, after sunset, Night and her stars. Ever the winds blow, ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing-beholding and beholden. The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages....Nature hastens to render account of herself to the human mind. Classification begins. ...But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law of the human mind? (41)

Emerson perceived an order in nature. He believed human perception was both destined and privileged to see without itself the order that operated within it. Most importantly, nature revealed to the human mind that studied it an inherent logic, an operation that both nourished and expanded the mind.

This view of the natural world as ordered and redemptive stands in stark contrast to Poe’s depiction of nature in his fiction.

To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible; yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful

regions, predominates over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge – some never to be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction. (198)

Here in short is the distinction between epistemic happiness and epistemic gloom.<sup>3</sup> While Emerson sees intellectual redemption in the contemplation of nature, Poe finds disorder and terror. Both are entranced by the outside world; both use it to fuel the imaginative process. Poe, like Emerson, sought to penetrate the world's mysteries, but his search was often attended by horror. The great secret of nature, so many of his works imply, was its capacity to destroy. For Emerson the outside world begins to define the mind; for Poe the outside world defeats the mind. Together they represent the two poles of thinking about nature in mid-nineteenth century America.

Poe, hardly an advocate of Jacksonian democracy, nevertheless was engaged by both politics and art. A conservative Southerner of his day, his first employment was an appointment to West Point, and he later sought a position with the United States Customs House, by relying on his acquaintance with

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware that Emerson is articulating a theory of thought, and Poe is writing a horror story, and thus the difference between these two passages is not intended to be a comparison of similarly oriented approaches. Nevertheless, the selection from Poe's fiction is emblematic of his use of nature throughout his fiction. Almost all of nature begins to decompose, if not physically than symbolically in the mind of its perceiver. In fiction, Poe states more boldly the destructive potential of nature than he is able to do in his essays. In fact, the essays lack the coherence of his fiction.

President Tyler's son, Robert<sup>4</sup> (Silverman 186-190). While these are not unusual choices for a well-born Southerner, they demonstrate, as do many of his essays, that Poe was not simply an aesthete focused only on his art, as some more romantic views would hold. As Barbour points out, Poe had strongly held ideas on politics and government, and even on natural law theorists such as Locke and Rousseau. Poe wrote,

The theorizers on Government who pretend always to 'begin with the beginning,' commence with Man in what they call his natural state – the savage. What right have they to suppose this his natural state ? Man's chief idiosyncrasy being reason, it follows that his savage condition – his condition of action without reason – is his unnatural state. (quoted in Barbour, 66)

This passage is intriguing on two counts. First, it reveals Poe's skepticism about natural law theorists, and by extension his disdain for the ideas of government they advocated. But more surprisingly, one would not expect that a gothic writer would insist that acting unreasonably would be *unnatural*. To the contrary, gothic celebrates the unreasonable. Humans in their natural state *are* unreasonable in gothic fiction. Poe seems to have it both ways. Human reason is the *sine qua non* of human existence and at the same time, his fiction only

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<sup>4</sup>For an extensive discussion of how Poe's disturbing views on race reflect his Southern heritage, see Teresa Goddu's extended examination of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.

commences in spite of it. Dupin is the only one of Poe's characters whose reason is not somehow suspect. So many of Poe's narrators describe the reasonableness of their actions by revealing acts that make one's hair stand on end. (Consider the increasingly unhinged narrators of "The Black Cat," "The Tell Tale Heart," or "Lygeia," to cite just a few examples.) Yet, Poe's argument with the social contractarians is that they fail to consider reason the pre-eminent state of natural humanity. One begins to understand how Harold Bloom came to call Poe's writing a "hymn to negativity" (15). Poe asserts the primacy of reason on the one hand and devotes a career in fiction to proving the unreliability of man's reason. One of the underlying faults lurking at the edges of the stories is that the reader is left without anything to cling to. Poe's skepticism is clear; however, so, too is the absence of any belief. This void that at the center of so much of Poe's work is part of what makes it so terrifying.

The critic Larzar Ziff declared, "Notoriously, Edgar Allan Poe was a man without a country. He had no allegiance to the America imagined by his fellow countryman; no definite location within any unit of his homeland (67). Nevertheless, the poet William Carlos Williams found Poe to be "a genius intimately shaped by his locality and his time" (Howarth 34). "In him American literature is anchored, in him alone, on solid ground" (Rosenheim 1). These observations appear to contradict one another, yet both may be true. In Poe we can never quite get our bearings, yet, this inability to know where we are may be an endemic part of American life in the first half of the nineteenth century. The

many unprecedented changes of the Federalist period --the political birth of the nation, the shifting economic system of the new nation, the rise of industrial capitalism, the fall of aristocratic American life-- were keenly felt by Poe in particular. His was a precipitous slide from one economic class to another, from actress' orphan to Virginia plantation owner's adopted son and finally, destitute husband to his barely grown cousin. This fluidity of place and status apparently gave him a keen ear for the difficulty of shaping an identity on ever-shifting ground. Williams correctly identifies Poe as someone acutely attuned to his moment in history. Poe's lack of a stable identity may in fact be an expression of the nation's lack of one as well.

Consider the opening of William Wilson. "Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation." The eponymous protagonist of this short story is introduced as a kind of poseur. This identification without real identity is a technique Poe used often.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the narrator of William Wilson leaves little doubt that he is not to be trusted. "Men usually grow base by degrees," he explains. "From me, in an instant, all virtue dropped bodily as a mantle" (337). His is the only voice we will hear, and we immediately know it to be corrupt.

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<sup>5</sup> The opening of "MS Found in a Bottle" is similarly obscure "Of my country and my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one and estranged me from the other." "Why then give a date to the story I have to tell?" he asks in "Metzengerstein." In "Berenice," the narrator begins by stating, "My baptismal name is Egæus; that of my family I will not mention." As these examples illustrate, both speaker and setting are often indistinct. These standard elements of fiction, identity and setting, are purposely ambiguous, leaving the reader uncertain ground from the outset.

On one level, "William Wilson" presents an eerie dramatization of the assault of the superego. Like many of Poe's tales, this story anticipates Freud, and suggests the structure of personality that he would ultimately articulate. William Wilson, a precocious child, meets his exact double at boarding school. They share the same name, birthday, gait, and appearance. The double, however, speaks only in a whisper "the very echo " of Wilson's own voice. Despite their twin-like appearance, only Wilson can see the full resemblance "I had but one consolation- in the fact that the imitation, apparently, was noticed by myself alone"(345). The lawlessness of Wilson continues unchecked and he becomes a kind of id run amok.

Standard elements of character and setting, elements that help to define the contours of fiction, are purposefully blurred. It remains difficult to fathom this strange double that directs the narrator and appears obscure to everyone else. Adding to the sense of disorientation, the speaker makes this remarkable assertion about his boarding school. "During the last five years of my residence here, I was never able to ascertain with precision in what remote locality lay the little sleeping apartment assigned to myself and some 18 or 20 scholars" (340). In five years' time, the narrator has been unable to locate where he lives.

This indistinct sense of place is in marked contrast to so many of Poe's contemporaries, for whom specifically American locales assume an important

role.<sup>6</sup> In much of Poe's fiction, that definitive feature, setting, was purposely indistinct. Joan Dayan notes,

In his *Philosophy of Composition* and his 1847 review of Hawthorne's *Tales*, Poe develops a two-tiered notion of composition, which results in what he calls "indefiniteness of effect." This "indefiniteness" should be read as no mere impression, no vague, soul-stirring resonance, but a radical uncertainty that makes us physically uneasy. (7)

This apt insight shows the convergence of both style and substance in Poe's technique. In "William Wilson," a story of twenty pages, the author three times refers to a wilderness. "I would fain have [my fellow men] believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of fatality amid a *wilderness* of error" (337). In an ironic turn, this American writer speaks of an *escape* from free will as if such bondage were an oasis. At school, Wilson is involved in a "*wilderness* of sensation," calling to mind Locke's famous claim that "sensation was the great source of most of the ideas we have." The raw nature that William Wilson's metaphors connote is

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<sup>6</sup> The American colonial past figures at least implicitly in the setting of so many of Poe's fellow writers. Both Brown and Irving use an American setting as part of the plot for the gothic tales. Hawthorne's tales rely on their New England setting for much of their mood as well as their sense of a colonial past. For early nineteenth century writers, place, like character, formed a key element of fiction.

hardly a fertile source of discovery but an impenetrable labyrinth. In order to steal into the bedchambers of his double late at night, the narrator must pass through a “wilderness of narrow passage ways.”

Regardless of the specific setting of the action, whether it is Rome or Dr. Bransby’s school, the narrator is always in a figurative wilderness. The speaker uses the noun “will” almost one dozen times, and even the eponymous narrator chooses a name that plays on the phrase. What makes “William Wilson” unnerving is the assumption that our analytic narrator is in the exercise of free will, despite his avowal that he has been hounded and obsessed by his double. “From his inscrutable tyranny did I at length flee, panic-stricken, as from a pestilence; and to the very ends of the earth, *I fled in vain*,” the narrator maintains (354). Indeed, he has; at the story’s conclusion, Wilson stabs his double only to discover his own blood-covered body reflected in a mirror. For all this character’s urbane wandering, from prep school to Eton, to Naples and Rome, he wanders in a wilderness of his own making, and from which he cannot escape. Stalked by the mirror of his own self, it hardly matters where he is. The “oasis of fatality,” the dream of escape from his own “free” will, remains a mirage. Indeed, “William Wilson” questions the very existence of freedom.

One of the unique aspects of this gothic story is the formality of diction the narrator consistently employs, even when narrating the scenes of his

childhood<sup>7</sup>. “Of his parents, he writes, “Weak-minded, and beset with constitutional infirmities akin to my own, my parents could do little to check the evil propensities which distinguished me... Thenceforward my voice was a household law” (338). As this metaphor suggests, the story is replete with legal phraseology: William Wilson, the assumed name of both characters, is made to represent both high and low birth, both nobility and ignominy. “Notwithstanding a noble descent, mine was one of those every-day appellations which seem, by prescriptive right, to have been, time out of mind, the common property of the mob” (341). This elevated diction would be more common in court pleadings than in the heightened sensationalism of the gothic. Wilson displays, “a profligacy which set at defiance the laws, while it eluded the vigilance of the institution.” This legalistic formality suggests that the narrator is rationally processing the peculiar information he receives. No matter how often he demands of his double who he is, where he came from and what his objects are, he could determine no answer. His attempts at cogent analysis fail. The inflated language the narrator uses allows “William Wilson” to reach beyond its immediate subject matter: “Poor justification this, in truth, for an authority so imperiously assumed! Poor indemnity for natural rights of self-agency so pertinaciously, so insultingly denied” (354). The speaker’s apparent loss of free will, the violation of his natural rights by this mysterious double, suggest the arena of political authority.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Donald Barlow Stauffer essay, “Style and Meaning in *Ligeia* and *William Wilson*” in which he notes the oblique relation of the speaker’s diction to the action he reports.

Fittingly that arena is as ambiguous and difficult to chart as the setting of Dr. Bransby's school. Wilson wanders through an indeterminate "wilderness of error," a forever shrinking enclosure that ends in self-regard, and finally self-destruction. No matter how widely this character travels, his world is always contracting.

The subsurface implications in a story that deliberately mimicked legal language help give it its uncanny weight. Poe's tales are as much about social terror as they are about psychological instability. The undetermined identity of its protagonist, whose name represents both the aristocracy and the mob, makes him both ruler and ruled. The presumed order of legality is subverted: the misbehaving child becomes a "household law." Self-agency appears to be desperately elusive, and the implications for self-governance are similarly dour. Even human freedom is rendered as a monstrous. "Wilson's rebellion," as Poe terms it, harks back to an earlier rebellion, one that has simply copied the specter from which it had fled. On one level, "William Wilson" suggests that the tyranny the American colonists fled has followed them here, and their "self-agency" has simply duplicated their oppression. However, the eerie first person narration preserves the terror as a distinctly personal injury.

This "wilderness," a repeated image in Poe's tales of the grotesque, is a far cry from common images of nature that were familiar to nineteenth-century readers. The growth of the city necessarily resulted in an idealized countryside—

open nature obviously offered more respite from the congestion of the city.<sup>8</sup> The progress of science, and its encyclopedic ordering of nature had made nature seem both decipherable and somewhat more domesticated. This ordered sense of the natural, particularly in American thought was linked closely with Locke. Locke's insistence that empirical experience would reveal the underlying order of God's world made nature seem less of a wilderness, and human reason more coherent (a point amplified by Emerson). The beginning of following quotation from "Morella" may serve as a gloss on William Wilson's dual self:

That identity which is termed personal, Mr. Locke, I think, truly defines to consist in the sameness of a rational being. And since by person we understand an intelligent essence having reason, and since there is a consciousness which always accompanies thinking, it is this which makes us all to be that which we call ourselves – thereby distinguishing us from other beings that think, and giving us our personal identity. But the *principium individuationis* – the notion of that identity which at death is or is not lost forever, was to me at all times, a consideration of intense interest; not more from the perplexing and exciting nature of its consequences, than from the marked and agitated manner in which Morella mentioned them. (235)

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<sup>8</sup> The naïve view of nature as pastoral escape can be found in Irving's essays in *The Sketchbook*. London is full of pretentious discomforts and poverty, where the rural landscapes are hospitable

Poe regarded Locke with great skepticism, and his tales give rout to his principles, some more gently than others. While “William Wilson” undoes Locke’s idea of man as a coherent and rational being, “Morella” attacks Locke’s notion of individual personality. Poe doubted the value of Locke’s theories when it came to explaining spirituality:

Locke conceived of the mind as a blank page on which ideas of the external world were inscribed through the senses, or as a kind of mechanical organizer of sensations which were fed to it by “experience.” This view appeared very well-suited to explain the processes of scientific classification and experiment or the formation of common sense judgments on practical matters, but it tended to create the assumption that only the physical, the tangible, the measurable were real, and that consciousness was a prisoner of the senses. (quoted in Barbour, *Southern Literary Journal* 10, no. 2, 78)

For Poe, who was deeply interested in the spiritual processes of the mind, Locke’s view was hopelessly limiting. Moreover, Poe aptly linked Locke with scientific and empirical classifications of nature, which necessarily assumed that nature was a reflection of inherent order.

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and real. For more on this point, see the discussion in Chapter 3.

In stories like "Morella," which charts the death of a beautiful woman, Poe gives little credence to Locke's theory of personal identity, and even less to his idea of an empirically discoverable natural order. Morella, the narrator's young wife, dies giving birth to the couple's only child. The child grows to be a mirror image of the dead wife, and after some years she, too, dies. When she is placed in the same tomb as her mother, the narrator discovers to his horror that his wife's tomb is empty, and the daughter, named Morella after her mother, is the only woman buried there. This story, like "Ligiea" and "Berenice," involve dead women who will not remain dead. All three are narrated by men who become increasingly deranged, and feature beautiful women, who, in fulfillment of Poe's edict that there is no more beautiful thing than the death of a beautiful woman, obligingly suffer early death. In all three stories, however, the corpses have a more vivid existence after their interment than before it. Corpses rising from their tombs presented not just an aesthetic reversal, but an absolute violation of the natural order. Poe is cunning in his oblique references to the dominant ideas of Locke's philosophy. In "Berenice," a story in which the narrator fetishized the teeth of his dead love, he writes, "It was a fearful page in the record of my existence, written all over with dim, and hideous, and unintelligible recollections. I strived to decipher them, but in vain; while ever and anon, like the spirit of a departed sound, the shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice seemed to be ringing in my ears" (232). This is a far cry from Locke's *tabula rasa*. The blank pages of the mind, which for Locke represented the tablet upon which sensation

and experience would write, reappear but with horrific consequence. The characters, like the bizarre characters of the narrators in all three stories, remain undecipherable and unintelligible.

Poe was not without humor in his frequent attacks on Locke's principles. In "How to Write a Blackwood Article," he advises a putative writer on how to compose a tale suitable for publication in one of the nation's best-selling journals for sensational stories. "The tone metaphysical is also a good one. If you know any big words this is your chance for them. Talk of the Iconic and Eleatic school – of Archytas, Gorgias and Alcmeon. Say something about objectivity and subjectivity. Be sure and abuse a man called Locke" (282). This tongue-in-cheek advice was not without some truth. Poe knew the contours of Locke's principles, and he viewed the basic premises as antithetical to his own. Moreover, effect, not order, was the ultimate goal of his fiction, and it was not possible to create dark effect without suggesting the dark side of thought. Locke is a writer for whom anxiety existed as a spur to thought; for Poe, anxiety was a condition to thinking.<sup>9</sup>

"The House of Usher," one of Poe's masterworks, is an apt example of this tension. In fact, Usher is a kind of fictive presentation of entering an abyss. Its opening is probably the most sustained performance of foreboding in American literature.

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<sup>9</sup> For discussion of Poe's ideas on the importance of effect in crafting his writing, see "The Philosophy of Composition."

During the whole of a dull , dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was –but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable doom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon a few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees – with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after dream of the reveler upon opium – the bitter lapse into everyday life – the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was 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. What was it – I paused to think-what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? (317)

The adjectives alone proceed along an ever-increasing trajectory of doom – dull, dark, low, dreary, melancholy, insufferable, desolate, terrible, decayed. The wonder, of course, is that the narrator actually enters the house. The speaker remarks on the “combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us.” The description of the speaker’s first glimpse of the House of Usher – “unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible,” is bizarre in what it chooses to yoke together – the poetic and the stern natural images of the desolate. In many ways, that same juxtaposition is part of the design of “The House of Usher.”

The narrator of the story even makes the meaning of his title more explicit: the valet “ushers him into the presence of the master of the house.” The room holds all the gothic trappings (“gothic archways,” floors of “ebon blackness, “sombre tapestries,” phantasmagoric armorial trophies), and there we are introduced to that strange hypochondriac, Roderick Usher. Usher, who suffers from a “morbid acuteness of the senses,” is a monstrous rendering of Locke’s man in nature, who receives all his information about the world through his sensations. Making matters worse, unlike Locke’s man in nature, whose needs are satisfied through nature and his own labors, Usher is agoraphobic. A man of only indoor life, Usher is both an artist and an invalid.

A musician who suffers a “morbid condition “of the auditory nerve, Usher can bear no music except verbal improvisation – poetry- to which he accompanied himself on the guitar. One of his works, “The Haunted Palace,” is reproduced by the narrator who found it unforgettable.<sup>10</sup> Its first stanza is quite uncharacteristic of Poe’s prose or poetry:

In the greenest of our valleys  
 By good angels tenanted,  
 Once a fair and stately palace  
 Radiant palace –reared its head.  
 In the monarch Thought’s dominion  
 It stood there!  
 Never seraph spread a pinion  
 Over fabric half so fair. (326)

This stately and green palace exists only in the realm of Thought. Its imagery is atypical of Poe – rarely is the natural world green, and the following stanzas, with their “gentle airs”, “sweet days” and happy valleys, are about as distant from Usher’s indoor life and morbid thoughts as they could be. Here is perhaps the idea that Roderick presents in his paintings: an idea of aesthetic beauty, and an idea that exists only in art. And yet, “Evil things”, the poem

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Wilbur presents a comprehensive reading of the poem, linking the house to Usher’s mind, in “The House of Poe.”

explains “assail the monarch’s high estate.” The penultimate stanza foreshadows the story’s plot:

And , round about his home, the glory  
 That blushed and bloomed  
 Is but a dim-remembered story  
 Of the *old time entombed*. [emphasis supplied]

The poem itself foreshadows the fate of the House of Usher.

Usher believes in the sentience of all vegetable things, including the fungus-encrusted stones of his house. Here is the pathetic fallacy, but in a new guise. The idea that vegetable nature contains some innate sense is surely not new. To discover the order and sense in nature was after all the goal of Jefferson’s study.<sup>11</sup> Like Jefferson and Emerson, Usher sees in nature a reflection of his own thinking. The idea that nature reflected human ideals of order and harmony was a basic tenet of Enlightenment thinking. This trope of order was also an underlying tenet of natural law. Moreover, it is difficult not to hear a subtle denunciation of Emerson. In “Nature,” Emerson famously wrote:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of the spirit (13).

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<sup>11</sup> I do not mean to suggest here that Jefferson believed nature had sentient thoughts, but only that Jefferson believed that the natural world was ordered, and therefore its sense was discernible.

In "Usher," Emerson's notion of the constant allegory of nature is both exaggerated and made malignant. Usher believed that vegetable nature contained thoughts that would contribute to the ultimate destruction of the Usher line. Roderick's conviction, that nature was sentient, "trespassed ...upon the kingdom of inorganization" (327). This odd choice of language, redolent of both Scripture and law, suggest that the narrator is trying to indicate more than just Usher's agitation. Usher's world presents a kind of inverted view of idealized nature – rather than mirror our best projections, it mirrors our worst fears. This "kingdom of inorganization" stands in stark contrast to artistic and philosophic conceptions of the natural world. Even the kingdom of the Usher's poem, with its "stately palace" and its lute's "well-tuned law," stresses order and organization. The narrator advises us, that " suggestions from this ballad" gave rise to a discussion of Usher's belief that the stones themselves reflect the "terrible influence" that had guided the destinies of his family. This cycle of repetitive reflection, that began with the reflection of the House in the black tarn outside, and continues with reflections of Usher's home, first in his art (his poem) and then in the stones outside it, becomes the engine driving "The House of Usher." As if we were staring into a funhouse mirror, it is difficult to know precisely what, or where is the subject that the object reflects. This disorientation of our perception, this inability to separate reality and art, is one source of the fear in "The House of Usher."

This reflexive quality is even more obvious in Usher's twin sister Madeleine. In fact, the narrator first notices their physical resemblance when he and Roderick are laying her in her tomb. Not only do Roderick and she resemble each other most noticeably when one is presumed dead, but "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them" (329). To add to the mirroring images of the twins, Roderick's psychological disintegration accelerates with her entombment. The narrator sees a "mad hilarity" in his eyes, echoing the final lines of Roderick's poem ("Through the pale door,/ A hideous throng rush out forever,/and laugh- but smile no more.") (327)

To further this parallel, the narration reverts to a story within a story. By way of calming himself and his host, the narrator begins to read a gothic tale entitled, "Mad Trist" by Sir Launcelot Canning. As we are reading about reading, the many parallels begin to converge. The tale being read, like the one we are reading, is full of gothic dread: A hermit waits below, and a monster attacks from within. As the monster in Sir Launcelot's story, Ethelred, pulls the door from its hinges, " 'he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow sounding wood alarummed and reverberated throughout the forest.' " (332) At that moment, the narrator advises, "there came indistinctly to my ears what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo ...of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described." The read tale echoes again in the tale we are reading, giving us art and art in the

guise of art and reality. The commonplace distinctions of art and reality begin to collapse until the very structure of the story collapses into itself.

As the grating noise becomes more pronounced, the details of the read story mirror the events in the House of Usher. The echoes of the death-cry of the dragon, the clang of the shield, the grating of the iron door-- the acutely sensitive Roderick Usher has heard these sounds for days, ever since the two men placed Madeleine in her tomb. The line separating The House of Usher from the *Mad Trust*, indeed the line between literary "fact" and fiction, consistently indistinct from the start, is now obliterated. As Usher collapses, we read ourselves out of the story.

From that chamber and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have been issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting and blood red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction to the base. When I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened – there came a fierce breath of the whirlpool -the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my

sight-my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder -  
 there was a long and tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a  
 thousand waters - and the deep and dark tarn at my feet closed  
 sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "*House of Usher.*"

(336)

In the final words of the story, for the first time, the "House of Usher" appears in quotation marks. The House becomes a genre, a short story of terror that disappears at the moment its writing ends. The story recited by the narrator begins to blur into the story we are reading; almost simultaneously, the written story loses its substance when the "House" collapses upon itself. The multiple reflections in the story --the house in the tarn, the twinned Ushers, the poem and the plot, the medieval tale of gothic horror and the present tale, the House and the decaying vegetation that reflects the thoughts of its owners--these metaphors become kaleidoscopic when there is nothing that is *not* figurative. The Enlightenment ideal, that nature reflected our thoughts, that we ourselves could find our reflection in the world around us, becomes horrific in the House of Usher. We face an unceasing multiplication of reflections, of images without subjects to ground them. The pathetic fallacy in Poe's work becomes demonic. Nature not only reflects our sentiments; it cannot stop reflecting, and we cannot locate the original source for these images. Art itself is inseparable from this terror.

Just a few years earlier, Emerson had written, "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass" ("Nature," 16). Emerson's ideal, that nature reflected our moral laws, becomes in Usher grotesque. The mirror that Emerson posited is recreated in Usher as a dark tarn, ceaselessly reflecting, but to catastrophic ends. Far from a thing of beauty, art, like Roderick the artist, becomes morbidly prolific. In the same essay Emerson had written, "We are not built like a ship to be tossed, but like a house to stand (24). This house cannot stand. At the end of "The House of Usher," we are left with nothing, in nothing.

Poe's natural world, in Usher and in other stories seems always on the verge of collapsing into itself. Even the walls cannot hold. In fact, in so many of the stories, the very instruments that we depend upon to order and support our universe prove unreliable. In "The Pit and the Pendulum," the walls close in and the narrator falls into the abyss. Who can rationally explain the "illimitable dominion over all" held by the formless figure in "The Masque of the Red Death"? Like "The House of Usher," so many of Poe's stories seem frankly immune from logical analysis. This resistance to reason was itself in defiance of prevailing logic.

"The Imp of the Perverse" begins with an examination of "the arrogance of reason" and notes, somewhat derisively that the intellectual man, having

fathomed the intentions of Jehovah, has built his innumerable systems of mind” (826). It is difficult to read this passage without hearing in it a commentary on the eighteenth-century notion reason was the method through which morality could be known. Reason was the twin of nature; nature, combined with right reason would reveal our true morality. Locke wrote, “The state of nature, has a law of Nature to govern it, and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind...”<sup>12</sup> (First Essay, Chapter 2, sec.15). Jefferson was heir to a long line of analysis that held reason to be the divining rod of our morality. For Poe, reason always yields to an altogether less settled conclusion. Larzar Ziff has made the trenchant observation that a Poe character is never more insane than at the moment he begins to reason with us (75). The dispassionate narrator of *The Black Cat* gives ample evidence of Ziff’s point.

“For the most wild, yet homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. ...My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly and without comment, a series of mere household events” (597). These household events, narrated without passion by this reasonable narrator, include gouging out the eye of a pet cat and the murder of his wife. As to motive – it is impossible to discern one, and that is precisely the point. The narrator is a self-described animal-lover, and a happily married man. The unmotivated attack – first on the narrator’s pet cat and then on his innocent

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<sup>12</sup> Locke had taken this principle almost verbatim from Hooker, who had taken it from Aquinas. Its longevity is testified to by Emerson’s restatement of this principle in “Nature.”

wife –throw into question the very notion of motivation as a rationally explainable phenomenon. The presumed provocation, “the fiend alcohol” hardly begins to justify the attack, and nor can it explain its severity.<sup>13</sup> That the seemingly rational narrators of so many of Poe’s tales prove to be deranged upends the idea of rational explanation. Who can explain why the narrator of “The Tell Tale Heart” has murdered his employer? Who can much less account for the dental theft Berenice endured? How does reason apply to these wholly inexplicable acts? Reason was at one time the law of nature, the instrument by which all morality could be known. In Poe’s hands reason is the faculty by which we are duped into believing a madman.

Poe’s celebrated Detective Dupin, called by one critic “Poe’s secular god,” (Daniel 104) demonstrates on the one hand the seeming triumph of dispassionate reason. Critics, attentive to Dupin’s acute powers of deduction, have perhaps been overly taken with the seeming closure of the Dupin stories. Once Dupin has solved mysteries that proved too daunting to his competitors, their resolution appears complete. Even Lacanian analysis fails to grapple with the profound social and political anxiety that hover at the edge of these detective stories.<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Poe and the relation of his fiction to the temperance movement, see David Reynolds essay, “Poe’s Art of Transformation; The Cask of Amontillado in its Cultural Context,” 93-112, in Silverman’s *New Essays on Poe’s Major Tales*. See also Reynolds chapter on Poe and sensational fiction in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 225-249.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan and Derrida; Jacques Derrida’s *Le Facteur de la Verite*,” and Jacques Lacan’s *Le Seminaire sur-La Lettre Volée*, as well as the analysis of these works in John Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution*.

clear resolution of these stories, and the idealization of the wily Dupin tends to elide the problems Dupin has been called upon to solve.

In "Murders in the Rue Morgue," a brutal murder of two women --mother and daughter-- has been committed. These quiet women have been strangled, the hair on their heads ripped out in tufts, one has been pushed head down up a chimney, the other had her throat cut. When Dupin applies his cool analysis, he determines that the true culprit of this crime is an Ourang Outan, escaped from its owner. Once the mystery is solved, the reader is secure in the knowledge that an escaped Ourang Outan can at any moment gain entry into a locked apartment and decapitate its inhabitants as they are safely at home. The "triumph" of reason yields an altogether more disturbing reality than the mystery had threatened. We are not only in jeopardy by obvious danger; we are threatened by unimaginable hazards as well.

Poe is often credited with creating in Dupin the prototypical detective story. Dupin, however, is hardly Sherlock Holmes, nor is he the prototypical detective- as savior, that so many detective novels came to celebrate. As David Van Leer points out, "Dupin's solutions lack the moral dimension by which such fictions customarily celebrate the detective's ability to right wrongs or restructure a disordered society" (66). After Dupin's virtuoso performance, the world appears more dangerous, not less. Dupin's skill at logical analysis is, in fact, called into action by violence. In both "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and in "The

**Mystery of Marie Roget,” brutal deaths and possible sexual deviance supply the material for Dupin’s singular analysis.**

**One of Dupin’s chief skills is to attend to the obvious. In “The Purloined Letter,” he discovers that which is hidden because no one has thought to look for it in plain sight. Adept at palace intrigue, Dupin is quick to see what others miss, which includes innate corruption. While it is true that Dupin manages to best professional detectives in analyzing the evidence, his skill, dark though it may be, is needed precisely because none of us is safe. Moreover, his intellectual prowess can do nothing to protect us. Reason, the tool with which philosophy had held we could find morality, operates in a wholly amoral world.**

**Moreover, Dupin himself is hardly an apt figure to look to for hope. In an important yet often overlooked introduction, Dupin is painted as a decadent aristocrat with bizarre nocturnal habits. “Had the routine of our life been known to the world, we should have been regarded as madmen,” the narrator confides. (401) He and Dupin share “a time-eaten and grotesque mansion,” said to match “the fantastic gloom of our common temper.” They venture out only at night and draw the curtains and light tapers to keep out the daylight. At turns “frigid and abstract, the narrator suggests the possibility of a double Dupin – the creative and the resolvent,” and the narrator suggests that Dupin may possess a “diseased intelligence.” Dupin’s prodigious intelligence is linked with his effete habits. Dupin is the most heroic figure in all of Poe, but frankly this, too, is a frightening thought. This nocturnal and possible diseased mind is our best and brightest.**

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The following lines of Glanville, which appear as an epigraph to *Descent into the Maelstrom*, might well gloss many of Poe's tales:

The ways of God in Nature, as in Providence, are not as our ways; nor are the models that we frame in any way commensurate to the vastness, profundity and unsearchableness of His works, which have in them a depth greater than the well of Democritus. (432)

The idealization of nature that was so critical to Enlightenment thinking, served as a fixed target for much of Poe's radical skepticism. In "The *Domaine of Arnheim*," and "Landor's Cottage," Poe presents an altogether different image of nature than he had in other tales.

These two stories are a kind of pastoral, an idealized vision of nature, but significantly they both present a vision of nature created artificially by an artist. Both were written in the year that Poe's wife died, and it is interesting to contemplate the effect her death had on focusing Poe on these themes of art and the pastoral.

"The *Domaine of Arnheim*" offers a kind of meditation on art. The story opens with a citation to four eighteenth-century philosophers including the French

Encyclopedist, Condorcet, who famously believed, "The perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite" (192). The narrator presents the inverse view.

...[I]n general, from the violation of a few simple laws of humanity arises the wretchedness of mankind- that as a species we have in our possession the as yet unwrought elements of content – and that, even now, in the present darkness and madness of all thought on that great question of the social condition, it is not impossible that man, the individual, may under certain unusual and highly fortuitous conditions, may be happy. (855)

These ideas about the great odds against human perfectibility are generated by Ellison, the hero of this tale. He has inherited the sum of 450 million dollars, and chooses to devote most of his wealth to a refined form of landscape gardening. In what purports to be a discussion of human perfectibility and happiness, the narrator presents a virtual ledger sheet documenting the Ellison's principle and income from various investments. A seemingly new but necessary condition for the American pastoral is the acquisition of capital. In fact, the narrator remarks that with a sum so large, "there is something even of the sublime." The sublime surely had a venerated place in art, but its application to inherited wealth was novel.

Ellison had little expectation for human progress "In the possibility of any improvement, properly so-called, being effected by man himself, he had little

faith. Upon the whole...he was thrown back, in very great measure, upon self.” (858) In an opening citation, Ellison is said to foreshadow the work of Turgot, a famed French philosopher and economist who held that land was the source of all wealth, and that only the unhindered flow of capital could create prosperity. Self-reliance, a powerful theme for American writers from Benjamin Franklin to Emerson, is given a singular meaning here. Social conditions, although grave, were largely immune from improvement. Ellison’s majestic quest (not unlike Roderick Usher’s) was to find a domain suitable for the creation of his art.

Ellison declares that there are two styles of landscape gardening: the natural and the artificial. Just as he found human perfectibility unlikely, he similarly finds nature itself defective. “In the most enchanting of natural landscapes, there will always be found a defect or excess” (859). Only in the artificial, in short, only in art, is perfectibility of design and aspect possible. “The original beauty,” he declares, “is never so great as that which may be introduced.” (862) Ellison searches the world until he finds a domaine suitable to receive the improvements he will make upon nature. He ultimately finds it and manages to create, among other things, a river on whose shore is no debris, a canoe that moves magically into a winding channel, and a “miraculous extremeness of culture that suggested a new race of fairies, laborious, tasteful, magnificent and fastidious. Finally the passenger arrives in the “paradise of Arnheim.”

There is a gush of entrancing melody, there is an oppressive sense of strange sweet odor; - there is a dream-like intermingling to the

eye of tall slender Eastern trees- bosky shrubberies- flocks of golden and crimson birds-lily-fringed lakes- meadows of violets, tulips, poppies, hyacinthes and tuberoses... (870)

This sensual paradise is the redemptive vision in a story that denied any possibility of improvement in the human condition. It is of course profoundly artificial – the creation of a landscape architect or, more accurately, a writer.

“Landor’s Cottage,” which is subtitled “A Pendant to The Domaine of Arneheim,” is one of the few Poe stories given a distinctly American setting. It charts the travels of a tourist in the Hudson valley who loses his way. Accompanied by his dog Ponto and carrying a gun, he follows a path to a sylvan amphitheatre. The traveler thus re-enacts the trip taken by Rip van Winkle. In fact, there are many echoes of Washington Irving in this brief tale: the phrase, “The Pride of the Village,” is lifted verbatim from the title of a story in *The Sketchbook*; the wife of the author resembles in both her appearance and her actions the character in Irving’s short story “The Wife;” and the narrator’s pilgrimage to a writer’s home, was similarly the opening destination (to Roscoe’s home) for *The Sketchbook*’s Geoffrey Crayon.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The critic Joan Dayan offers three possible meanings for Landor – all writers named Landor that Poe might have been suggesting as possible models for the cottage owner (129). Another possible meaning lies in a comparison of this cottage with the cottage described in Irving’s “The Angler.” The Angler’s cottage has all manner of nautical symbols for its decoration; Landor’s cottage, is strictly landlocked in its décor. Poe may have been suggesting that the idealized nautical retreat of the Angler was more aptly a cultivated invention of the writer.

“Landor’s Cottage,” however, diverges markedly from *The Sketchbook’s* treatment of the pastoral. Although the narrator claims he has found “the perfection of natural, in contradistinction from artificial grace,” the story seems to take the view that nature cultivated is the true art. There are dazzling plantings, but the containers in which they are planted are submerged from view. They appear indigenous, but only their cultivation, in other words, is concealed. The writer’s home is decorated with French floral wallpaper, English muslin and lithographs depicting scenes from the Orient and classical Greece. All manner of artful improvement grace this natural scene. Poe gently corrects Irving’s idea in the *Sketchbook* that the artist, not the natural world, is the true source of the pastoral.

The images of nature that appear in these stories are the only images of nature in Poe’s fiction that are not claustrophobic. No walls are closing in, no body of water threatens to engulf the unwitting visitor. Every aspect of size, proportion, color and even perfume is appealing. Significantly, both are visions of nature created artificially, by the artist. Poe took pains to make it clear that these pastoral visions were things of the writer’s invention, and not recreations of any naturally occurring bliss. The chasm between art and nature could not be bridged.

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Poe's visions, indelible and perplexing, continue to haunt us. The two arguably positive visions Poe creates--the idealized nature of Arnheim and the prodigious talent of Dupin --are themselves deeply problematic. Arnheim is a purely artificial convention, tantalizing and impossible. Dupin's triumph of intellect remains wholly impotent against the violence of a corrupt world. In Poe's tales, concord simply does not exist.

The critic Richard Wilbur remarked: "Poe's mind may have been a strange one; yet all minds are alike in their general structure; therefore we can understand him, and I think he will have something to say to us as long as there is civil war in the palaces of men's minds" ("The House of Poe" 120). This remark seems pregnant with meaning. One of Poe's great strengths is that he invokes political and social realities without ever naming them. The Civil War, soon to erupt, is prefigured in these stories by the disturbed minds of the narrators, and the horrific places they inhabit. The mind at war with itself, the walls that do not hold up, the inescapable enclosures, the inexplicable violence—these horrible dramas are played out in Poe's ambiguous settings and locations. Even the peace of the grave is for Poe a riotous place. There is never an escape – not from Usher's twin or William Wilson's double, not from the Black cat's mewling or from the reach of so many buried women; nor do we truly know where we are. Poe recreates a setting for the "civil war in our minds," that would soon become a civil war in our states.

Poe's uncanny and discomfiting ability to depict the anxieties attendant to his world give his work what William Carlos Williams called its genius of place. With barely a mention of an American town, Poe's tales create a vision of horror in American life, a vision that was wholly made up, and never so far from the truth that it did not stir our fears. Although we never quite know where we are, there is in Poe's fiction a re-creation of reality that remains both vivid and indistinct. The legalism of "William Wilson," the voyage of discovery in "Manuscript in a Bottle," the strange science of Chevalier Dupin, the tabula rasa of "Berenice" -- none of these elements are wholly real, but neither are they purely imaginative. These representations of social and political reality give the tales an uncanny gravity, allowing them to whisper a deeper meaning that we cannot quite hear.

Unlike earlier American gothic fiction, in Poe there is no European respite to escape to; there is no enchanted myth to enliven the banks of the American shore. In Poe, there is no way out, and no promise within. There was no great fall, no halcyon grace, and nor could there be a return to such a state. Nature, the true tabula rasa upon which the Enlightenment had projected its ideal of order and coherence, in Poe has moved indoors.

Poe's physical reality does not provide the stimulus for imaginative possibility, as Emerson had suggested. Rather than supply the template upon which to enact our imaginative possibility, in Poe, nature is imprisoned by the vagaries of our own psychological limit. Nature and reason were the foundation

of natural law doctrine, but Poe's nature cannot sustain any such expansive possibility. Reason, the redemptive force of the Enlightenment, the cornerstone of the American Revolution, the secular savior of constitutional democracy, is in Poe made demonic. Personified by Dupin and Poe's many unreliable narrators, reason worked fallibly and only by stealth. As often as not, it left the world in worse shape than it found it. Building upon a century of expectation, Poe's repeated depiction of the failure of reason was nothing less than spectacular.

The Enlightenment with its attendant ideals and uninflected faith in progress effectively ends with Poe. The faith and hope that characterized so much of Enlightenment thinking, would be recast in American literature. Writers like Emerson and Thoreau would re-inscribe into their native literature a celebration of nature's bounty and redemptive properties; but both would have to insist that their relation to nature was original and emancipated from the philosophic and historical dictates that preceded them. The metaphors that had identified the nation as a garden, that allowed its politics to restate pastoral ideals, had grown first empty and finally diseased. It was not simply the serpent in the garden that had to be routed out, not just Calvinist depravity that had to be cast out from the American enterprise. It was also Poe. He had exposed as ludicrous notion that progress was undeniable, that reason had no dark side. As his characterization of the crowd and the democratic mob made clear, a nation of the people, by the people and for the people might just be terrifying. After Poe, nature's nation could never be the same.

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