

UNCANNY CAPITALISM: THE GOTHIC, POWER, AND THE MARKET
REVOLUTION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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DEDICATION

For Jody

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ABSTRACT

In *Uncanny Capitalism*, I examine works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that incorporate literary elements typically associated with gothic fiction into their depictions of America's capitalist economy. In so doing, I trace a widespread tendency found throughout American literature to some of its earliest and most revealing manifestations, arguing that the gothic lent itself to such uses because eighteenth-century thinkers had long relied upon the fictional mode to represent the divergence between their own commercial societies and the feudal economies of the past. In the course of its development, capitalism occasionally displayed characteristics that linked it with the gothic practices it had supposedly left behind. When it did, my chosen writers used the gothic to represent the convergence between America's commercial economy and its putative other.

Chapter one examines the dichotomy that J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur establishes between Europe and America in *Letters from an American Farmer* that is founded upon two opposing forms of power: an oppressive European one and another that is American and productive. This opposition collapses in the letter devoted to Charles Town where Europe's feudal institutions have made an uncanny reappearance on American soil. Chapter two reads the self-incriminating narrators of Edgar Allan Poe's tales of murder and confession as grotesque examples of the types of coercion upon which the nation's emerging market economy depended in the nineteenth-century. Chapter three examines Frederick Douglass' alternation between the formal techniques of

the realist and gothic novels in his 1845 *Narrative*, and argues that Douglass uses the figure of the gothic monster to apprehend the way in which slavery violates the natural order by commodifying human beings and placing them on a par with the brute creation. I conclude the dissertation with an analysis of the uncanny episodes in *The Blithedale Romance* that Nathaniel Hawthorne uses to reveal the long reach of the commodity form and the futility of any efforts at escaping the deleterious effects of the market revolution via a Transcendentalist retreat into nature.

INTRODUCTION

“The stockholder has stepped into the place of the warlike baron. The nobles shall not any longer, as feudal lords, have power of life and death over the churls, but now, in another shape, as capitalists, shall in all love and peace eat them up as before.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Life and Letters in New England”

In the 2004 documentary film *The Corporation*, directors Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbot take the idea of corporate personhood, a legal fiction which grants corporations most of the rights afforded to real people, quite seriously. As students of this most prominent and powerful of modern institutions, Achbar and Abbot avail themselves of the diagnostic tools of clinical psychology in an effort to determine exactly what sort of “person” the corporation really is. After one of the film’s many interviewees, Robert Monks, defines the corporation as an “externalizing machine,” the voice of a female narrator explains that “To determine the kind of personality that drives the corporation to behave like an externalizing machine, we can analyze it like a psychiatrist would a patient. We can even formulate a diagnosis on the basis of typical case histories of harm

it has inflicted on others, selected from a universe of corporate activity.”¹ After enumerating some of the many ways in which corporations have harmed others, the filmmakers provide a shot of an animated piece of paper with the heading “Personality Diagnostic Checklist/ World Health Organization ICD-10/ Manual of Mental Disorders DSM IV.” This paper lists the personality trait “Callous Unconcern for the Feelings of Others” with a box next to it, which is duly filled in with a red checkmark. Following this initial check, the film associates the corporate personality with a number of equally disturbing traits such as a “Reckless disregard for the safety of others”; “Deceitfulness: repeated lying and conning others for profit”; and the “Incapacity to experience guilt.” Based upon these characteristics, the corporation matches the behavioral pattern of the psychopath. In fact, according to Robert Hare, inventor of the Psychopathy Checklist, corporations “would have all the characteristics, and in fact, in many respects a corporation of that sort is the prototypical psychopath” (Achbar and Abbot). In offering such a diagnosis, the film’s directors implicitly link the corporate person with the many conscienceless serial killers who stalk the pages of true crime literature and who, according to Nicola Nixon, displaced the demonically possessed individual of 1970’s American film to become the predominant gothic “other” of American culture during the

¹ Another interviewee, Milton Friedman defines an externality as “the effect of a transaction between two individuals on a third party who has not consented to or played any role in the carrying out of that transaction.” In a far folksier vein, the CEO of Interface, Roy Anderson explains that “Running a business is a tough proposition. There are costs to be minimized at every turn, and at some point, the corporation says ‘You know let somebody else deal with that. Let’s let somebody else supply the military power to the Middle East to protect the oil at its source. Let’s let somebody else build the roads that we can drive these automobiles on. Let’s let somebody else have those problems.’ And that’s where externalities come from, that notion of let somebody else deal with that, I got all I can handle myself”

1980's and 90's. As if to emphasize the corporate person's depraved nature, the film follows this diagnosis with a segment titled "Monstrous Obligations," in which the linguist and social critic Noam Chomsky accounts for corporate malfeasance using terms that could have easily been drawn from Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 archetypal novella of the evil doppelganger, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Chomsky starts by claiming that "It's a fair assumption that every human being, real flesh and blood human beings, not corporations, but every flesh and blood human being is a moral person." Committed as he is to the notion that humans are moral creatures, Chomsky must account for the obvious immoralities routinely committed within the corporate world. Faced with such a challenge, he makes a distinction:

When you look at a corporation, just like when you look at a slave owner, you want to distinguish between the institutions and the individual. So slavery, for example, or other forms of tyranny, are inherently monstrous, but the individuals participating in them may be the nicest guys you could imagine, benevolent, friendly, nice to their children, even nice to their slaves, caring about other people. I mean as individuals they may be anything. In their institutional role, they're monsters. Then the same is true here.

In distinguishing between two aspects of a single person, Chomsky appears to have discovered the same truth as Henry Jekyll, whose research into "transcendental medicine" has revealed that "man is not truly one but truly two" (Stevenson 55). In place of the

chemical potion that Jekyll uses to dissolve the bonds linking the “polar twins” of good and evil that are the essence of human identity, modern executives can rely upon the legal alchemy of limited liability to form two distinct identities: one in which they occasionally participate in morally dubious activities as corporate officers and another in which they perform benevolent actions within their families and communities (Stevenson 56). When they form such distinct identities, these commercial Jekylls are able to “profit by the strange immunities of [their] position” (Stevenson 60). In using the trope of the monstrous double and the psychopathic other to describe the workings of global capitalism, Achbar, Abbot and Chomsky attempt to undermine their viewers’ faith in a laissez faire economy using literary elements that are typically found in gothic fiction.² In so doing, they participate in a widespread practice within American culture whose historical roots extend back to the nation’s founding. In this dissertation, I examine some of the earliest manifestations of this tendency in American literary works, all of them containing “gothic elements,” drawn from the late eighteenth to the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

What Is the Gothic?

As many studies of the gothic have demonstrated, one can begin to grasp its significance by examining the way that the word “gothic” itself was used in the eighteenth-century, the period in which this fictional mode originated and enjoyed its first commercial

² While the film addresses international corporate activity and while many of the people involved in its production are in fact Canadian, the United States nonetheless looms large in its narrative. I therefore feel justified in using the work to introduce my discussion of an American cultural phenomenon.

success. According to Chris Baldick, in “its earliest sense, the word is simply the adjective denoting the language and ethnic identity of the Goths,” who made their first appearance “upon the shores of the Baltic,” and who in their pillaging migrations across Europe contributed to the fatal “weakening of the Roman empire” (xii). To the Anglo-American, middle-class readers who identified civilization with the classical world that the Goths destroyed, however, the word has long signified far more than the mere ethnographic designation Baldick describes. For such middle-class readers, who were among the genre’s first consumers, “gothic” evokes the benighted “dark ages” of feudal tyranny that had supposedly preceded their own era of enlightened “progress.” In fact, to fully appreciate the word’s meaning for these readers, it must be juxtaposed with the word “Enlightenment,” which is used to describe the philosophy and science of the eighteenth century that produced the gothic. Placed in such company, “gothic” assumes its role as a representation of the “dark side” of the many “cultural oppositions by which the Renaissance and its heirs defined and claimed possession of European civilization: Northern versus Southern, Gothic versus Graeco-Roman, Dark Ages versus the Age of Enlightenment, medieval versus modern, barbarity versus civility, superstition versus Reason” (Baldick xii). Within this dichotomous scheme, eighteenth-century thinkers used “gothic” to conjure a barbarous medieval world that they opposed to their own enlightened age and that consequently played the role of a historical other against whom they could define themselves. Whereas these Enlightenment thinkers marveled at their own improved manners, benevolent political institutions and rational religion, they were horrified by what they considered the uncouth behavior, political tyranny and Catholic

superstition of their “gothic” ancestors. Such Enlightenment thinkers attributed the differences that separated them from previous ages to progressive historical advancement, which tended toward the general improvement of humankind and its emergence from superstition into the light of reason.

Out of the progressive theory of history implied by the word “gothic,” grew the literary mode that bears its name, and which has proven to be remarkably versatile in representing the many forms of tyranny that its predominantly middle-class audience has feared over the past 250 years. During the eighteenth century, when the threats posed by feudal tyrants were not so historically distant as to render them utterly fantastic, the gothic tended to locate its sources of terror in objects drawn directly from the medieval world. In Horace Walpole’s 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*, for instance, the principal action occurs sometime between the first and last crusade in a haunted castle through whose subterranean passages the villainous aristocrat Manfred stalks the maiden Isabella. As the fears surrounding castles and autocratic barons became less urgent, the intellectual heirs of the first gothicists were quick to discover novel threats to their hard-won liberties. When they did, they adapted the conventions of the first gothic novels to the exigencies of their own historical moment. In the process, they transformed Walpole’s prototypical castle into a variety of “antiquated spaces,” which have been used to represent the many forms of oppression that have continued to haunt those who are committed to humanity’s progressive liberation from the “vicious tyrannies over the body and mind, established in the infancy of human history” (Appleby, *Liberalism* 1). Thus, in her occasionally gothic *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in which southern slavery represents the most egregious form of

atavistic repression, Harriet Beecher Stowe replaces the medieval castle with Simon Legree's southern plantation. A hundred years later, after Freudian psychoanalysis had identified sexual repression and the traumas of childhood as principal sources of neurotic behavior, Shirley Jackson sets her 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* in the Victorian mansion built by the overbearing patriarch Hugh Crain. According to one of the novel's characters, Dr. John Montague, the nursery, which is marked by a seemingly supernatural "cold spot," constitutes the "heart of the house" (119), and among the items that the Puritanical Crain bequeaths his daughters, the characters discover a book that warns the young girls to avoid the pitfalls of the seven deadly sins. When the doctor beholds the illustrations that accompany the sin of lust, he can only express his outrage: "Good heavens," said the doctor. "Good heavens" (170).³ Whatever form they happen to take, these antiquated spaces usually contain the repressed "secrets from the past...that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically or otherwise at the main time of the story. These hauntings can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, specters, or monsters (mixing features from different realms of being, often life and death) that rise from the antiquated space, or sometimes invade it from alien realms, to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view" (Hogle, "Introduction" 2). In short, then, a gothic fiction will typically contain an antiquated space that holds the repressed secrets of the past. Its characters will encounter

³ In his 1963 adaptation of the novel, Robert Wise locates Hill House in New England, making it a product not only of Victorianism but of a region with a strong Puritanical past. As a consequence, he strengthens the connotations of sexual repression, since both Puritanism and Victorianism often serve as shorthand representations for hypocritical sexual repression.

uncanny beings that are themselves revenants from the past, which has supposedly been surmounted, but which nonetheless exerts a tenacious grip upon the present. Using these formal elements, writers of the gothic have produced fictions that have allowed their middle-class readers to imaginatively explore their relationship to a barbaric past, which usually threatens to overwhelm the present and which, for all of its threatening qualities, nonetheless exerts a terrifying fascination upon those who encounter it.

Due perhaps to the fact gothic fictions obsessively stage confrontations between their sympathetic characters and monstrous others—and perhaps because of the ambivalent attitudes with which such monsters are treated—many critics have relied upon the analytical tools of psychoanalysis, coupled with historical contextualization, in their studies of the genre and have concluded that the gothic is inextricably bound to the cultural work of subject formation. According to Leslie Fiedler, the gothic depicts an oedipal drama acted out on a civilizational scale:

the guilt which underlies the gothic and motivates its plots is the guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the (paternal) past which he has been striving to destroy; and the fear that possesses the gothic and motivates its tone is the fear that in destroying the old ego-ideals of Church and State, the West has opened a way for the intrusion of darkness: for insanity and the disintegration of the self. Through the pages of the gothic romance, the soul of Europe flees its own darker impulses.

(129)

In a similar vein, David Punter, while acknowledging that the gothic “takes us on a tour through the labyrinthine corridors of repression, gives us glimpses of skeletons of dead desires and makes them move again,” nonetheless insists that “a Freudian interpretation cannot be the whole of the story, if only because Gothic emerged at a particular historical moment and has a particular historical development” (409, 412). More recently, many critics have drawn upon the work of Julia Kristeva whose concept of abjection, articulated in her 1980 work *Powers of Horror*, has proven to be especially useful in bridging the gap between psychological and social levels of reality. According to Kristeva, abjection refers to the process whereby people form coherent identities by expelling from themselves all that “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). The primordial instance of such abject ambiguity occurs during the trauma of birth when a child is neither wholly separate from nor wholly incorporated into its mother’s body, an event which Kristeva describes as the “immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (Kristeva 10). People must repress the memory of this “immemorial violence” if they are to form the autonomous egos that define psychological maturity. Like all repressed material, the abject tends to return. When it does, people experience a “massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me” (2). Given the fact that systems of categorization and hence the nature of their violation vary across cultures, many critics have concluded that the process of abjection is “as thoroughly social and cultural as it is

personal” (Hogle, “Introduction” 7). Armed with such theoretical tools, these critics have examined the way in which the gothic, “the form of western fiction-making...where such symbolic ‘abjection’ most frequently occurs” has allowed middle-class people of the last 250 years to pursue the identities “sanctioned” by their cultures while also providing them with a “fearful and attractive confrontation with the ‘thrown off’ anomalies that are actually basic to the construction of a western middle-class self” (Hogle, “Introduction” 8).

In the main, students of the American gothic have followed a critical path that resembles the one outlined above and have argued that the American form of the genre has implicated itself in the national project of subject-formation as well. According to Alan Lloyd Smith, “Four indigenous features were decisive in producing a powerful and long-lasting American variant of the Gothic: the frontier, the Puritan Legacy, race, and political utopianism” (37). Since each one of these “indigenous features” concerns itself at some point with questions of human identity—the boundary separating the civilized from the savage, in the case of the frontier, or the Calvinistic sense of innate depravity central to Puritan thought—it is easy to see why critics have found Kristeva’s socially inflected psychoanalysis so productive. Despite the obvious potential inherent in each of Smith’s strands, however, most critics have focused on the American gothic’s relationship to race. As is often the case, Leslie Fiedler leads the way. Speaking of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Fiedler claims that “It is indeed to be expected that our first eminent Southern author discover that the proper subject for American Gothic is the black man, from whose shadow we have not yet emerged” (39).

In reference to her own multifaceted examination of the gothic, Teresa Goddu explains that “While [her] study addresses a number of sites of historical horror—revolution, Indian massacre, the transformations of the marketplace—it is especially concerned with how slavery haunts the American gothic” (3). And, although he finds Fiedler’s thesis about the gothic and race reductive, Justin Edwards nonetheless agrees that “the American gothic is intimately tied to the history of racial conflict in the United States” (xvii). With these critics, I generally agree: the American gothic has indeed been “intimately tied to the history of racial conflict in the United States,” in no small part because slavery and its historical aftermath clearly contradict and therefore haunt the nation’s founding ideals as these are articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Given this general concurrence of opinion, I do not intend to supplant this earlier criticism. Instead, I seek to contribute to the study of the American gothic by examining texts written during the late eighteenth to the middle decades of the nineteenth century that incorporate literary elements typically associated with the mode into their depictions of the nation’s capitalist economy. In so doing, I hope to expand our understanding of the nature and origins of a widespread representational practice that has persisted well into the present day.

Capitalism and Enlightenment Ideals

If the critics cited above rarely associate the American gothic with the nation’s economy explicitly, their discussions are nonetheless haunted by its presence since almost all of them envision the gothic as a critique of the Enlightenment’s progressive theories of

history and human nature.⁴ Once again, Leslie Fiedler establishes a strong precedent when he claims that Charles Brockden Brown enjoyed only modest success in his efforts to adapt the gothic to native concerns, since “the generation of Jefferson was pledged to be done with ghosts and shadows, committed to live a life of yea-saying in a sunlit neo-classical world. From the bourgeois ladies to the Deist intellectuals, the country was united in a disavowal of the ‘morbid’ and the ‘nasty’” (144). Like the early gothic novelists, who “looked on the ‘gothic’ times with which they dealt...as corrupt and detestable,” the Americans who had little use for Brown’s novels also possessed a “vision of that past [that] was bitterly critical,” and they were also to some degree undoubtedly “radical in their politics” (Fiedler 137). Unlike the gothic novelists, however, these Americans were less anxious over the past’s malevolent influence, since they believed that they had initiated an unprecedented era in human history when they established a government founded on republican principles. In the process, they transformed the horrors surrounding the dead hand of the past into retrograde violations of good taste. Fortified with such progressive attitudes, most Americans took little interest in Brown’s gothic fictions, yet Fiedler advances his influential thesis that, in its American form, the gothic functioned as a “Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition” (160). Although American Calvinism had long subjected the children of Adam to its jaundiced gaze, it acquired its gothic significance in the context of Enlightenment liberalism, which

⁴ Goddu represents an obvious exception to this rule since she does in fact discuss the gothic’s relationship to the market revolution that occurred in nineteenth-century America.

“understood human nature as essentially good, rational and capable of self-government” (Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul* 4). Eric Savoy refers to a similar set of progressive attitudes when he turns from Fiedler’s “bourgeois ladies and Deist intellectuals” to Benjamin Franklin, “the writer who serves conveniently as a metonym for the American Enlightenment and its ideals of progress and self advancement and whose popular autobiography...came to represent the standard American view of the rational individual rising by his own efforts in the marketplace” (170). According to Savoy, the writers of the early American gothic aimed their skeptical narratives at such progressivist attitudes when they refused to accept “the complacent, progressive ideology of their native country” (186). For both Fiedler and Savoy, then, the progressive theories of history associated with the American Enlightenment find their antithesis in the gothic fictions that emphasize the tenacious grip both of the past and of the present’s own most repressed elements that have developed out of that past.

What both Fiedler and Savoy neglect, however, is the crucial role that economic thought has played in these Enlightenment theories of progress and human rationality. According to Ronald Meek, the most widespread theory of progress in the late eighteenth century was the “four stage theory” most clearly articulated by Anne Robert Jacques Turgot in his lectures “On the Historical Progress of the Human Mind” and “On Universal History,” delivered in 1750 and 1751 respectively, and by Adam Smith in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* delivered in the 1760’s. The four-stages theory argues that “society ‘naturally’ or ‘normally’ progressed over time through four more or less distinct and consecutive stages, each corresponding to a distinct mode of subsistence, with these

stages being defined as hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce. To each of these modes of subsistence, it has been argued, there corresponded different sets of ideas and institutions relating to law, property, and government, and also different sets of customs, manners, and morals” (Meek 2).⁵ If the Enlightenment imagined historical progress as the movement through these stages that culminated in the commercial order of their own day, it also owed its optimistic notions of human nature to economic analyses that were first conducted in seventeenth-century England. According to Joyce Appleby, the traditional European view of humankind posited creatures who were “impulsive, fickle, passionate, unruly, and likely to come to no good end regardless of what they did” (*Capitalism* 31). This view of humanity was used to justify governments that allowed the aristocratic few to rule over a passionate many. Without the powerful check of their social betters, it was thought that the less enlightened multitude would sacrifice the public good to their own selfish and brutish ends. During the seventeenth-century, however, writers who examined

⁵ As intellectual historians such as Bailyn, Wood and Pocock have demonstrated, not everyone believed that the Americans had ushered in a new era when they broke with Great Britain. Many of the founding generation’s leading thinkers adhered to an intellectual tradition that extended back to the Italian Renaissance and that relied upon the study of historical texts drawn from classical Greece and Rome. These so-called classical republicans sought to abstract instructive political lessons from these texts, which they could then apply to their own historical situation. In drawing analogies between their own era and the ages that had preceded it, these classical republicans failed to make the absolute distinctions between the past and the present upon which the progressive theories of history rely. This analogous reasoning was partially enabled by a rather pessimistic view of human nature that had little in common with the rational actor capable of self-government whom the American gothic subjected to its skeptical glance. Instead, the classical republicans viewed their fellow humans as “impulsive, fickle, passionate, unruly, and likely to come to no good end regardless of what they did” (Appleby, *Capitalism* 31). By creating strong political institutions modeled on England’s balanced constitution, the classical republicans sought to mitigate the worst effects that such unruly people were capable of producing.

the way that people behaved in England's emerging market economy developed an alternative account of human nature that emphasized its rationality. When these proto-economists examined marketplace behavior, they did not encounter the chaos predicted by a model of human nature that emphasized its capriciousness, but rather a sort of order that "began to resemble—in men's minds at least—the operation of systems in the physical universe" (Appleby, *Capitalism* 33). In its apparent rationality, the market seemed to bridge the gap between the Newtonian universe and the human realm. As Appleby suggests, these writers attributed this order to a universal spring of human action, self-interest, and they began to imagine "social relations as a complex of exchanges between similarly rational and self-interested bargainers" (*Capitalism* 50). In imagining social relations as exchanges between "similarly rational" individuals, these seventeenth-century writers undermined the invidious distinction between the passionate many and the reasonable few that had until then dominated political philosophy and in the process suggested political possibilities that were previously unthinkable. Referring to Thomas Jefferson's Republican Party, Appleby claims that the Jeffersonians were encouraged by the "promise in prosperity" to "vault over the cumulative wisdom of the ages and imagine a future far different from the dreary past known to man." In place of this persistent inequality, the Jeffersonians sought to create a "society of economically progressive, socially equal, and politically competent citizens" (*Capitalism* 50). This equalizing image, coupled with "the more equal social conditions that prevailed in America [,] made it possible to think of the economists' description of the market as a template for society...Capitalism thus disclosed itself in a benign and visionary way to

Republicans who drew from its dynamic operation the promise of a new age for ordinary men” (*Capitalism 50*). As an economic system that promised to deliver the new world republic from Europe’s dreary history of feudal oppression, capitalism became a cornerstone of America’s utopian aspirations and consequently for the strand of American gothic that, for Alan Lloyd Smith, specifically addressed the nation’s political utopianism. Thus, when writers of the American gothic hearken back to Calvinism’s pessimistic view of human nature to deflate the more optimistic attitudes of Enlightenment liberalism or create uncanny narratives in which the past refuses to remain buried, they are in fact critiquing views of human nature and progressive history that are inextricably bound up with the utopian promises of capitalism.

Within such utopian thought, capitalism was treated as the economic environment that was most conducive to the pursuit of happiness that the Declaration of Independence had included among the “unalienable rights” to which human beings were entitled, and it appeared to be the ideal vehicle for delivering humanity from the barbarities of the feudal world. In his much anthologized third letter of his 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur answers the rhetorical question “What is an American?” In so doing, he provides a pithy statement of America as a capitalist utopia:

Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; can it want a stronger allurements? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, now fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those

fields whose exuberant crops are to arise to feed and clothe them all, without any part being claimed, either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord...The American is a new man, who acts on new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American. (70)

In this passage, Crèvecoeur reveals many of the assumptions underlying utopian capitalism. At a fundamental level, Capitalism's advocates believed that the economic system they supported was more "natural" than other modes of subsistence. This assumption is made manifest when Crèvecoeur, speaking through the voice of "Farmer James," claims that the American's "labour is founded upon the basis of nature, self-interest." Relying as it did upon the internal promptings of self-interest to encourage people to labor, this system could dispense with physical coercion. In so doing, it provided a type of radical freedom that apparently granted people sovereignty over their everyday lives. These two items, an economy based upon "nature" and dedicated to freedom, represent the principal areas of capitalism's promise. In addition to such positive aspirations, Crèvecoeur also hints at the way the supposed barbarity of the medieval world always haunts the borders of such utopianism when his letter points to those elements of the European world that are noticeably absent in America: the "despotic prince, the rich abbot" and "the mighty lord" to whom the feudal serf owed the fruits of his labor. As a system founded upon individual choice in economic matters,

Capitalism promised to deliver Americans from such rapacious figures and the hierarchical societies over which they presided.

As history has demonstrated, however, capitalism is not a monolithic entity and not all of its forms carry the same potential for human liberation. According to the economists William J. Baumol, Robert E. Litan and Carl J. Schramm, for instance, some forms, such as the “Oligarchic capitalism” that characterizes much of the “free enterprise” practiced in Latin America, bear a striking resemblance in their social inequality and corrupt institutions to the feudal “other” against which Enlightenment liberalism has long defined itself.⁶ In identifying the way that capitalism could come to resemble its gothic predecessor, or, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the way in which the “stockholder” could step “into the place of the warlike baron,” Baumol, Litan and Schramm are anticipated by many writers of the American gothic. When capitalism failed to deliver on its utopian promise, some authors who were attuned to such developments drew upon the literary gothic to represent the uncanny convergence between America’s “enlightened” economic order and the “benighted” feudal societies it had supposedly left behind. These authors were able to do this because, as David Punter points out, “In Gothic the middle class displaces the hidden violence of present social

⁶ The term “Oligarchic capitalism” comes from Baumol, Litan and Schramm’s *Good Capitalism, Bad Capitalism and the Economics of Growth and Prosperity*. For Baumol, Litan and Schramm the social worth of a particular form of capitalism is determined by its capacity to promote economic growth, and they develop a typology of four capitalist forms: state guided capitalism, oligarchic capitalism, big firm capitalism and entrepreneurial capitalism. They identify entrepreneurial capitalism as the most effective for creating growth and oligarchic as the worst. Like the economist Benjamin M. Friedman, author of *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, Baumol and company are the modern heirs of the Enlightenment thinkers who saw utopian possibilities of an economy founded upon private property and personal initiative.

structures, conjures them up again as past, and falls promptly under their spell” (418). When Punter refers to the “violence of present social structures,” with which the middle classes were and are so preoccupied, he seems to have in mind the violence of capitalism. As he makes clear, no matter where the gothic’s barbaric violence is situated, whether it be the historical past, the species past or the “over technologized future...what is being talked about is always double: these other barbarities have an intrinsic connexion with the hidden barbarities of the present, the social and economic barbarities of injustice and forced labor” (419). In the following chapters, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which a number of American writers use the gothic to uncover the repressed truths about what could at times be a thoroughly barbaric economic system.

In chapter one I analyze the collapse of the dichotomy that Crèvecoeur strives to create between a modern and benevolent America and a feudal Europe in his 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer*. I argue that Crèvecoeur founds this dichotomy upon two different forms of power that Michel Foucault has identified as “productive” and “deductive.” In Crèvecoeur’s America productive power dominates and produces, in most cases, an egalitarian social order. In Europe, on the other hand, deductive power produces miserable inequalities of condition, which Crèvecoeur associates with castles and the other gothic trappings of medieval Europe. In my chapter, though, I argue that Crèvecoeur cannot sustain this dichotomy because, as he reveals, productive power, or as we might term it, economic growth produces the same tyrannical structures found in societies that are governed by deductive power. In chapter two, I examine Edgar Allan Poe’s tales of murder and detection and treat the self-incriminating narrators of “The

Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse” as grotesque representations of the disciplined subjects demanded by America’s antebellum market economy. At the same time, I treat Poe’s detective Dupin as exemplifying the disciplinary apparatus that actually helped to keep such subjects in line. I further argue that Poe uses his notion of perversity to critique free market utopianism at its foundation by representing human beings who were primarily driven by a principle completely opposed to self-interest. Then, I begin chapter three with an examination of the particular difficulties that Frederick Douglass faced when he wrote his 1845 *Narrative*. On the one hand, Douglass needed to authenticate the story of his enslavement by tying it to actual individuals who could be located on the public rolls of Tuckahoe County, Maryland. In this endeavor he is aided by the realist novel and its documentary epistemology, which is particularly suitable for the representation of individuals. At the same time, as an abolitionist, Douglass wished above all else to represent the corrupting influence that the system of slavery exerted upon all those who participated in it. In these latter efforts, he is aided by the gothic novel and its (by now) stereotypical characters. In this chapter, I further argue that Douglass uses the gothic monster and its tendency to transgress categories to represent the monstrosity of human commodification that occurs on that *locus classicus* of chattel slavery, the capitalistic auction block. In chapter four, I read Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* as a critique of what Lance Newman has termed the Transcendentalist discipline of nature that sought to resolve the many social problems occasioned by the antebellum economy by a return to nature and its eternal laws. I specifically argue that Hawthorne aims his critique most squarely at Ralph Waldo

Emerson's foundational work *Nature*. In this endeavor, he is aided by the gothic figure of Westervelt whose sham spiritualism serves as a double for Emerson's theory of correspondences. After treating these two spiritual disciplines as interchangeable, I believe that Hawthorne makes it clear that Westervelt at least has the advantage of being right in his readings of other people. I conclude this work by examining some of the reasons why the academic study of the American gothic has neglected the genre's engagement with economic concerns and argue for the relevance of studies such as mine as a means for understanding our own period in which free-market ideology has achieved hegemony.

CHAPTER ONE

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POWER AND TYRANNY'S RETURN IN
CRÈVECOEUR'S *LETTERS FROM AN AMERICAN FARMER*

“We are wholly convinced...that social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought. Nevertheless, we believe that we have just as clearly recognized that the notion of this very way of thinking...already contains the seed of the reversal universally apparent today. If enlightenment does not accommodate reflection on this recidivist element, then it seals its own fate.”

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer

Dialectic of Enlightenment

Early in the letter titled “On the Situation, Feelings and Pleasures of an American Farmer,” J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur assumes the voice of his chief literary persona, Farmer James, and thanks his former houseguest, Mr. F.B., for the many advantages he has gained from their conversations, recalling in particular that his friend has indicated some of the ways in which his own condition differs from that of English farmers living on the home island. When he compares his lot with that of his fellow subjects, James imagines that any technical advantages they enjoy are balanced by America’s indulgent laws, and he ends his comparison aphoristically, observing that “Good and evil, I see, are

to be found in all societies, and it is in vain to seek for any spot where those ingredients are not mixed” (51).⁷ When James ponders the condition of people not fortunate enough to live under the benevolent rule of the English crown, the “Russian boor” and the “Hungarian peasant,” his erstwhile magnanimity gives way to a far less generous sentiment. After counting his blessings, he thanks his correspondent for the “idea, however dreadful, which you have given me of their condition; your observations have confirmed me in the justness of my ideas, and I am happier now than I thought myself before. It is strange that misery, when viewed in others, should become to us a sort of real good, though I am far from rejoicing to hear that there are in the world men so thoroughly wretched” (51-52). Since James assumes that these unfortunate drudges “are no doubt as harmless, industrious and willing to work as we are,” he concludes that their suffering is unwarranted. He must not, therefore, derive his “strange” pleasure from the satisfaction that comes from contemplating a world where people are treated according to their deserts. Whence, then, this unaccountable *schadenfreude* in a man who is anything but a sadist?

For James, the image of these downtrodden workers functions as a double, allowing him to enjoy the perquisites that Sigmund Freud claims were once attached to

⁷ According to Daniel J. Boorstin, colonial American agriculture was notorious for its inefficient use of the soil. Faced with what they believed to be an inexhaustible supply of land, American farmers had little incentive to improve the soil they worked. In this, they differed from their English counterparts who were forced by the scarcity of land to practice far better husbandry (259-265). When James mentions the advantages of the English farmer, I believe he is referring to their more scientific agricultural methods.

the psychological figure in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny.”⁸ Freud begins the essay by describing the uncanny in broad terms, claiming that it is “undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror” (339). Focusing on two particular definitions of the word, he specifies the qualities that distinguish the uncanny within the more generalized category of the frightening. On the one hand, uncanny experiences oscillate between the poles of the foreign and the familiar. The German word “*unheimlich*” comes closest to apprehending this aspect of the emotion. Translated literally, it means “unhomelike,” an adjective that conjures the substance of home even as it negates it. Freud also foregrounds a definition offered by Friedrich Schelling, who writes that “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (345). Using these two meanings, Freud situates the uncanny within his theory of psychic ontogeny, claiming that people experience the emotion when repressed infantile beliefs suddenly reemerge into consciousness. According to Freud, in their more youthful stages, people may entertain fantastic notions about the world that they eventually outgrow. Freud applies this narrative of increased intellectual sophistication to the historical development of human cultures as well, claiming that contemporary people have “*surmounted*” the beliefs of their “primitive forefathers.” Although these primitive beliefs may well have been “discarded,” they nonetheless “exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation,” and when they do, “we get a feeling of the uncanny” (371, italics in original). Freud locates the double, a figure that often

⁸ For a sustained analysis of the role that these European peasants play in bolstering James’ self image that shares much with my own, see Jeff Osborne’s “American Antipathy and the Cruelties of Citizenship in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*.”

appears in literature and that provokes feelings of uncanniness, among such surmounted beliefs, arguing that it “was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego” and that “the ‘immortal’ soul was the first double of the body” (357). Having long since outgrown such ideas, the heirs to these primitive notions find little solace in the doppelgänger. Instead, for them, it has become “a thing of terror” that confronts them with what they themselves have repressed (358).

In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur charts a narrative trajectory uncannily similar to the one outlined by Freud. Both works display these narrative parallels because they each rely upon a theory of historical progress that originated in the eighteenth century. In advancing such a claim, I am indebted to Terry Castle’s thesis that “the eighteenth century in a sense ‘invented the uncanny’: that the very psychic and cultural transformations that led to the subsequent glorification of the period as an age of reason or enlightenment—the aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch—also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement and intellectual impasse” (8). Despite their intellectual commonalities, though, Crèvecoeur and Freud emphasize different elements of eighteenth-century thought: whereas Freud equates rational progress with the repudiation of animistic superstition, Crèvecoeur focuses primarily on Enlightenment theories of political economy.⁹ In Crèvecoeur’s text, America represents a political *avant-garde*

⁹ Mary Rucker defines these as “the ideal value of an agrarian democracy located midway between unhandseled nature and civilization; the validity of an economic system based on the pursuit of self interest; the responsibility of government to ensure the general welfare; the deterministic force of physical and social environments; and the order, intelligibility, and benevolence of the universe (193).

because it has escaped the oppressive institutions of feudal Europe, which relied upon physical coercion to spur workers into productive activity. By contrast, Crèvecoeur's American is motivated by the strongest "allurement' imaginable, "self-interest," which Farmer James refers to as "the basis of nature" (70). As a result, his "new man" has passed "From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury and useless labour" to "toils of a very different nature," which are "rewarded by ample subsistence" (70). As I suggest above, Farmer James, the representative American, defines himself against a set of doubles, the Hungarian Peasant and the Russian boor, in order to reinforce his identity as a freeholder and achieve the emotional equanimity of Letters I-VIII. His mental tranquility is eventually undone, though, by another image of an agricultural laborer who suffers the very coercion that *Letters* tries to sequester in Europe: the caged black slave condemned to death for having murdered an overseer. The slave's crucial psychological role is first intimated when James positions him as a buffer between himself and the privations suffered by the unfortunate Europeans, who are "condemned to a slavery worse than that of our negroes" (52). Recorded in Letter IX, James's experiences in Charles Town prevent him from taking such a sanguine view of American bondage, and the double, in the form of the less fortunate laborer, reverses its friendly aspect and in Freud's words becomes the "uncanny harbinger of death."

In this chapter, I attribute this reversal to the fact that eighteenth-century political theorists use the word "power" to denote two different but related ideas.¹⁰ On the one

¹⁰ For some time now, Crèvecoeur's critics have complicated earlier readings of *Letters* that tended to focus exclusively on the early letters' optimism and ignore the

hand, these thinkers include the word in their discussions of which prerogatives belong to which social orders, much as contemporary Americans might speak of the “separation of powers” ordained by the Constitution. For them, “power” belongs to the rulers and is opposed by “liberty” or “right,” which are the unique possessions of the ruled, and which circumscribe power’s legitimate exercise to well-defined areas. On a less abstract level, other investigators at the same time seek the material sources of power, which they conclude are population and the wealth that large numbers of people can generate. Letters I-VIII owe much to the first in their representation of power, which they locate predominantly in the monarchy and its oppressive state apparatuses. According to the logic of these letters, America has freed itself from coercive power since it lacks the feudal institutions with which such power is typically associated. In Letter IX, however, James quite gothically depicts a society in which economic growth ultimately produces the same repressive structures presumably left behind in Europe.

Power

As Michel Foucault teaches us, we should always approach progressive narratives of liberation with a healthy dose of skepticism. This rule of thumb applies especially to those that originated near the end of the eighteenth-century, a time when Foucault claims power’s methods changed radically. This controversial theorist famously illustrates this caveat in Volume I of *The History of Sexuality* by rehearsing a shopworn tale that pits a

despondence of the later ones, noting the dramatic tonal shift that occurs in Letter IX and in some cases its foreshadowing in the earlier letters. See Grabo’s “Crevecoeur’s American”; Rapping’s “Theory and Experience in Crevecoeur’s America”; Saar’s “Crevecoeur’s ‘Thoughts on Slavery’” Winston’s “‘Strange Order of Things’” For a thumbnail sketch of these evolving critical attitudes see Iannini’s “‘The Itinerant Man.’”

sexually loquacious, and supposedly liberated, present against a “restrained, mute and hypocritical” past (3). Faced with this history of repressive silence, present-day activists have asserted that nothing short of an “irruption of speech” can free us from the bonds of Victorian reticence. In examining the historical archive, however, Foucault discovers a paradox: rather than finding the monastic silence the homily presumes, he encounters a veritable din of sexual discourse. He therefore concludes that the narrative of prohibition and subsequent verbal transgression misses the mark because it assumes that power operates fundamentally through repression, or, as he later puts it, through “deduction.” Foucault applies the term deduction to those historical societies where power operated primarily as a “subtraction mechanism” in which the sovereign held “a right to appropriate a portion of the wealth, a tax of products, goods and services, labor and blood levied on the subjects. Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it” (136). In the modern age, this form of subtractive power constitutes only one among many differing practices, all of which are subordinated to productive power that works to “incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit or destroying them” (136). This complication of the “repressive hypothesis” prompts Foucault to conclude that people who exhort others to speak sexuality’s truths to power may unwittingly be advancing the interests of those discourses that enact power over sexuality.

Just as the “repressive hypothesis” depends upon a binary distinction between repressive “injunction to silence” and transgressive “irruption of speech,” Bernard Bailyn describes an eighteenth-century model of power founded upon an opposition between “power” and “liberty.” In language strikingly similar to Foucault’s, Bailyn explains that for the polemicists of America’s revolutionary generation, “power” was closely associated with the word “dominion,” and that to them, it meant “the dominion of some men over others, the human control of human life: ultimately force, compulsion” (56). According to Bailyn, “most discussions of power centered on its essential characteristic of aggressiveness: its endlessly propulsive tendency to expand itself beyond legitimate boundaries” (56). Invariably, this “endlessly propulsive tendency” aimed its appetitive drives at “liberty, or law or right” (57). When describing the pamphleteers’ efforts to distinguish between these political keywords, Bailyn reproduces some of the urgency that animated them. This is especially true when he describes a point-by-point opposition based upon a gendered dichotomy: whereas masculinized power was “brutal, ceaselessly active, heedless,” feminine liberty was “delicate, passive, sensitive” (58). Bailyn further captures the desire to maintain distinctions by figuring the polarity in a crystalline image of separate spheres: “The public world these writers saw was divided into distinct, contrasting and innately antagonistic spheres: the sphere of power and the sphere of liberty or right” (58). In spite of such melodramatic language, Bailyn emphasizes that power was not, “in some metaphysical sense—evil.” Rather, in its “legitimate form” it “inherited naturally in government and was the possession and interest of those who controlled government, just as liberty...inherited naturally in the people and

was their peculiar possession and interest” (59). He concludes then, that “Liberty was not, therefore, for the colonists, as it is for us, professedly the interest and concern of all, governors and governed alike, but only the governed. The wielders of power did not speak for it, nor did they naturally serve it. Their interest was to use and develop power, no less natural and necessary than liberty but more dangerous” (59). Thus these abstract spheres referred to different social orders: power belonged to the monarchy, liberty to the people.

In contrast to the dichotomous model described by Bailyn, Theodore Draper identifies an Enlightenment understanding of power that frustrates any facile attempts to differentiate between power and liberty and between victims and aggressors. According to Draper, “Every age has its own sense of what the foundation of power is. By the eighteenth century, reigning political thought held that the most important basis of power and wealth was population” (102). Furthermore, “Population did not perform its miracles by itself. Population beget wealth; wealth was the offspring of trade; population, wealth, and trade laid the foundations of power. Such was the conventional wisdom during the American colonies’ coming of age” (111). This theory of power undermines the rhetorical clarities of Bailyn’s ideologues because it departs from abstract discussions of prerogatives and abandons the opposition between two antithetical substances around which such discussions revolved, opting instead to situate power within the economic realities of the material world. This shift radically decentralizes power, diffusing it throughout society. Instead of being the unique possession of the governors, power emerges wherever people produce and reproduce. As a result, relations of dependence get

reversed, a situation that greatly troubled power's traditional wielders: Draper's study examines the heightened anxiety that the British experienced over the prosperity the American colonies enjoyed under Robert Walpole's "salutary neglect." As an exemplary instance of productive power in action, such *laissez faire* policies valued the promotion of British commerce above any inflammatory concerns over abstract political principles.

Crèvecoeur includes both of these models in *Letters*. In an especially revealing passage, James refers to Nova Scotia, which proves to be the exception to the American rule of the "indulgent laws" and therefore to the general prosperity that attends these. Throughout America, these laws "protect [immigrants] as they arrive, stamping on them the symbol of adoption," granting them "ample rewards for their labours," and procuring for them lands which "confer on them the title of freemen," to which "every benefit is affixed which men can possibly acquire" (69). This litany of boons follows James's own rhetorical question: "By what invisible power hath this surprising metamorphosis [the transition from the list of a nation's poor to that of its citizens] been performed?" In this instance, "power" generates wealth, transforming the European pauper into an American freeholder, and, in the long run, enhancing the power of the crown through trade and mild taxation. Such power operates productively. By contrast, Nova Scotia "is very thinly inhabited indeed," a fact that James attributes to a collusion between "the power of the crown" and "the musketos" (69). In this case, royal power displays the essential characteristics of Foucault's deductive power by functioning as a "subtractive mechanism" and working primarily through appropriation and the prohibition of activities rather than their encouragement (69). Alluding to the English's 1755 expulsion

of French settlers from the province, James asserts that the crown has committed its “greatest political error” in America by cutting “off men from a country which wanted nothing but men” (69). Throughout much of his work, Crèvecoeur follows the pattern established by this passage, associating America with productive power and the economic felicity it fosters, and contrasting it with Europe, which, like Nova Scotia, is governed by a deductive power that creates miserable inequalities of condition. By the end of *Letters*, however, the distinction between these two practices collapses since productive power, or as we might term it today economic growth, precipitates the same oppressive structures found in societies where deductive power prevails. Thus, like Foucault’s naïve speakers, Crèvecoeur’s American farmer suffers a similarly ironic fate in that the very social arrangements that promise liberation also carry the potential to enslave. As a literary mode that consistently seeks to undermine the many dichotomies upon which bourgeois identity is founded, the gothic provides Crèvecoeur with the perfect vehicle for eroding the dichotomy he establishes in his early letters between an oppressive Europe and an economically free America, allowing him to create a narrative that more accurately reflects the conflicting tendencies within capitalist development.

Deductive Power in *Letters*

Apropos of a text that figures America’s divergence from Europe in terms of historical progress, Crèvecoeur distinguishes between the two by opposing America’s youth and vitality to Europe’s age and decrepitude. When he does, Crèvecoeur, like Bailyn’s

pamphleteers, avails himself of all the advantages offered by the rhetoric of melodrama.¹¹

The melodramatic binary between a youthful America and an aged and corrupt Europe first appears when the minister encourages James to accept Mr. F.B.'s invitation to become his American correspondent. The clergyman explains that despite his untutored state, James will undoubtedly compose letters pleasing to his former houseguest since "they will smell of the woods and be a little wild"(41). He extends the purview of this claim to advocate his native land's virtues more generally: just as Mr. F.B. will profit from the natural pungency of the farmer's letters, so too will European travelers find greater edification in viewing the colonies' rudimentary and therefore natural settlements. After James asks him why so many people resort to Italy, the minister disingenuously protests his ignorance and speculates that "their object is to trace the vestiges of a once flourishing people now extinct" and "amuse themselves in viewing the ruins of temples and other buildings which have very little affinity with those of the present age and must therefore impart a knowledge which appears useless and trifling" (42). In claiming that the earnest traveler will gain little from viewing these ruined monuments, the minister

¹¹ According to Peter Brooks, "melodrama takes as its concern and *raison d'être* the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths. It says them over and over in clear language, it rehearses their conflicts and combats, it reenacts the menace of evil and the eventual triumph of morality made operative and evident... We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era" (15). As a literary/rhetorical form melodrama functions ritually by staging a "confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them. It can offer no terminal reconciliation, for there is no longer a clear transcendent value to be reconciled to. There is, rather, a social order to be purged, a set of ethical imperatives to be made clear" (17). As I suggest above, Crèvecoeur uses elements of melodrama to purge deductive power and the feudal order from his ideal community.

argues for a radical break with the past. In so doing, he differs from many of his contemporaries who scoured the historical record in order to discover social analogues to the natural laws that governed the Newtonian universe. Such thinkers reasoned that the principles governing human nature would invariably produce similar effects under similar circumstances.¹² David Hume offers a concise statement of this theory when he asks and answers his own rhetorical question:

Would you know the sentiments, inclinations and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former *most* of the observations which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behavior. (359)

Within Hume's description of history, the past does not oppose the present. Instead, contemporary events represent modern iterations of things that have come before. By

¹² For a discussion of prevalent theories of history contemporary with Crèvecoeur see Cohen's "Explaining the Revolution: Ideology and Ethics in Mercy Otis Warren's Historical Theory," Persons', "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America," and Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*.

contrast, the minister treats the past as wholly other and purges this alien element from his ideal American community and in the process emphasizes the novelty of the American experience.

When speaking of the past, the minister intends far more than just temporal antecedence, however. In his discussion, connotation occasionally takes precedence over denotation. This is particularly evident when he claims that “In Italy, all the objects of contemplation, all the reveries of the traveler, must have a reference to ancient generations and to very distant periods, clouded with the mist of ages. Here, on the contrary, everything is modern, peaceful and benign” (42). The clergyman’s opposition represents but a partial symmetry. “Ancient generations,” “very distant periods” and “clouded with the mist of ages” all function as appositives, elaborating ideas that relate to bygone times. As such, they clearly oppose the adjective “modern.” But “modern” only constitutes a third of the second half of the minister’s scheme. To this, he adds “peaceful” and “benign.” By breaking the appositional structure found in the first half of his polarity, he implicitly attaches the connotations of “bellicose” and “malign” to his idea of the past, an association he reinforces when he embodies these same connotations in a visual image: “Here, we have had no war to desolate our fields” (42). The past’s warlike qualities are complemented with a generally unhealthy atmosphere. The minister speaks of the “musty ruins of Europe” and the “putrid fevers of the Campania” which he imagines would “fill the mind with the most melancholy reflections.” In America, he claims that “instead of submitting to the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations, and plagues” the traveler’s imagination “would, on the contrary, wisely

spring forward to the anticipated fields of future cultivation and improvement” (43). In the minister’s discussion of external and internal pressures that either oppress or support the mind, Crèvecoeur captures the essence of both deductive and productive power, each of which he assigns to different localities: Europe becomes the land of repressive, deductive power, while America hosts a form of productive power that fosters the development of an egalitarian social order.

In Letter III, James offers some of his most melodramatic comparisons when he describes the divergent social arrangements that these antithetical environments produce. According to him, America “is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one, no great manufactures employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury” (67). These passages achieve the clarity associated with melodrama through the stark numerical contrast between those who enjoy and those who are denied society’s benefits: lords possess “everything” and a “herd of people...have nothing,” while “great manufactures employ thousands” presumably for the benefit of a tiny minority. In addition to the numerical imbalance between haves and have-nots, James also points to the enormous qualitative difference separating these classes of people. Invoking a hypothetical Englishman newly arrived on American shores, James imagines that “If he travels through our rural districts, he views not the hostile castle and the haughty mansion, contrasted with the clay-built hut and miserable cabin, where cattle and men keep each other warm and dwell in meanness smoke and indigence” (67). Instead, he will

likely find that America is defined by a uniformity of occupation—“we are all tillers of the soil”—which results in a far more equitable distribution of wealth: “A pleasing uniformity of decent competence appears throughout our habitations. The meanest of our log-houses is a dry and comfortable habitation” (67). Thus does James construct an ideal community, whose egalitarian social structure depends upon the exclusion of coercive power, melodramatically embodied by such architectural spaces as the “hostile castle” and the “haughty mansion,” which both he and gothic novelists use to represent those feudal “institutions which have enslaved so many” (42).

Notwithstanding these rhetorical efforts, James, like Bailyn’s political theorists, recognizes that republican equality may in fact depend upon coercive power judiciously applied. He states this clearly in Letter II, where he translates contemporary political wisdom regarding the importance of a “balanced constitution” into a beast fable. Political philosophers who valued a balanced constitution assumed that the social world invariably resolved itself into three different orders: the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the commons. Ideally, governments would distribute power among these three orders so that no one of them would grow too powerful. If one group threatened to devour the other, power had to be wielded in order to restore the balance. In his beast fables, James uses coercive power to maintain political equilibrium among the animals on his farm. In one transparent allegory, he describes the balance prevailing between the bees, whom the farmer admires for their industriousness, and the kingbirds, whose animosity toward crows, the destroyers of crops, compensates for their tendency to prey upon his favored insects. He claims that “divided by two interested motives, I have long resisted the desire

I had to kill them [the kingbirds] until last year, when I thought they increased too much and my indulgence had been carried too far” (56). Apparently, force is occasionally required to prevent the monarchial few, the kingbirds, from despoiling the many, the bees. James explicitly connects these barnyard lessons to politics when he describes the measures he must take to prevent some especially avid cattle from consuming both their own and their neighbors’ portion of feed:

the law is to us precisely what I am in my barnyard, a bridle and check to prevent the strong and greedy from oppressing the timid and weak. Conscious of superiority they always strive to encroach on their neighbours; unsatisfied with their portion they eagerly swallow it in order to have an opportunity of taking what is given to others, except that they are prevented. Some I chide; others, unmindful of my admonitions, receive some blows. Could victuals thus be given to men without the assistance of any language, I am sure they would not behave better to one another, nor more philosophically than my cattle do. (57)

In the absence of laws and the power to enforce them, recidivist humankind would inevitably slide back to the proverbial state of war that philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes postulated as the primordial condition of humankind in his accounts of the origins of human government.

Despite this recognition, James balks at putting these theories into practice.¹³ When speaking of the degenerate frontiersmen, for instance, the country philosopher describes the very conditions under which coercive power may be legitimately used. In his march across the continent, which is also a tour of civilization's progress, James describes the way in which material conditions profoundly influence character. Whereas people living within older communities have recourse to courts of law to resolve their differences, the frontiersman encounters a magistrate "little better than the rest" (72). As a result, these people are "often in a perfect state of war; that of man against man sometimes decided by blows, sometimes by means of the law... There men appear to be no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank, living on the flesh of wild animals" (72). James believes that these moral deficiencies could be ameliorated by a change of occupation from hunters to farmers or by the "power of example and check of shame" (72). In the absence of such influences, it would seem that the state could compel the frontiersmen to comply with the country's laws, yet when speaking of the "lawless people" inhabiting the backwoods of Virginia and the Carolinas, among whom "it has even been dangerous to travel," James concedes that "Government can do nothing in so extensive a country; better it should wink at these irregularities than that it should use means so inconsistent with its usual mildness" (79). Apparently the American farmer

¹³ Myra Jehlen has coined the term "Monarcho-Anarchist" to describe Crèvecoeur's political beliefs and to resolve the apparent paradox between his democratic and loyalist attitudes. Jehlen argues that, for Crèvecoeur, the American colonies, in living under the benevolent rule of a distant though powerful monarch, and in their recognition of the individual's sovereignty, had very nearly achieved a democratic ideal. Such beliefs go a long way toward explaining James' hesitation to endorse the use of power, whose theoretical legitimacy he nonetheless recognizes.

distrusts power so much that he would deny its admission into the colonies under any circumstances and would rather convince himself that this hill-country lawlessness amounts to little more than mere “irregularities.”

Instead, James shifts the responsibility for doing the unpleasant work of enforcing the law and maintaining a balanced social order onto nature itself. In some cases, he imagines that the continent’s ample supply of land will guard against the social evils the colonists left behind in Europe. He articulates this belief most clearly when he describes the general concord that prevails among America’s many religious sects. Like all of the boons America offers, the continent’s benevolent rule plays a critical role in fostering this amicability. As James informs his correspondent, “the general indulgence leaves every one to think for themselves in spiritual matters; the laws inspect our actions; our thoughts are left to God” (72). The sheer magnitude of the continent augments the law’s positive influence, since religious enthusiasm tends to dissipate in America’s wide open spaces: “zeal in Europe is confined; here it evaporates in the great distance it has to travel; there it is a grain of powder inclosed; here it burns away in the open air and consumes without effect” (76). In a similar fashion, America’s abundant acreage protects its inhabitants from the ill effects of economic factionalism as well: “here man is as free as he ought to be, nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are. Many ages will not see the shores of our great lakes replenished with inland nations, nor the unknown bounds of North America entirely peopled...Who can tell the millions of men whom it will feed and contain?” (67-68).

Apparently, Americans can rely upon nature to provide an egalitarian society even in areas where land is far less plentiful and where cultural practices already militate against hierarchy. In Letters IV through VIII, James offers Mr. F.B. a description of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard intending thereby to "prove what mankind can do when happily governed" (107). Throughout much of the sequence, the farmer describes the customs of the island's Quaker inhabitants who, through their "freedom, their skill, their probity, and perseverance have accomplished everything and brought [themselves] by degrees to the rank they now hold" (110). The Islands' inhabitants predominantly support themselves through whaling, and as James notes, most people expect those who ply the maritime trades to spend their time ashore indulging appetites that have been deprived at sea. This general rule does not apply to the Quakers, however. Instead of reporting any scenes of debauchery, James informs Mr. F.B. that "at the return of their fleets, no material irregularities, no tumultuous drinking assemblies" are to be seen (140). He attributes this "peace" and "decency" to the fact that almost all of the sailors are married "and the pleasure of returning to their families absorbs every other desire." Moreover, the "motives that lead them to sea are very different from those of most other sea-faring men; it is neither idleness nor profligacy that sends them to that element; it is a settled plan of life, a well-founded hope of earning a livelihood" (141). One would imagine that the Quakers' frugal appetites, coupled with their frantic industry—even at rest, they whittle useful objects—would prevent any gross social inequalities from arising. Such is not the case. James informs Mr. F.B. that shades of distinction exist even among these modest people. In fact, the Pennsylvanian claims that the islands produce a

more dramatic hierarchy than that found on the agricultural mainland since mariners “run greater hazard, and adventure more” (126). Even so, Nantucket’s economic hierarchy does not approach that found in Europe. Just as the island’s economy offers the possibility of greater returns on one’s capital, its location consumes much of those profits. After all, its inhabitants must pay to import whatever they cannot themselves manufacture (149).

James emphasizes nature’s leveling role even more clearly when he uses the language of the Burkean sublime to record his astonished response to the tumultuous Atlantic. Near the end of Letter VIII, James explains that he desired a view of the “island in its longest direction,” and therefore “took a ride to its easternmost parts.” Once there, he establishes a lonely tone, informing his correspondent that “Several dwellings had been erected on this wild shore for the purpose of sheltering the fishermen in the season of fishing; I found them all empty, except that particular one to which I had been directed.” Following this solitary image, James describes the sublime ocean itself:

The ever-raging ocean was all that presented itself to the view of this family; it irresistibly attracted my whole attention: my eyes were involuntarily directed to the horizontal line of that watery surface, which is ever in motion and ever threatening destruction to these shores. My ears were stunned with the roar of its waves rolling one over the other, as if impelled by a superior force to overwhelm the spot on which I stood. My nostrils involuntarily inhaled the saline vapours which arose from the

dispersed particles of the foaming billows or from the weeds scattered on the shores.

(163)

As is often the case with people who view sublime landscapes, James is held hostage by his senses, overwhelmed by the awesome power of the scene before him. In its sublimity, the ocean produces effects similar to those the minister describes when he speaks of the oppressive feelings prompted by the sight of Europe's ancient ruins. Unlike the sights of Europe, though, which presumably inflict psychological repression without respite, filling "the mind with the most melancholy reflections" and forcing the observer to submit to "the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations and plagues," this intellectual captivation prompts an especially revealing chain of thought (43). Always the practical man, James contemplates Janus-faced Nature, balancing every observation regarding the natural world's ability to provide with another that speaks of its tendency to destroy, and he poses the rhetorical question "who is the landman that can behold without affright so singular an element, which by its impetuosity seems to be the destroyer of this poor planet, yet at particular times accumulates the scattered fragments and produces islands and continents fit for men to dwell on...Can this wind which but a few days ago refreshed our American fields and cooled us in the shade be the same element which now and then so powerfully convulses the waters of the sea, dismasts vessels, causes so many shipwrecks and such extensive desolations?" (164). In addition to producing similar psychological effects, Nature, exemplified by the powerful ocean, produces analogous material consequences as well. Like "Misguided religion, tyranny and absurd laws," it

too has done its share to “depress and afflict mankind” (43). Yet, since no human hand lurks behind the scenes, both he and the island’s inhabitants graciously accept the fact that Nature distributes its blessings unevenly: “This necessary difference in their fortunes does not, however, cause those heart burnings which in other societies generate crimes. The sea that surrounds them is equally open to all and presents to all an equal title to the chance of good fortune” (126).¹⁴ Thus does James temporarily prevent power and its temptations from entering his edenic land by allowing Nature to perform the terrifying offices elsewhere assumed by “gibbets loaded with guilty citizens” and “soldiers...appointed to bayonet their compatriots into servile compliance” (125).

Productive Power in *Letters*

The greatest flaw in the textual America of *Letters*, however, enters the garden via an apparently innocuous source: Crèvecoeur’s repeated use of the plant as a figural representation of growth and regeneration. He first uses this trope in Letter I when the minister encourages James to set aside his timidity and comply with Mr. F.B.’s request to become his American correspondent. After James counters his wife’s continued skepticism by explaining that “the art of writing is just like unto every other art of man, that it is acquired by habit and perseverance,” the minister seconds this idea. Referring to the time when he had just embarked upon his clerical duties, he recalls that when he “began to preach the word, [he] felt perplexed and dry, [his] mind was like unto parched soil, which produced nothing, not even weeds” (45). In time, however, he began to profit from

¹⁴ For Nature’s role as a providing mother in de Crevecoeur, see Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*.

his diligent application, growing “richer in thought, phrases and words” (45). While this first instance of the horticultural metaphor lacks the overt political connotations it will later acquire, it nonetheless establishes a figural pattern that recurs throughout Crèvecoeur’s work: human activity and especially human potential get figured in terms of vegetative growth. Placed in a salubrious environment, these abilities flourish; in a hostile one, they wither.

The minister reveals the political value of this organic analogy when he argues that James’s spontaneous literary effusions will please Mr. F. B. more than would the self-conscious productions of a sophisticated European. He explains that were he to travel through Europe, he “should be tired with perpetually seeing espaliers, plashed hedges and trees dwarfed into pygmies” (46). The passage translates the clergyman’s earlier claim that European sights would weigh heavily on travelers’ minds into an image of European gardeners deforming their native vegetation. By contrast, American letters display an unfettered luxuriance that remains latent in Europe, a literary equivalent to the expansion undergone by the traveler’s mind which would “wisely spring forward” upon beholding America’s rudimentary though robust culture: “Do let Mr. F.B. see on paper a few American wild-cherry trees, such as nature forms them here in all her unconfined vigor, in all the amplitude of their extended limbs and spreading ramifications- let him see that we are possessed with strong vegetative embryos” (46). In addition to connecting the vegetative metaphor to Europe in terms of the effects they each produce in their observer, this instance of the metaphor also complicates the meaning of cultivation. Unlike the reflexive practice that fosters growth, the European style prevents a plant from following

its innate tendencies, forcing it instead into the freakish designs of a gardener's procrustean imagination. Like economic systems that compel the mass of people to labor for the benefit of a tiny minority rather than allowing them to pursue their own self-interest, some forms of cultivation tend to deform the object of their attention rather than ameliorate it. This aspect of the metaphor becomes most apparent when the minister speaks of European trees "dwarfed into pygmies." Thus, in addition to being a land of novelty where Europeans have freed themselves of feudal institutions and where a general equivalence prevails rather than the extreme hierarchy of the home continent, America also becomes the land of happily riotous growth.¹⁵

James explicitly links this figuration to politics when, in Letter III, he describes the transformation effected upon immigrants as they arrive in America. Speaking of the dispossessed multitudes who have staked their future on a trip across the Atlantic, the farmer claims that the colonial situation has allowed for possibilities undreamt of in Europe: "new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants, wanting vegetative mould and refreshing showers; they withered, and were mowed down by want, hunger and war; but now by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root and

¹⁵ In celebrating the robustness of his adopted land's flora, Crèvecoeur also undoubtedly participates in the rivalry between America and the Old World that the Comte de Buffon initiated when he claimed that America tended to produce degenerate and diminished species. Crèvecoeur even paraphrases Buffon's claim that "The savage is feeble and small in his organs of generation" (qtd. in Gerbi, page 6) when he has James write of the Indians with whom he hopes to weather the revolution: "Let us say what we will of them, of their inferior organs, of their want of bread, etc., they are as stout and well made as the Europeans" (215).

flourished!” (69). This image of the regenerated plant figures the literal acquisition of land, and immigrants prosper to the degree that they acquire property: as soon as the former “German boor” possesses the deed to his property, he becomes “an American, a Pennsylvanian, an English subject. He is naturalized; his name is enrolled with those of the other citizens of the province” (83). Propertied citizenship displaces all of the European prejudices, and the individual who enjoys its benefits forget “that mechanism of subordination, that servility of disposition which poverty had taught him” (83). One can easily discern the figural unity between the minister’s characterization of Europe as the land of “espaliers, plashed hedges, and trees dwarfed into pygmies” and the image of a topiary man, distorted by poverty, who, under the influence of the benign American laws, has learned to stand with his head held high.

While the metaphor of vegetative growth and renewal provides a rousing image of human dignity, it brings particular risks with it as well. As we have seen, Crèvecoeur often defines his American negatively by pointing to the significant absences that differentiate the new world from the old. For the most part, this differentiation treats Europe as the land whose people are yoked to oppressive feudal institutions, and America as the place whose citizens are bound by the “silken cords” of a different government. In the absence of Europe’s apparatus of coercion, Americans can acquire property and enjoy the rights of citizens. As Draper argues, however, for the eighteenth-century mind, power was founded upon wealth, which, in turn, depended on population. In a sense, then, Americanization equals *empowerment*, a translation that undermines the absolute distinction between Europe and America and the dichotomy described by Bailyn between

power and liberty. If we follow Bailyn's descriptions alone, we might conclude that, in America, a proper balance has been restored between the interests of "liberty" and "power." We can complicate this by referring to Draper, though and reveal that Crèvecoeur really describes the redistribution of a single substance. This reading is confirmed by a passage in which James depicts Andrew the Hebridean's bewildered response to Mr. A.V. as he enumerates the particulars of the deal they have struck. James writes: "No wonder, therefore that he was embarrassed; for how could the man who had hardly a will of his own since he was born imagine he could have one after his death? How could the person who never possessed anything conceive that he could extend his new dominion over this land, even after he should be laid in his grave?" (102). The farmer says far more than he intends. For example, he uses the same word that Bailyn quotes from Adams as he struggles to provide an exact definition of power: "dominion." Unlike Adams, James speaks of the dominion Andrew will exercise over land rather than over men, but the use of the word ties the two together and indicates that Crèvecoeur, unlike his literary persona, views power less in terms of an opposition but more in terms of a relative distribution of a homogenous political substance. In fact, we have already seen hints of this collapse of distinctions in the above passage where James describes his astonished response to the ocean. Through his use of the sublime, which Burke claims is especially suited to the representation of objects of great power, James has subtly linked America with Europe, and, in his description of the ocean, he hints at the equivocal nature of power that both giveth and taketh away.¹⁶ The implications of power's dual

¹⁶ In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and*

nature becomes especially apparent when James visits the southern city of Charles Town, the place where capitalist development has reached its most advanced stage on American soil.

The Uncanny Harbinger of Death

Whenever James distinguishes Europe from America, he often does so indirectly by invoking the figure of a European whose travels across America introduce him to sights that at times remind him of home and at others strike him as entirely novel. In the generally upbeat Letter III, for instance, James describes how an “enlightened Englishman” would feel a surge of national pride when he beholds “the chain of settlements which embellish these extended shores” and says to himself ““This is the work of my countrymen, who, when convulsed by factions, afflicted by a variety of miseries, and wants, restless and impatient, took refuge here. They brought along with them their national genius, to which they principally owe what liberty they enjoy and what substance they possess” (66). Since the traveler shares the same “national genius” with the successful colonists, his experience is defined by familiarity, one half of the emotional content of the uncanny. After the traveler sees things with which he is already

Beautiful, Burke writes that “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable” (113). He further claims that: “Besides these things which *directly* suggest the idea of danger, and those which produce a similar effect from a mechanical cause, I know of nothing which is not some modification of power. And this branch rises as naturally as the other two branches, from terror, the common stock of every thing that is sublime” (116). For an alternative reading of Crèvecoeur’s use of the sublime in this and other passages see Holbo’s “Imagination, Commerce, and the Politics of Associationism in Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*.”

acquainted, James exposes him to a sight that will produce the sort of “intellectual impasse” that Terry Castle associates with the uncanny. He writes: “The difficulty consists in the manner of viewing so extensive a scene. He is arrived on a new continent; a modern society offers itself to his contemplation, different from what he had hitherto seen” (67). In its potential egalitarianism, this prospect clashes with the visitor’s acquired knowledge. It almost approaches the sublime: James describes the intellectual difficulty faced by the traveler as one of apprehending something “extensive,” a term that shares much with Burke’s ideas of vastness. Even the language spoken by both the Englishman and colonist, something that should be as homelike as anything, proves difficult to apprehend: “It must take some time ere he can reconcile himself to our dictionary, which is but short in words of dignity and names of honour” (67). In cleaving the familiar to the foreign, Crèvecoeur creates what would appear to be a textbook example of the uncanny, yet the experience, bewildering though it is, never partakes of the fearful, the crucial emotional ingredient with which Freud begins his essay.

Crèvecoeur adds this missing element when James imagines the European traveler’s response to Charles Town. The Letter begins by noting an uncanny similarity between the southern metropolis and a South American counterpart that would have done little to inspire the national pride of an “enlightened Englishman.” The farmer writes: “Charles Town is, in the north, what Lima is in the south.” Immediately following this statement, James interprets his own comparison: “both are capitals of the richest provinces of their respective hemispheres” (166). In spite of his effort to confine its significance to a single hermeneutic track, James’s reference to a Spanish colony would

have undoubtedly evoked a version of the “Black Legend,” a colonial discourse that portrayed the Spanish as “uniquely cruel and far more destructive than other Europeans in their treatment of the Indians” (Taylor, 51). As such, The Black Legend transformed the Spanish into a gothic double against which the English could define themselves. James’s analogy linking a Spanish colony to an English one would have undoubtedly embarrassed his Anglophone audience who would have viewed themselves as nothing short of benevolent next to the notorious *conquistadores* Pizarro and Cortez. The comparison marks a further step in the breakdown of the dichotomous othering that has occurred throughout Crèvecoeur’s text and which will crumble by the end of the letter.¹⁷

James follows this unsettling comparison with a series of images that would undoubtedly prove all too familiar to the cosmopolitan traveler. Like the enlightened Englishman bewildered by the sight of America’s democratic social order, the European will stumble intellectually as he tries to apprehend Charles Town’s old world appearance. Upon his first arrival, the European “must be greatly surprised when he sees the elegance of their houses, their sumptuous furniture, as well as the magnificence of their tables. Can he imagine himself in a country the establishment of which is so recent?” (167). Whereas the other colonies are baffling because of their novel social arrangements, Charles Town owes its strangeness to the fact that it could easily be mistaken for a European city that has been transplanted to the new world intact. In addition to Charles Town’s decadence,

¹⁷ For a more thorough glimpse into Crèvecoeur’s attitudes toward Spanish as compared to English colonies, especially those surrounding Latin America’s idle ecclesiastics, see his “Sketch of a Contrast between the Spanish & the English Colonies,” included in *More Letters from an American Farmer*, pages 82-89.

James also notes how Europe's oppressive institutions have entered the colony, albeit in distorted form. Unlike agricultural Pennsylvania, where everyone lives by the plow, Charles Town depends upon a division of labor that separates people from the real sources of wealth: "The three principal classes of inhabitants are lawyers, planters and merchants; this is the province which has afforded the first the richest spoils, for nothing can exceed their wealth, their power and influence" (167). From the other letters, it is clear that, for James, social stratification is an evil in its own right, a recidivist tendency that threatens to demolish his American identity. But the Pennsylvanian presses the point further. Lawyers amount to little more than greedier versions of Europe's obscurantist priests:

The whole mass of provincial property is become tributary to this society, which far above priests and bishops, disdain to be satisfied with the poor Mosaical portion of the tenth. I appeal to the many inhabitants who, while contending perhaps for the right to few hundred acres, have lost by the mazes of the law their whole patrimony...In another century, the law will possess in the north what now the church possesses in Peru and Mexico. (167-168)

Presumably, Charles Town resembles the other colonies in that ecclesiastical authority has been divested of state power: in fact James recounts the story of a clergyman whose parishioners rebuff his calls for them to treat their slaves with greater kindness.

Nevertheless, disestablishment has failed to prevent lawyers from assuming a social role functionally identical to that of the Roman Catholic priest of both Europe and Latin America, two geographical areas that are central to de Crevecoeur's strategy of doubling.

In perhaps the text's most uncanny moment, Crèvecoeur stages a climactic return of the physically coercive power that America has supposedly surmounted when James describes his meeting with a slave condemned to death for having killed an overseer. The episode occurs at the end of the letter and follows James's anguished rehearsal of the many atrocities that constitute human history. He records the scene in the hope that it "will account for these melancholy reflections and apologize for the gloomy thoughts with which [he] has filled this letter" (177). Explaining that he had been invited to dine with a planter and that he had resorted to the shade of a pleasant wood, James sets the stage for his encounter: "I was leisurely traveling along, attentively examining some peculiar plants which I had collected, when all at once I felt the air strongly agitated, though the day was perfectly calm and sultry" (177). This single sentence mimics the narrative structure of *Letters* as a whole. It begins with an image of benevolent nature, "the pleasant wood," with the farmer examining its works in search of a rational order: like an Enlightenment rustic, James engages in botanical inquiry. This image of an ordered world is violently interrupted by an apparently irrational occurrence: the air is "strongly agitated though the day was perfectly calm." The inexplicable gust of wind obviously amounts to much more than a trifling meteorological anomaly. Instead, it marks the uncanny return of pre-Enlightenment epistemology that accounted for natural

phenomena using supernatural explanations.¹⁸ James then describes what he sees after hearing “a few inarticulate monosyllables” and glancing to the area above the path. As he looks up, he finds an object that inspires a quintessentially Burkean response:

I perceived at about six rods distance something resembling a cage, suspended to the limbs of a tree, all the branches of which appeared covered with large birds of prey, fluttering about and anxiously endeavoring to perch on the cage. Actuated by an involuntary motion of my hands, more than by any design of my mind, I fired at them; they all flew to a short distance, with a most hideous noise, when, horrid to think and painful to repeat, I perceived a Negro suspended in the cage and left there to expire! (178)

This vision provokes the subjective experience Burke associates with the sublime: astonishment. Succumbing to a frightening paralysis, James writes: “I found myself suddenly arrested by the power of affright and terror; my nerves were convulsed; I trembled; I stood motionless, involuntarily contemplating the fate of this Negro in all its dismal latitude” (178). “Arrested” recalls the passage in which the farmer recounts his reaction to the ocean off the shores of Nantucket. There the prospect also exerts a terrible fascination for him. He repeatedly uses the passive voice to indicate his powerlessness: “my eyes were involuntarily directed”; “my ears were stunned.” Even when he uses the

¹⁸ For an example of the revolutionary generation’s ideological association between superstition and political tyranny see Adams’s *A Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law*.

active voice, he makes parts of his body rather than an integrated ego, the subject of his sentence as if they had mutinied against the “I”: “My nostrils involuntarily inhaled” (163). James is similarly affected by the sight of the condemned slave. Crèvecoeur even constructs a verbal echo of the earlier episode when he has James use the adverb “involuntarily” in both. In each case, James confronts an awesome display of power. Yet for their similarities, the two objects produce completely different results. On the one hand, after viewing the ocean, James contemplates the fickleness of nature: the same winds will on one day bring nourishing rains to the farmer and on another ruin the mariner. But the country stoic adopts an appropriately philosophical attitude toward the mercurial elements over which he has no control. It is a different story, however, when human hands wield the same frightful power. Faced with such mortal cruelty, the farmer loses all faith in a benevolent universe and in America’s immunity to the “revolutions, desolations, and plagues” which have been the common lot of humankind throughout its history. In a moment of harrowing despair, James practically cries from the page “Is there, then, no superintending power who conducts the moral operations of the world, as well as the physical?” (173).

Perhaps most frustrating for James is the fact that Charles Town’s atavistic turn results from the very thing that had promised to liberate so many despondent Europeans: unrestrained economic growth. James bases his imagined traveler’s bewildered reaction to the southern city on an implicit theory of cultural development: he assumes that the transition from an embryonic society to an enervated one occurs over a lengthy period of time. Otherwise, no discrepancy exists between the advanced appearance of the city and

its historically recent origins. More than once, he marvels at the way that Charles Town has sprouted mushroom-like from the southern soil, writing that “The sound of pleasure and the expenses of those citizens’ tables are much superior to what you would imagine; indeed, the growth of this town and province has been astonishingly rapid” and that “An European at this first arrival must be greatly surprised when he sees the elegance of their houses, their sumptuous furniture, as well as the magnificence of their tables. Can he imagine himself in a country the establishment of which is so recent?” (167). Yet James records his most damning judgments upon the promise of economic growth when he seeks the trace of a superintending hand behind the moral universe. In a passage that occurs just before he narrates his encounter with the tortured slave, James loses all faith in the promise of progress and wonders whether or not it would have been better if humankind had remained hunters since economic growth delivers so many into a world of uncertainty, crime and disease, a world that shares many characteristics with the darkened catacombs found in gothic fiction:

Would you prefer the state of men in the woods to that of men in a more improved situation...? For my part I think the vices and miseries to be found in the latter exceed those of the former, in which real evil is more scarce, more supportable, and less enormous. Yet we wish to see the earth peopled, to accomplish the happiness of kingdoms, which is said to consist in numbers. Gracious God! To what end is the introduction of so many beings into the mode of existence in which they must grope

amidst as many errors, commit as many crimes, and meet with as many diseases, wants and sufferings! (177)

To aggravate matters, Charles Town's rapid growth results from its surrounding geography. James begins his description of the southern city by enumerating the topographical features that have made it the hub of the province's commercial routes:

Its situation is admirable, being built at the confluence of two large rivers, which receive in their course a great number of inferior streams, all navigable in the spring for flat boats. Here the produce of this extensive territory concentrates; here therefore is the seat of the most valuable exportation; their wharfs, their docks, their magazine, are extremely convenient to this great commercial business. (166)

Nature has done for Charles Town, in the form of navigable rivers, what "internal improvements" would do for America in the nineteenth-century.¹⁹ As a result, the city's

¹⁹ Among the manuscripts unpublished by Crèvecoeur but later compiled by Dennis D. Moore as *More Letters from an American Farmer* is one titled "Manners of the Americans." The letter details the rise of a sort of anti-Andrew, the Hebridean, who instead of being ameliorated by the American system of laws, becomes a sharp dealing huckster. This unnamed settler situates himself at the intersection of several roads "which he has contrived on purpose," and instead of working honestly as does his Scottish counterpart, becomes an "Innholder & a Country Merchant," an occupational change that produces a number of deleterious effects: "this introduces him into all y' Little Misteries of self Interest, Cloathed under the general name of Proffits & Emoluments; he sells for Good that which he Knows to be Indifferent...he Fears Fraud in all his dealings and

inhabitants have amassed their wealth not because they have redoubled the efforts of the Pennsylvanians, but because the topography has greatly reduced the cost of transportation, spurring the development of a market economy. This advantageous positioning makes America's landscape an unreliable substitute for the occasional use of coercive power to which James alludes in his beast fables. In fact, Charles Town inverts the very mechanism that had guaranteed against the development of a stark social hierarchy on Nantucket. Like the southern planters, the whalers' fortunes depend upon more than their diligence: Nantucket's distribution of wealth partially results from the luck of the chase. Therefore, some of the island's inhabitants may outstrip others in their pursuit of wealth, turning the development of a European style hierarchy into a distinct possibility. Thankfully, though, in the case of Nantucket, the cost of importing commodities makes them dear, a situation that consumes a good deal of the island's superfluous wealth, thus stifling the rise of extreme social divisions. In Charles Town, however, the lowered costs of transportation encourage the growth of a class of idlers and popish attorneys. Apparently, nature is indifferent as to whether it fosters republican societies or tyrannical ones. As a result, spontaneous economic growth appears to be a mixed blessing.

Transactions, he arms himself therefore with it, Strict Integrity is not much Wanted" (100-101). The letter demonstrates that Crèvecoeur understood that the concentration of wealth found in Charles Town does not necessarily depend upon serendipitous geography since the settler described in "Manners" contrives to get roads to intersect near his property. Had Crèvecoeur included manners in 1782 edition of *Letters*, he would have, as Thomas Philbrick has noted, "given Letter III a realistic balance that it lacks" (111). In excluding it from the 1782 edition, the exiled Loyalist heightens the sense of decline and the uncanny return of history that define *Letters*.

After the distinction between America and Europe has effectively collapsed, Crèvecoeur includes a note from a Russian gentleman, Mr. IW—N AL—Z, that mixes the experience of the previous letters with what must be a willed naïveté. In the letter, IW—N, records a visit he has made to Mr. John Bertram. As Teresa Goddu notes, the Russian gentleman paraphrases the import of Letter IX, which demonstrates that America has not completely surmounted the coercive practices of Europe. In a nearly perfect reversal of the observations made by the minister in Letter I, IW—N tells Bertram that America’s infrastructure, though of recent origin, put him “in mind of those of the city of Pompeii,” where he “attentively examined everything...particularly the foot-path which runs along the houses. They appeared to have been considerably worn by the great number of people which had once traveled over them. But now how distant; neither builder nor proprietors remain; nothing is known!” (189). These ruins turn out to be more relevant than the minister allows. By the Russian’s reckoning, America has not escaped history’s gravitational pull: the continent’s current prosperity does not inoculate it against future decline. Yet IW—N contains the effects of this knowledge so that he can glibly assert that America, though not immune to political degeneration, will nevertheless remain a free and prosperous country and assume its place among the world’s great nations. After comparing his home country to Pennsylvania, IW—N jubilantly exclaims “Oh, America...Thou knowest not as yet the whole extent of thy happiness: the foundation of thy civil polity must lead thee in a few years to a degree of population and power which Europe little thinks of!” Bertram responds to this ebullience with a skepticism that recalls Iw--n’s earlier linking of America to Pompeii: “But doth thee not

imagine that the great will, in the course of years, come over here also; for it is the misfortune of all societies everywhere to hear of great men, great rulers and of great tyrants.” To which the sanguine Iwan replies “My dear sir...tyranny can never take a strong hold of this country; the land is too widely distributed; it is poverty in Europe that makes slaves” (193). Thus, do both Iwan and Bertram resurrect the duality of power that has been thoroughly discredited in Letter IX. Invoking the model of power described by Draper, Iwan claims that America will simultaneously become an increasingly potent nation, yet maintain its egalitarian nature, largely because of the vast amount of land yet to be settled. As the trip to Charles Town demonstrates, societies saturated with economic power tend to precipitate tyrannical social structures that are earlier associated with a gothicized Europe. Charles Town also proves that nature can conspire to create the conditions for huge social inequalities as much as it can act as a leveler. So resilient is his optimism, that even when he is speaking of chattel slavery, Iwan again forgets his ominous comparison between America and Europe. In an internal variation of the doubling between two locations, Iwan responds to Bartram’s query about whether or not Russia also has slaves by explaining that “Yes, unfortunately, but they are more properly civil than domestic slaves” (197). Is this not yet another version of the distinction between private and public that countenances any form of tyranny provided it is not attached to the machinery of the state? Although the distinction between “civil” and “domestic” slavery might have been significant to the Revolutionary generation, it appears to be nothing short of casuistry in the aftermath of Letter IX.²⁰ If it is nothing

²⁰ For the distinction between “civil” and “domestic” slavery see Alvarez Saar who

else, *Letters from an American Farmer* is unequivocal on this point: left unchecked, private economic power can produce circumstances that are every bit as terrifying as those that can be found in societies governed by the most tyrannical of states.

Crèvecoeur and the Myth of American Exceptionalism

Writing at an earlier apogee of American corporate power and nearly a hundred and twenty years after de Crèvecoeur first donned the mask of Farmer James, Fredrick Jackson Turner advanced his influential thesis that “The existence of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (1). In so doing, he argued against the “germ theory of politics,” a dominant explanatory framework that treated the history of American institutions as the transplantation and growth of European, and especially Germanic, seeds in an American context.²¹ Turner claims that “Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional

claims that “At the literal level, letter IX depicts the evil of slavery. However, during the colonial period, slavery also had a symbolic meaning. For slavery symbolized the relationship between Britain and the American colonies and was an important component of Whig theory of a conspiracy in the highest levels of British government that would bring the colonies under British control...Further, in the eighteenth century, slavery had a specific political meaning that it would lose for future generations: it meant the loss of power by an independent people” (195). Alvarez Saar relies heavily upon Bailyn in formulating her definition of “symbolic” slavery, which I treat as equivalent to IW—N’s civil slavery, since both seem concerned with defining the relationship between governors and governed, with political dependencies rather than household ones, which I equate with “domestic” slavery.

²¹ In “A Summary View of the Rights of British America,” Thomas Jefferson similarly traces both America’s and England’s democratic traditions to the Saxon tribesman who inhabited Germany’s forests and who eventually immigrated to Britain. This historical “myth” held that William the Norman imposed England’s feudal institutions on a previously free people after he conquered the island in 1066, allowing Jefferson to externalize feudalism from America’s history, much as de Crèvecoeur does throughout

students to the Germanic origins, too little to the American factors” (3). To remedy this, he invokes the transformative power of the frontier which offered the possibility of renewal:

For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant. There is no *tabula rasa*. The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons have accompanied the frontier. (38)

In his general disdain for the inherited past, one could easily mistake Turner for Crèvecoeur’s minister who in Letter I similarly imagines that Italy’s ruins “have very little affinity with those of the present age and must therefore impart a knowledge which appears useless and trifling” (42). Above all else, the frontier promoted freedom, and in spite of its closure, Turner writes that “He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased” (37).

Letters. He even implicitly invokes this idea when the minister, in an apparent reversal of his treatment of America as youthful, claims, “Here we have in some measure regained the ancient dignity of our species” (43).

Turner carries a tempered version of this enthusiasm into a later essay in which he contemplates four revolutionary changes that America underwent in the late nineteenth century, making it a sort of Charles Town writ large: “the exhaustion of the supply of free land”; “a concentration of capital in the control of fundamental industries”; “the expansion of the United States politically and commercially into lands beyond the sea”; and the fact that “political parties of the United States now tend to divide on issues that involve the question of socialism” (244-246). Among these four factors, the Gilded Age historian is especially troubled by the “concentration of economic and social power in the hands of a comparatively few men” which threatens “to make political democracy an appearance rather than a reality” (261). On this question, Turner adopts an ambivalent attitude that eludes easy characterization. Apparently he believes that the future of American democracy could go either way. Most troubling are the captains of industry, of whom Turner writes, “it is still to be determined whether these men constitute a menace to democratic institutions, or the most efficient factor for adjusting democratic control to the new conditions” (267). He epitomizes his ambivalence when he refers to Andrew Carnegie as “the ironmaster,” an apt title for a man who made his fortune trafficking in steel and who heads the Steel Trust (265). Yet “ironmaster” points to more sinister connotations and would be just as appropriate for describing an inflexible tyrant or Vulcan-like god of mythoogy. For the most part, though, Turner overcomes his ambivalence by invoking the mitigating effects of frontier ideals that transcend the disappearance of the literal one:

Long after the frontier period of a particular region has passed away, the conception of society, the ideals and aspirations which it produced, persist in the minds of the people...If, indeed, we ourselves were not pioneers, our fathers were, and the inherited ways of looking at things, the fundamental assumptions of the American people, have all been shaped by this experience of democracy on its westward march. This experience has been wrought into the very warp and woof of American thought. (264)

America thus remains something of an exception to the historical commonplace that, when wealth becomes too concentrated, a republic's days are numbered. This modified exceptionalism prompts the historian to conclude with a call for continued vigilance that simultaneously recognizes democracy's fragility while insisting upon its perdurable tendencies: "Let us see to it that the ideals of the pioneer in his log cabin shall enlarge into the spiritual life of a democracy where civic power shall dominate and utilize individual achievement for the common good" (268).

In his final letter, Farmer James, like Turner, also looks to the frontier for salvation. After the outbreak of revolutionary hostilities and the final dissolution of his pastoral dream, James finds himself torn by the irreconcilable loyalties of the citizen and of the man:

Great source of wisdom! Inspire me with light sufficient to guide my benighted steps out of this intricate maze! Shall I discard all my ancient principles, shall I renounce that name, that nation which I once held so respectable? I feel the powerful attraction; the sentiments they inspired grew with my earliest knowledge and were grafted upon the first rudiments of my education. On the other hand, shall I arm myself against that country where I first drew breath, against the playmates of my youth, my bosom friends, my acquaintance? The idea makes me shudder! (205)

To escape this antinomy, he decides to take up residence among the Indians and “revert into a state approaching nearer to that of nature, unencumbered either with voluminous laws or contradictory codes, often galling to the very necks of those whom they protect, and at the same time sufficiently remote from the brutality of unconnected nature” (211). While such a flight may allow James to avoid having to choose between allying himself with either his neighbors or his monarch, a life closer to nature is not without its risks. Beyond his abhorrence of miscegenation, James also worries that his children, like many of the Indians’ captives, will be charmed by the relatively leisured life they live. The farmer characterizes this lifestyle by listing some of the reasons given by Europeans who have elected to remain with their captors: “the most perfect freedom, the ease of living, the absence of those cares and solitudes which so often prevail with us” (214). For someone like James, who views agricultural labor as an ameliorating influence and a good in its own right, the appeal of Indian life is undeniable, yet the exact sources of this

appeal remain ineffable. As he puzzles over its allure, he can only postulate that “*there must* be in their social bond something singularly captivating and far superior to anything to be boasted of among us...*There must* be something very bewitching in their manners, something very indelible and marked by the very hands of nature” (214, italics mine). In the absence of definitive answers as to why Europeans would abandon their culture for that of the Indians, though, James retains his prejudices against it, perhaps because of the central importance of hunting to their economy: when James speaks of the degenerate frontiersmen, he is horrified by their reliance upon hunting, which, when practiced by Europeans, produces “a mongrel breed, half civilized, half savage...Eating of wild meat, whatever you may think, tends to alter their temper” (77-78). To obviate the possibility that his own children will similarly degenerate, James claims that he will allow them to practice hunting merely as an avocation and as a means of acquiring cultural capital among their adopted compatriots: “Whatever success they may meet with in hunting or fishing shall be only considered as recreation and pastime; I shall thereby prevent them from estimating their skill in the chase as an important and necessary accomplishment. I mean to say to them: ‘You shall hunt and fish merely to show your new companions that you are not inferior to them in point of sagacity and dexterity’” (223). So firm is his commitment to the edifying effects of the plough, the American farmer even hopes that he might “persuade” his guests “to till a little more land than they do and not to trust so much to the produce of the chase” (221).

To further keep his children faithful to the vocation of agriculture, James concocts a scheme that he hopes will foster what Max Weber would famously term “The Protestant Work Ethic”:

In order to supply this great deficiency of industrious motives and to hold out to them a real object to prevent the fatal consequences of this sort of apathy, I will keep an exact account of all that shall be gathered and give each of them a regular credit for the amount of it, to be paid them in real property at the return of the peace. Thus, though seemingly toiling for a bare subsistence on a foreign land, they shall entertain the pleasing prospect of seeing the sum of their labours one day realized either in legacies or gifts, equal if not superior to it. (223)

Here, Crèvecoeur speaks ironically through James, who has forgotten one of the central lessons of Charles Town: defined as it is by its “superfluity” of wealth and the insidious leisure which follows such riches, an appeal not entirely dissimilar to that of the “ease of living” James associates with the Indians, the southern city becomes the antithesis of the republican colonies of both Pennsylvania and Nantucket, which promise little more than a “simple subsistence” gained through honest industry (223). Yet, in order to prevent his children from approaching the state of nature too closely, James appeals to their greed with the promise of wealth that exceeds the value of the labor required to produce it, the principal bane of both Charles Town’s slaves and its idle planter class. James’ scheme

also bears an uncanny resemblance to Europe's collusion between church and state that sought to produce a tractable population content to exchange present labor for future rewards. This reverses one of the defining features of the American, for whom "the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour" (70). By dangling such a promise in front of his children, James resembles Charles Town's class of obscurantist lawyers who are themselves the uncanny repetitions of Europe's and Latin America's oppressive priests.

Thus does Crèvecoeur create a relentlessly uncanny representation of America, an unfamiliar America unable to escape the familiar traps of Europe's gothic past. Every promise of freedom is undermined by the introduction of the very elements that had destroyed it before. In so doing, he mounts a devastating critique of the ideology of America's economic exceptionalism exemplified by Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Yet Crèvecoeur treats the victim of this uncanny reversal sympathetically. As James explains, "It is not, believe me, a disappointed ambition which leads me to take this step; it is the bitterness of my situation, it is the impossibility of knowing what better measure to adopt: my education fitted me for nothing more than the most simple occupations of life; I am but a feller of trees, a cultivator of lands, the most honourable title an American can have" (212). As noted above, Frederick Jackson Turner, like Crèvecoeur, would develop a much more measured and complicated response to the development of American capitalism, a response partially signified by the historian's need to exhort his audience to retain their pioneer ideals at the end of his 1903 essay. Nonetheless, from our contemporary perspective, Crèvecoeur's uncanny narrative

appears all the more prescient in that his own skepticism about the frontier's ability to reconcile democracy with capitalism preceded Turner's by a century. Furthermore, Crèvecoeur was able to discern tendencies within capitalist development, the inevitable concentration and monopolization of wealth, that were for the most part latent in the eighteenth century, but which were all too apparent in Turner's day and remain so in our own.²² In an age where economic growth is still equated with progress in general, we would do well to heed his admonitions.²³

²² As Christopher Iannini has shown, Crèvecoeur's horizons extended beyond the shores of mainland America and into the Caribbean. This cosmopolitan perspective provided him with a picture of the many forms that capitalism, an economy founded upon "the basis of nature, self-interest," could take. The historical acuity I describe above was undoubtedly facilitated by such a broadened point of view.

²³ Benjamin Friedman expounds this view in his *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*.

CHAPTER TWO

“A RINGING IN MY EARS”: THE DISCIPLINED SUBJECT IN POE’S TALES OF MURDER AND DETECTION

“Our fathers could enforce morality by law, but the times have changed and unless we can regulate public sentiment and secure morality in some other way, WE ARE
UNDONE.”

The Reverend Lyman Beecher

Qtd. In Charles Sellers

On October 23, 2008, as the American economy teetered on the brink of financial collapse, the former Chairman of the Federal Reserve and noted advocate of free market principles, Alan Greenspan, appeared before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform to help, in the words of committee chairman Henry Waxman, clarify “the role that federal regulators have played in the financial excesses on Wall Street” (Committee on Government Oversight and Reform). During his testimony, Greenspan made a rather startling admission when he explained that he “found a flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak” (Committee on Government Oversight and Reform 37). Greenspan believed

that he had erred in assuming that the self-interest of economic agents could more effectively promote the stability of financial markets than could government regulation: “Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders’ equity (myself especially) are in a state of shocked disbelief. Such counterparty surveillance is a central pillar of our financial markets’ state of balance. If it fails, as occurred this year, market stability is undermined” (Committee on Government Oversight and Reform 23). In expecting self-interest to protect shareholder equity, Greenspan had merely translated classical economic theory into policy, and his testimony provides a dramatic revelation of the degree to which free-market ideology depends upon a particular theory of human nature. Adam Smith offers perhaps the most famous articulation of this theory in his 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*, where he treats self-interest as the key to understanding human behavior. Explaining that a person is in constant need of the assistance of his fellows, Smith argues that a supplicant “will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favor, and show them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them” (507). For as he later explains “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages” (507). To this picture of the self-interested man, Smith adds a complementary desire for self-improvement when he speaks of “the desire of bettering our condition, a desire which ...comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave” (508). And finally, the human actor at the center of Smith’s

discussion is blessed with a rational faculty that allows him determine how best to improve his condition by investing capital in the most profitable enterprises. Since the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, many of Smith's assumptions have achieved hegemony, particularly in the last forty years of American history thanks in large part to the ideological ascendance of the University of Chicago school of economics exemplified by Milton Friedman and his libertarian views. In fact, among many free-market economists, "ideas have solidified into dogmas" that often "supersede any empirical observation" (Bouchard 1181). Given such habits of thought, it is not hard to see why someone of Greenspan's stature could have been left dumbfounded by the events of 2008.

Yet if the former Chair of the Federal Reserve was caught off guard by the collapse of America's financial markets, there were others who posited an alternate view of human nature who would have been far less surprised. Well before the economic shocks of 2008, the image of economic man defined by his rationality had lost some of its intellectual cachet in America, due in large part to the emerging field of behavioral economics. Using the insights of experimental psychology, behavioral economics has demonstrated that actual human beings do not generally behave in ways predicted by economic models. According to Richard H. Thaler and Cass Sunstein, if "you look at economics textbooks, you will learn that homo economicus can think like Albert Einstein, store as much memory as IBM's Big Blue, and exercise the willpower of Mahatma Gandhi...But the folks that we know are not like that. Real people have trouble with long division if they don't have a calculator, sometimes forget their spouse's

birthday, and have a hangover on New Year's Day. They are not homo economicus; they are homo sapiens" (6-7).²⁴ In advancing this more complex, empirically-grounded model of human nature, behavioral economics helps to correct some of the dogmatizing tendencies within the discipline, which can be traced to "economic work done in the 1950s and 1960s, which with hindsight looks more like propaganda against communism than plausible science" (Bouchard 1181).

Despite their revolutionary nature, the conclusions of behavioral economics are, in many respects, anticipated by Edgar Allan Poe, whose firsthand experience of the market economy had made him all too aware of the distance separating economic ideology from empirical reality. Unlike some of his literary contemporaries who were insulated from the vicissitudes of America's developing economy through either sinecure or inherited wealth, Poe spent the majority of his adult life engaged in the business of American literature, working out of necessity as either a magazine editor or contributor. As Terrence Whalen has demonstrated, this economic position, coupled with an early exposure to the mercantile ethos of his adopted guardian, the Richmond tobacco merchant John Allan, granted Poe an insider's perspective on the United States' emerging market economy. Such insights occasionally prompted Poe to adopt a skeptical attitude toward his country's ideological representations of its existing modes of production.

²⁴ For an example of how behavioral economics can be used to address issues of public policy see Thaler and Sunstein's *Nudge*. For a more theoretical discussion of behavioral economics and a more direct engagement with the ideas that undoubtedly contributed to the deregulation of financial markets which Greenspan helped promote, see Schleifer's *Inefficient Markets*.

Unlike Smith, who postulates economic agents who strive to improve their lot in life and who are allowed to pursue their own self-interest by a constitution founded on simple liberty, Poe represents human beings who are motivated primarily by “perverseness,” which the narrator of “The Black Cat” defines as the “unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature.” He includes this self-destructive tendency among “the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man” (*Poetry and Tales* 599). In “The Imp of the Perverse,” Poe creates a narrator who contemplates why perverseness, this “*primum mobile*” of human behavior has escaped the attention of phrenologists and other theoreticians of mind. According to this unnamed narrator, the acolytes of Franz Joseph Gall, much like the contemporary followers of Adam Smith and Milton Friedman, have failed to register this innate principle because “phrenology, and in great measure all metaphysicianism, have been concocted *à priori*. The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs—to dictate purposes to God. Having thus fathomed to his satisfaction the intentions of Jehovah, out of these intentions he built his innumerable systems of mind” (*Poetry and Tales* 826). Within such an epistemology, perverseness remains almost unthinkable: “The idea of it has never occurred, simply because of its seeming supererogation. We saw no *need* of the impulse...we could not have understood in what manner it might be made to further the objects of humanity, either temporal or eternal” (*Poetry and Tales* 826). In place of such a priori thinking, the narrator recommends an inductive approach to the study of humankind:

It would have been wiser, it would have been safer to classify, (if classify we must), upon the basis of what man usually or occasionally did, and was always occasionally doing, rather than upon the basis of what we took it for granted the Deity intended him to do...Induction, *à posteriori*, would have brought phrenology to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call *perverseness*, for want of a more characteristic term. (*Poetry and Tales* 827)

To exemplify this quality, the narrator points to the all too human tendency to procrastinate and the desire to leap into nothingness when looking down from a great height. In either case, it is clear why he would characterize perverseness as a sentiment that is “strongly antagonistical” to our desire for well-being and therefore to self-interest. After offering this lengthy disquisition, the narrator reveals himself as “one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse” and recounts the tale of how he planned the perfect murder and eluded detection for a number of years. Then, one day, as he is walking along a busy street, he spontaneously confesses his crime and consigns himself to “the hangman and to hell” (*Poetry and Tales* 831). Thus does Poe offer the final iteration of a narrative pattern with which he had worked on two previous occasions: the same plot involving a person committing a murder, keeping it successfully hidden and then impulsively exposing his guilt, also occurs in “The Tell Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat.”

In this chapter, I argue that Poe places such masochistic narrators at the center of his gothic tales to critique his country's emerging capitalist order by undermining the ideological assumptions used to justify it. By engaging in such irrationally self-destructive behavior, these tales' perverse narrators flagrantly defy the dictates of self-interest and thereby complicate the image of economic man proffered by Smith and his intellectual heirs. Coupled with their self-destructive tendencies, these victims of the perverse are also haunted by a common set of paranoid fantasies. In creating such characters, I believe that Poe draws heavily upon the work of the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Recently, Bentham has been linked in the critical imagination with Michel Foucault, who treats the former's design for a model prison, the "panopticon," as the architectural figure for a widespread practice of power that arose near the end of the eighteenth century and that was especially suited to the demands of a market economy.²⁵ Like Foucault, Poe knew of the panopticon, and consistently associates Bentham with capitalism, and arrives at similar conclusions regarding the way such a construct, and the more generalized practice of power it embodies, would inform the psychology of people living within its purview. In the Dupin stories and three gothic tales of murder and confession, "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse," Poe

²⁵ Foucault connects the disciplined society he describes to industrialization and the free labor it requires in his own version of historical materialism: "with feudalism, at a time when money and production were still at an early stage of development, we find a sudden increase in corporal punishment—the body being in most cases the only property accessible; the penitentiary...forced labor and the prison factory appear with the development of the mercantile economy But the industrial system requires a free market in labour, and in the nineteenth century, the role of forced labour in the mechanisms of punishment diminishes accordingly and 'corrective' detention takes its place" (*Discipline and Punish* 25).

incorporates imagery and character behavior that bear the unmistakable impress of Bentham's house of inspection. In spontaneously revealing their crimes and fetishizing their victims' eyes, these tales' murderous narrators exemplify both the preoccupations and motivations one would expect to find in people whose minds have been infiltrated by such a disciplinary apparatus. In creating such characters, Poe offers his readers a grotesque version of the quotidian practice within America's Antebellum economy where "free" laborers behaved in ways that manifestly undermined their own interests and that benefited the propertied capitalists for whom they worked. In so doing he exposes "the forms of compulsion to which free laborers themselves were subjected" in nineteenth-century America and which prevented them from pursuing the dictates of self-interest and realizing the promise of emancipatory capitalism (Foner x).²⁶

Poe and Bentham

In a series of letters dated 1787, Jeremy Bentham outlines a plan for an architectural structure intended to house people requiring constant supervision such as prisoners, workers, pupils and hospital patients. He calls his proposed structure the panopticon, which he vaunts as "A new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example" (31). Consisting of a central observation tower, or inspector's lodge, surrounded by a circle of cells that house the structure's inmates, the panopticon

²⁶ For a discussion of the many ways that self discipline became ascendant in antebellum America's market economy see Charles Sellers' *The Market Revolution*, especially his chapter titled "Ethos vs. Eros," pgs. 237-268. In that chapter, Sellers describes the way that anti-masturbation and temperance campaigns helped to produce the self-regulating workers needed by the emerging economic order.

derives its unprecedented powers from an architectural trick that distributes visibility unequally between observers and observed. The cells themselves are constructed with a window “in the outward circumference...large enough...to light the cell” while its “inner circumference...is formed by an iron grating, so light as not to screen any part of the cell from the inspector’s view” (Bentham, 35). Whereas the prisoners’ cells are constructed to maximize visibility, the inspector’s lodge aims at obscuring its occupant through the use of blinds. This nonreciprocal visibility is absolutely indispensable: “The essence of it consists then, in the *centrality* of the inspector’s situation, combined with the well known and most effectual contrivances for *seeing without being seen*” (43) [Bentham’s italics]. The inspector’s invisibility creates the impression of an omnipresence where an actual one is not possible: “This [every person being under simultaneous surveillance] being impossible, the next thing to be wished for is, that at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive himself to be so” (34). Through a simple structure, inmates labor under the belief that an invisible and omniscient supervisor can observe their every action. This unseen, though certainly not unperceived, watcher becomes an organizing principle of their psychology.

Poe knew of Bentham and mentions him several times in his writing where he consistently associates the philosopher with both industrialization and capitalism. In his 1842 review of Rufus Griswold’s *The Poets and Poetry of America*, for instance, Poe treats Bentham as the epitome of the sort of mechanical intelligence best suited to construct the machinery of industrialization. Addressing what he believes to be a premature claim that American intelligence can apply itself to practical ends alone, he

writes: “Because it suited us to construct an engine in the first instance, it has been denied that we could compose an epic in the second. Because we were not all Homers in the beginning, it has been somewhat too rashly taken for granted that we shall be all Jeremy Bentham to the end” (*Essays and Reviews* 549). In another instance, Poe links Bentham to speculative enterprise in ways that portray both the philosopher and capitalism in unflattering terms. In his tale “Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences,” Poe provides an anatomy of the diddler and his methods, which is to say an anatomy of the confidence man and his games. After identifying diddling as the essential human characteristic, claiming that man “was made to diddle. This is his aim—his object—his end,” Poe dissects this central activity and postulates that “Diddling rightly considered, is a compound, of which the ingredients are minuteness, interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, *nonchalance*, originality, impertinence, and *grin*” (*Poetry and Tales* 607). Poe critiques capitalism when he describes the first of his enumerated elements, “minuteness.” There, he places the speculator embarrassingly close to the diddling confidence man, claiming that the difference separating them is purely quantitative:

“*Minuteness*:--your diddler is minute. His operations are upon a small scale. His business is retail, for cash, or approved paper at sight. Should he ever be tempted into magnificent speculation, he then, at once loses his distinctive features, and becomes what we term a “financier.” This latter word conveys the diddling idea in every respect except that of magnitude. (*Poetry and Tales* 607-608)

Poe incorporates Bentham into this disparaging analysis in the opening paragraph of the tale: “Since the world began there have been two Jeremys. The one wrote a Jeremiad about usury, and was called Jeremy Bentham...The other gave the name to the most important of the exact sciences” (*Poetry and Tales* 607). Here Poe refers to Bentham’s 1787 “A Defense of Usury” in which he attacks Adam Smith’s recommendation that legal limits be placed upon the rates of interest lenders may charge as an affront to economic liberty. In “Diddling,” then, Poe treats Bentham as the capitalist’s capitalist, as someone who even outdid Adam Smith in his defense of *laissez faire* principles.

Poe unites these two associations, capitalism and machinery, in his discussions of the panopticon. In a review of Frederick Von Raumer’s *England in 1835*, Poe alludes to some of the topics that he had noted “for comment and extract” but which he omitted because he perceived he might have already infringed upon his readers’ patience. These include “a lively Philippic against Utilitarianism” and “an account of Bentham’s penitentiary” (511). Building on this unequivocal reference, G.W. Sherman reads Poe’s 1840 “Philosophy of Furniture” as a “subtle satire of Jeremy Bentham”(31). In the article, Poe writes of “a race of time servers and money lovers—children of Baal and worshipers of Mammon—Bentham's, who, to spare thought and economize fancy first cruelly invented the Kaleidoscope, and then established joint-stock companies to twirl it by steam” (*Poetry and Tales* 384). Sherman claims that Poe offers this satire when he chastises his fellow citizens for their garish tastes in interior design, especially as this is manifested in their proclivity to hang a number of mirrors on the walls of their homes. According to Sherman, such decorative choices produce an experience “akin to

imprisonment in Bentham's panopticon" (31). In contrast to such overdone interiors, Poe recommends a "single mirror so as to create an exact converse of Bentham's prison room" (31). Louis A. Renza offers a similar argument, linking the ideal room of the article to another of Poe's tales, "The Pit and the Pendulum," through a series of verbal associations. In the tale, the narrator recounts his experience of being imprisoned by the Spanish inquisition and ultimately saved from certain death by a General La Salle. Renza claims that LaSalle's rescue "represents the rescue of [Poe's] tale from mid-nineteenth century abstract modes of communal surveillance" and that it therefore "revises Jeremy Bentham's 1787 'Panopticon'" (69). Renza connects this tale of inquisitorial dungeons to Poe's discussion of tasteful interiors by reminding readers that the name "La Salle" sounds identical to the French word for "room." He goes on to claim that the single mirror described in Poe's article "counters in miniature that period's... fascination with large-scale visual staging" aborting "both the room's amplitude, its refracted expansion and since one would not see oneself reflected in it from any 'ordinary' seating position, the visual display of self, or the sense of one's publicly accessible appearance before others" (77). While Renza rightly reminds readers that David Brewster rather than Jeremy Bentham invented the kaleidoscope, I would nevertheless argue that Poe uses the name of Brewster's invention to emphasize the Panopticon's visual elements that are central to his depiction of the disciplined subject. Furthermore, in speaking of the "joint-stock companies" that underwrite the kaleidoscope, Poe could well be referring to Bentham's own lengthy description of how his project should be financed. In an

eighteenth-century version of more recent attempts to introduce the profit motive into prison management, Bentham writes:

To come to the point at once, I would do the whole by *contract*. I would farm out the profits, the no profits, or if you please the losses, to him who being in other respects unexceptionable, offered the best terms...his success in it if he does succeed, may be regarded in the light of an invention, and rewarded accordingly, just as success in other inventions is rewarded, by the profit which a monopoly secured by patent enables a man to make. (51)

While people other than Brewster secured patents for the kaleidoscope and profited by its sale, it seems odd that Poe would characterize such endeavors as cruel, an adjective that seems much more applicable to Bentham's prison.

Bentham would have been especially important for Poe because his prison house offers the perfect model for someone who wishes to represent free laborers as little more than prisoners. The philosopher invites such an association because he makes very little distinction between people who will work in his panopticon because they have been sentenced under the hard labor bill and others who will do so because their employers have adopted his plan with an eye toward efficiency. In the first place, Bentham imagines that his prison, like *laissez faire* capitalism, will be founded upon self-interest, though he clearly indicates that the panopticon values the interests of its investors above those of its laborers. Like all advocates of free labor, he hopes to spur productivity by harnessing his

workers' self interest. In a letter that describes the "Means of Extracting Labor," Bentham writes: "It is necessary every exertion should be sure of its reward; but it is not necessary that such reward be so great, or any thing near so great, as he might have had, had he worked elsewhere" (67). In another letter, Bentham treats his prison as a capitalist's dream, the perfect apparatus for extracting the maximum amount of surplus value and keeping his workers under his thumb: "What other master is there that can reduce his workmen, if idle, to a situation next to starving, without suffering them to go elsewhere? What other master is there, whose men can never get drunk unless he chooses them to do so? and who, so far from being able to raise their wages by combination, are obliged to take whatever pittance he thinks it most for his interest to allow" (71). After describing the methods of which the investor may avail himself for extorting labor from his charges, Bentham devotes another letter to "Manufactories." There he claims that, from the manager's perspective, coerced labor differs very little from free labor. This similarity renders any separate discussion of non-penal manufactures superfluous: "After so much has been said on the application of our principle to the business of manufactories, considered as carried on by forced labour, you will think a very few words more than sufficient, in the view of applying it to manufactories carried on upon the ordinary plan of freedom" (81). In a subsequent letter, Bentham obscures even the trifling distinction he earlier makes between free and coerced labor by omitting the first from a list of topics that he has already covered: "After applying the inspection principle first to prisons, and through mad-houses bringing it down to hospitals, will the parental feeling

endure my applying it at last to schools?” (86). Within the Benthamite lexicon, “work,” or at least manufacturing work is synonymous with imprisonment, even when it is free.

Poe published all of the tales that I believe were influenced by the panopticon after making his first explicit references to Bentham and his penitentiary. The review of Frederick Von Raumer’s *England in 1835* was published in 1836, “The Philosophy of Furniture” in 1840. The tales with which I am principally concerned were all published within a period just short of three years: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” in 1841; “The Tell Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” in 1843; “The Imp of the Perverse” and “The Purloined Letter” in 1845. Within a relatively short period of time, Poe writes tales that share the motifs of particularly perceptive eyes and of murderers who spontaneously publicize their guilt. The proximity of these dates becomes even more tantalizing when we recall that from 1838 to 1844, Poe lived in Philadelphia, the city that hosted an American avatar of Bentham’s ideal, the Eastern State Penitentiary. Donald McNutt describes many of Eastern State’s characteristically Benthamite features from its “long wings of cells radiating from a central rotunda” (140) to the “small windows fixed in the ceilings of each cell ‘formed by a convex reflector of 8 inches in diameter, termed “*dead eyes*” and the cell’s hollow cones of cast iron “fixed securely in the wall” through which wardens “could command a view of the cell unobserved by the prisoner” (Haviland qtd. in McNutt 146). While McNutt acknowledges that a thorough search through the works

of Eastern State's architect, John Haviland yields no explicit references to Bentham, I would concur with him in treating the similarities as anything but coincidental.²⁷

Dupin, the Individual and Discipline

At one end of the disciplinary apparatus stands the institutional body responsible for surveillance and social control: the police, a group that Poe has occasion to represent in his tales of detection. In the tales, the police do not generally fare well. Rather, they tend to function much as foils against whom the private investigator, Dupin, defines his superior intellectual methods. This is especially true in "The Purloined Letter." Narrated by Dupin's anonymous companion, the tale recounts a visit by Monsieur G., the prefect of the Parisian police who has reached his wit's end in an investigation he has been assigned. A certain Minister D. has stolen a compromising letter belonging to a female member of the royal household, presumably the queen, which he has used to his political advantage. The prefect explains how he has scoured the minister's apartment, using the most exacting methods imaginable, all for naught. The letter remains in the minister's possession. After hearing this account, Dupin recovers the epistle himself. According to

²⁷ McNutt interprets Poe's tales of confinement and confession, "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" in light of the Eastern State Penitentiary and the ubiquitous discussion of imprisonment practices in antebellum America, claiming that "these tales delineate the suffusion of disciplinary ideologies throughout public and private spaces," a claim with which I essentially agree. But whereas McNutt concerns himself primarily with the appearance of ruined houses in the tales and the way that "patterns of demolished settings allegorize the ways in which disciplinary discourses infiltrate spaces and minds outside of prisons" (151), I am concerned with the way that Poe draws upon Bentham and his prison to represent the psychology of the free laborer who invariably undermines his own interests and becomes a victim to The Imp of the Perverse.

Dupin, the police fail to locate the document because they do not adapt their investigative techniques to the object of their pursuit. Instead, the prefect employs his usual “certain set of highly ingenious resources” as “a sort of Procrustean bed, to which he forcibly adapts his designs” taking “for granted that all men proceed to conceal a letter, --not exactly in a gimlet-hole bored in a chair leg—but, at least in *some* out-of-the-way hole or corner suggested by the same tenor of thought which would urge a man to secrete a letter in a gimlet-hole bored in a chair leg” (*Poetry and Tales* 691). Apparently Monsieur G. is one of those *a priori* reasoners who mangle empirical situations so that they may better conform to their ideal categories. In this regard, he resembles the phrenologists who, in contrast to the “understanding or observant man,” have been unable to detect the presence of the perverse.²⁸ To exemplify the basis of a successful investigation, Dupin refers to a certain eight-year-old boy who consistently outwitted his schoolmates at a game in which he correctly guessed whether another boy held an even or an odd number of marbles in his hands. Dupin explains that the boy’s success depended upon the “mere observation

²⁸ Poe often uses Bentham to exemplify intellectual slovenliness and the misapplication of *a priori*, or deductive reasoning, to areas for which it is ill-suited. He contrasts this epistemological method with an *a posteriori* one that reasons from facts to principles and which is synonymous with inductive reasoning. For examples of Poe’s disdain for *a priori* methods see his tale “Mellonta Tauta,” his prose poem *Eureka* and marginalia published in the December 1844 edition of the *Democratic Review*. In this marginal passage, Poe argues that *a priori* reasoning is “much worse than useless except in the mathematical sciences, where it is possible to obtain precise meanings. If there is any one subject in the world to which it is utterly and radically inapplicable, that subject is government. The *identical* arguments used to sustain Mr. Bentham’s positions, might, with little exercises of ingenuity, be made to overthrow them; and by ringing small changes on the words “leg-of-mutton,” and “turnip” (changes so gradual as to escape detection), I could “demonstrate’ that a turnip was and of right ought to be a leg-of-mutton” (*Essays and Reviews* 1339).

and admeasurement of the astuteness of his opponents” (*Poetry and Tales* 689). In admeasuring his opponents’ astuteness, the boy allows for gradations between them, distinguishing between “an arrant simpleton” and “a simpleton a degree above the first” (*Poetry and Tales* 689).

Crude though they are, these schoolyard psychometrics allow for an “identification of the reasoner’s intellect with that of his opponent,” enabling him to discern the habits of thought governing his adversary’s actions and thereby predict his every move (*Poetry and Tales* 689). Dupin similarly attributes his own success and the prefect’s failure to the relative accuracy with which he and Monsieur G. admeasure the Minister’s intellect. Instead of diagnosing the minister as either a simpleton or a simpleton a degree above the first, Dupin and Monsieur G. apply the terms “poet” and “mathematician.” Aware of the minister’s poetic reputation, the prefect relies upon a heuristic that equates all such writers with fools. Dupin claims that if the police had correctly divined the minister’s nature, their nocturnal forays into his apartment would have met with greater success. Employing a more refined, *a posteriori* technique, Dupin recognizes that the minister is both poet and mathematician and that this hybrid intelligence allows him to anticipate the police’s actions and prepare accordingly: he leaves the letter hidden in plain sight and therefore outside of the ken of Monsieur G. and his cohort.²⁹ In turn, Dupin achieves the ultimate Archimedean perspective, mastering

²⁹ Here, Poe gestures toward Bentham. Dupin’s claim that the minister can reason well because he is both poet and mathematician and that he outsmarts the prefect because he combines these intellectual traits recalls Poe’s review of Rufus W. Griswold’s *The Poets and Poetry of America*. In the review, Poe claims that “The highest order of the imaginative intellect is always preeminently mathematical; and the converse” before

both the police and the minister who fools them, a vantage point that enables him to successfully recover the letter.

Based upon these observations, one might well conclude that through Dupin, Poe expresses his distrust of *a priori* Benthamite methods of social analysis and the disciplined society such thinking represents. Focusing on “The Man of the Crowd,” Donald McNutt makes just such an argument, claiming that in his attempts to classify the people he sees outside of a London coffeehouse, the tale’s narrator “relies upon strategies of analysis that recall the separation of criminals within common-room prisons.” McNutt further claims that “Through the narrator’s over-confidence [in his ability to classify], Poe undercuts his contemporaries’ obsession with ‘system’ a cardinal component of antebellum reform movements denoting the application of interrelated ideas to phenomena as diverse as crime, insanity, economics, governance and urban planning” (151). To a certain extent, I concur with McNutt: while not nearly as obtuse as the prefect, the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” displays some of the faults characteristic of Poe’s bumbling *a priorists*, and he fails to measure up to the improvisational, empirically responsive Dupin. After glibly reading the visual signs of class, the narrator hits a snarl when he happens upon the puzzling idiosyncrasy of an old man’s physiognomy. His interest piqued, he exits the coffee house to follow the man when he notices that his “clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged” but “that his linen...was of a beautiful texture.” The narrator also catches a glimpse of “both a diamond and a dagger”

writing “‘Because we were not all Homers in the beginning it has been somewhat too rashly taken for granted that we shall be all Jeremy Bentham’s to the end” (*Essays and Reviews* 549). Perhaps both the minister and Dupin are composed of equal parts Bentham and Homer.

(*Poetry and Tales* 393). The old man displays polyvalent characteristics that simultaneously signify both wealth and poverty, crime and opulent respectability. These semiotic contradictions goad the narrator into following the old man throughout the night and into the next day when he returns to the same spot where he began the chase. The circularity of his pursuit leads the narrator to conclude, “It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him nor of his deeds” (*Poetry and Tales* 396).

Had Dupin, the investigator who claims that “most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms,” encountered the old man, he would have been no more stymied by someone who combined elements of poverty and wealth than he would by a mind that was both poet and mathematician (*Poetry and Tales* 401). In fact, Dupin serves as something of an antidote to the epistemological impasse that the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd” experiences. Whereas the narrator of this urban tale is stumped by his quarry’s unique characteristics, individuality poses no problem for the amateur detective. When the nameless narrator first introduces Dupin, he speaks of his friend’s disconcerting ability to reconstruct his own chain of thought, an ability made all the more astonishing “by the apparently illimitable distance and incoherence between the starting-point and the goal” (*Poetry and Tales* 403). While I would agree with McNutt that Poe saw his countrymen’s reliance upon “system” as a ham-fisted use of *a priori* reasoning, a proclivity he characterizes as worse than useless when applied to social phenomena, I would add that Poe does not entirely dismiss “system” as a means for controlling criminality. Instead, he recommends its refinement. As David Van Leer demonstrates, Dupin’s method allows for singularity while retaining some reliance upon certain

universal, *a priori*, principles. Dupin demonstrates this hybrid method when he speaks of the necessary link between the words “stereotomy” and “atomy”: “I could not doubt that you murmured the word ‘stereotomy,’ a term very affectedly applied to this species of pavement. I knew that you could not say to yourself ‘stereotomy’ without being brought to think of atomies, and thus the theories of Epicurus” (*Poetry and Tales* 404). The words “stereotomy” and “atomy” are not related semantically. The first refers to a practice in masonry of cutting stone into particular shapes, while the second alludes to the theories of the Greek philosophers Democritus and Epicurus, who claimed that the physical universe was composed of atoms. These words are only connected by the phoneme “tomy.” In reasoning that his companion could not “say to [himself] ‘stereotomy’ without being brought to think of atomies, and thus to the theories of Epicurus,” Dupin suggests that such chains of association, in spite of their apparent incoherence, are determined by certain necessary universals that transcend any individual idiosyncrasies. Thus, his method combines both inductive methods, Dupin’s careful attention to the narrator’s facial expressions, with certain *a priori* principles, all thoughts of stereotomy invariably conjure thoughts of Epicurus’ theory of atomies. Obviously, the perspicacious Dupin cannot dispense with all universals, but must avail himself of whatever is at hand, even if it means combining what may appear to be opposing methods of analysis.

With his focus on the individual and his unnerving ability to penetrate other people’s minds, Dupin embodies the ideals of Benthamite social control. Speaking of the panoptical society, Foucault writes that earlier forms of “Power had only a weak

capacity for ‘resolution,’ as one might say in photographic terms; it was incapable of an individualizing, exhaustive analysis of the social body. But the economic changes of the eighteenth century made it necessary to ensure the circulation of effects of power through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions” (“Eye of Power” 151-152). This focus on individualization assures “the capillary functioning of power,” assigning “to each individual...his ‘true’ name, his ‘true’ place, his ‘true’ body, his ‘true’ disease” (*Discipline and Punish* 198). Poe even portrays Dupin’s affinity with Bentham and his prison through the story’s imagery. When the amateur detective calls on the minister in search of the stolen letter, he tells the narrator that

“Full of these ideas I prepared myself with a pair of green spectacles and called one fine morning, quite by accident at the ministerial hotel...To be even with him, I complained of my weak eyes, and lamented the necessity of the spectacles, under cover of which I cautiously and thoroughly surveyed the whole apartment, while seemingly intent only upon the conversation of my host. (*Poetry and Tales* 695)

In donning his shaded spectacles, Dupin transforms himself into the human panopticon. Just as the inspector’s lodge of Bentham’s prison shields the central observer from being seen, so Dupin’s green lenses obscure his eyes and render their action uncertain. Dupin also explains that he quite accidentally calls on the ministerial hotel. If we are to trust

this remark, then it appears as though the detective assumes the responsibility of surveillance even when he is not engaged in official investigative business. We can imagine him strolling down the streets of Paris, admeasuring the intellects of those he passes without their knowing whether or not they fall within his gaze. Perhaps, he is gathering information about the capital's citizens that he will use in future investigations.³⁰

³⁰ While Dupin undoubtedly shares some essential characteristics with the supervisor in Bentham's house of inspection, his connection to the objects of surveillance, Poe's murderous narrators, who cannot resist the impulse to exhibitionism, seems far more tenuous. In his famous reading of the tale of detection, however, Jacques Lacan suggests that the two may have more in common than a cursory examination of the tale suggests. Lacan introduces his *Ecrits* with his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" and treats Poe's tale as a parable that exemplifies the central point upon which he insists throughout his work: "namely, that it is the Symbolic order which is constitutive of the subject" (29). In the seminar, Lacan identifies a triadic intersubjective pattern that is repeated twice in the tale. In this intersubjective chain, the first position is characterized by obliviousness and is occupied initially by the king and subsequently the queen in the person of her deputy, the prefect, the second slot is initially held by the queen and then by the minister and the third by the minister and in its second iteration by Dupin. Where one falls in this intersubjective chain is determined by whether or not one holds the letter. When one does, one immediately falls into the second slot and is caught up in a dual relationship with the unseeing person who occupies the first, thereby becoming an easy target for the pilferer occupying the third.

According to John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, "there appears to be a certain correlation between the position of the 'blind' personage and the real, between the position of the self-absorbed 'seer' and the imaginary, and between the position of the perspicacious 'robber' and the symbolic" (63). Muller and Richardson claim that, within the seminar, Lacan departs from his usual definition of the real as whatever is "impossible' to symbolize or imagize" and adopts the "more normal usage signifying a naively empiricist objectivism that is oblivious of the role of symbolic structure in the organization of 'reality.' Hence the 'realist's imbecility' say, of the police" (63). They claim that the second's association with the imaginary "is to be understood in terms of the narcissism (and its ruses) implied in the subject's seeing but failing to see that he is seen" (63). Finally what "correlates the third position with the symbolic is the fact that it discerns the role of structure in the situation and acts accordingly. The paradox is that, in the Poe story as told, the 'acting accordingly' of the third position tends to catch the subject up in the dynamics of repetition that drag him into the second position, and so

A Ringing in My Ears

At the opposite end of the disciplinary apparatus stand the criminal, the patient, and most importantly the worker, and in representing their minds and their concerns over

discovery, Poe likely found inspiration in the iconic elements of Bentham's penitentiary,

forth, without any conscious intention on his part. Thus, because the power that derives to the Minister from the holding of the letter depends on the non-use of that power, he is forced willy-nilly into the passivity of the second position...Hence he fails to see the symbolic situation that he was once so able to see and in which 'he is now seen seeing himself as not being seen.' Rather than his possessing the letter, the letter possesses him" (64). Near the end of the seminar, Lacan intimates that after Dupin successfully recovers the letter, the formerly self-conscious investigator slips into a dual relation with the minister and hence falls into the second position. When he does, he, like the minister and the queen before him, "fails to see the symbolic situation he was once so able to see." This turn of events leaves Lacan himself occupying the third position since he is the one who now recognizes the structuring role played by the symbolic. Thus, it seems that not even Dupin can escape being determined by the symbolic order and lose his perspective of mastery.

According to Jane Gallop, in both the seminar and his *Ecrits* more generally, "Lacan attacks America" (268). More precisely, Gallop claims that the psychoanalyst's "main 'adversary' in the *Ecrits* is generally understood to be ego psychology, that offshoot of psychoanalysis whose home ground is the United States...But he does not limit his attacks to American psychoanalysis. There is a more general campaign against the 'American way of life'" (269). As indicated by the "index of concepts at the back of *Ecrits*, Lacan associates the "American Way of life" with "'L'idèologie de la libre-entreprise' (the ideology of free enterprise)" (269). It stands to reason, then, that if Lacan wished to critique ego psychology, a school of psychoanalysis that emphasizes the autonomous ego and which the French psychoanalyst associates with "free-enterprise," he would have found an ideal text in "The Purloined Letter." Poe's tale serves such a purpose because it was written in a historical context that saw the apotheosis of the autonomous ego in the image of the self-made man. Furthermore, I would argue that Poe was engaged in a project similar to that of Lacan. He too sought to undermine the image of the autonomous ego. Just as Lacan argues that "the ego is not free but determined by the symbolic order," so too does Poe demonstrate that the wage laborer is not autonomous but rather swept up by an economic system structured to benefit someone else while offering him all the enticements of self-interest and the promise of self-improvement (Evans 15). While this critique is submerged somewhat beneath Dupin's superlative abilities in "The Purloined Letter," it is far more apparent in Poe's tales of confessional murderers.

a debt he reveals whenever he includes eyes within his confessional gothics. As both Bentham and Foucault understand, the panopticon acquires its strength by convincing subjects that they never fall outside of authority's ubiquitous gaze. Those living within such a prison, or the more generalized practice of power it represents, would naturally associate eyes with authority. If such people were inclined toward illicit behavior and wished to keep their transgressions a secret, they would undoubtedly strive to hide their misdeeds from the law's penetrating gaze. And indeed, when attempting to conceal the murders they commit, both the narrators of "The Black Cat" and "The Tell Tale Heart" focus on obscuring the visible traces of their crimes. "The Tell-Tale" narrator marvels at the way he adroitly inters his victim beneath his house's floorboards: "I then replaced the board so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye--not even his--could have detected anything wrong" (*Poetry and Tales* 558). Similarly, before immuring his wife's remains in the wall of his basement, the narrator of "The Black Cat" admits that: "I made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious" (*Poetry and Tales* 604). Possessing even greater foresight, the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" improves upon his predecessors' *ex post facto* remedies and concocts a plan that obviates the problem of visible evidence from the very beginning. For many months, the ingenious assassin ponders and then rejects "a thousand schemes because their accomplishment involved a *chance* of detection" before finally alighting on the perfect method for eluding discovery: he replaces the harmless candles in his victim's "narrow and ill-ventilated"

apartment with others imbued with poison (*Poetry and Tales* 830).³¹ Any cunning lawbreaker would obviously want to remove any visible evidence that might betray him, a goal best achieved by tidying up the scene of the crime, or, even better, by attending to these ocular details prior to the deed's accomplishment. Yet practicality alone does not justify these narrators' obsession with eyes. After returning from a night spent indulging his appetite for gin, the Black Cat narrator commits a horrific act of cruelty against his pet Pluto, who, frightened by his master's violence, bites him on the hand, plunging the narrator into a frenzy. Among the innumerable methods for inflicting pain of which a sadistic imagination may avail itself, this particular man gouges out his pet's eye, perhaps because he wishes to deprive it of its sight, a significant sense for an animal that has witnessed its owner's crimes. Similarly when puzzling over his own murderous act, the Tell-Tale narrator initially claims that his actions must remain unaccountable: "It is impossible to say first how the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire" (*Poetry and Tales* 555). After dismissing these more commonplace motives, he identifies his own peculiar rationale: "I think it was his eye! yes it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of the vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever" (*Poetry and Tales* 555).

³¹ Apparently the narrator never considers that these toxic candles might leave indelible olfactory clues. This oversight costs him nothing since he lives within a world that privileges the visual.

As if to further emphasize the singularity of his obsession, the Tell-Tale narrator also recounts having several times observed the old man helplessly asleep, a situation that seems especially propitious for murder, but each time he balks at completing the deed since his victim's eye remains closed: "I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me but his evil eye" (*Poetry and Tales* 556). Both murderers focus their aggression on eyes, a tendency that precedes the homicides they commit. Obviously their ocular preoccupations are induced by something beyond mere pragmatism.

For these narrators, feline and vulture eyes typify a punitive omniscience they cannot abide and before which they feel completely vulnerable.³² After the police have torn down the wall concealing his wife's body, the Black Cat narrator is greeted by the accusing eye of the pet he thought he had destroyed: "The corpse...stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice consigned me to the hangman" (*Poetry and Tales* 606). The Tell-Tale narrator invests his victim's eye with omniscient powers when he treats it as the benchmark for heightened perception, reasoning that if the old man's eye could not detect any evidence of his crime then no one could. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," however, the old man's eye terrifies for reasons other than its heightened perceptive abilities. Christopher Benfey argues that the narrator also fears his victim for his cataract film, a feature that couples

³² For some of the critical discussion surrounding the significance of the old man's eye see B. D. Tucker's "'The Tell-Tale Heart' and the 'Evil Eye'"; James Kirkland's "'The Tell-Tale Heart' as Evil Eye Event" and Daniel Hoffman's *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*.

inscrutability with omniscience. Essentially, I agree. I differ from Benfey, however, in that instead of attributing this anxiety to a general philosophical problem, “the problem of other minds,” I would connect it to the paranoia induced by Bentham’s inspection house: the old man’s clouded “vulture eye” resembles nothing so much as the inspector’s lodge of the panopticon or Eastern State Penitentiary’s “dead eyes,” which, through the use of shades, prevents people under surveillance from seeing the warden who looks at them.³³

While the narrators of these tales recognize the important role that surveillance plays within their fictional worlds, they, unlike their creator, do not appreciate the more subtle operations at work in a disciplined society. Poe’s murderers invariably associate authority and its ability to discover their crimes with the eyes of *someone else* and *their* sense of sight. In circumventing the law’s external sentinels through dissimulation and the disposal of evidence, they invariably succeed: after placing himself above the dismembered body of his victim, the Tell-Tale narrator claims that “The officers were satisfied. My *manner* had convinced them. I was singularly at ease” (*Poetry and Tales* 559). The narrator of “The Black Cat” is discovered only after he recalls the police to offer a gratuitous observation regarding the soundness of his basement walls; and, after having inherited his victim’s estate, the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse” reports that “all went well with me for years” (*Poetry and Tales* 830). Despite these initial successes, however, the murderers are all eventually apprehended, not because the police have obviously improved their investigative techniques, but, rather, because the criminals

³³ By implication, the old man’s eye also shares characteristics with Eastern State Penitentiary, with its dead eyes and hollow tubes, which was undoubtedly inspired by Bentham’s plan.

involuntarily blurt out their guilt. In creating such compulsively loquacious killers, Poe moves beyond a simple iconographic debt to Bentham and discerns some of the more insidious psychological effects produced by the penitentiary as well. Speaking of a person imprisoned within the panopticon, Foucault writes: “he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (*Discipline and Punish* 203). Poe anticipates this very observation: his murderers suffer from a form of narrative schizophrenia that parallels Foucault’s “both roles.” The voice that tells the tale acts as the furtive object of surveillance, always expecting some eye to be looking at it and ceaselessly attempting to circumvent authority’s gaze. At the same time, the other part of the narrator’s self, the unassimilated observer, which the narrators experience as something external, is filled by a ringing in the ears, the howl of an immured cat or by the “Imp of the Perverse.” The plots of the stories themselves pivot around the struggle between these two internalized agents, reaching their climax when the tattling observer seizes control of the narrative voice and confesses his crimes. As a consequence of this internalization “the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends toward the non-corporal; and the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects” (Foucault 203). And indeed, the tales of confession represent an increasingly etherealized form of power. In this, they differ markedly from the detective tales that also bear the mark of having been influenced by Bentham’s penitentiary: in spite of Dupin’s ability to blur the boundaries between objective and subjective worlds, he nonetheless engages in a game of cat and mouse played by two separately embodied human beings.

Unlike the narrators of both “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Imp of the Perverse,” the narrator of “The Black Cat” has not entirely assumed “responsibility for the constraints of power” nor become “the principle of his own subjection.” As a result, his tale relies far more heavily upon external agents to reveal his guilt to the authorities. This greater reliance upon objective phenomena locates the Black Cat narrator somewhere between the Minister D. of “The Purloined Letter,” who must contend with a separate human being, Dupin, and the internalized observers of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Imp of the Perverse.” In these latter tales, both narrators offer unsolicited confessions of their crimes. By contrast, the Black Cat narrator must enlist the aid of an accomplice, a role played by a second cat, who, like Pluto, is missing one of his eyes and bears the image of a gallows upon his neck. After the police have satisfied themselves of his innocence, the narrator perversely summons them back into the basement where he raps “heavily, with a cane...upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of the wife of [his] bosom (*Poetry and Tales* 605). With this fatal knock, the narrator insures his own doom as his fugitive pet responds with “one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman” (*Poetry and Tales* 606). Furthermore, since the “external power” has not completely thrown off its “physical weight,” it must assert itself far more energetically in the tale. After hearing the shriek of the entombed cat, the party of searchers responds quite vigorously: “For one instant the party upon the stairs remained motionless, through extremity of terror and of awe. In the next a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily” (*Poetry and Tales* 606). In this tale, power can still be represented through synecdoche as sheer physical strength, a

“dozen stout arms,” that dismantle the barriers behind which the narrator has hidden his repressed secrets.

Despite the fact that the avenging cat exists outside of the narrator’s mind, Poe clearly indicates that it represents something far more significant than just another *thing* in this murderer’s object world.³⁴ Throughout the tale, the narrator reveals that he shares a very special relationship with his cats. Initially, this bond endears him to his original pet, but, after killing him and finding an uncannily similar replacement during one of his debauches, the narrator is horrified by his new pet’s “loathsome caresses” (*Poetry and Tales* 602). This repulsion reaches its high-water mark when the narrator describes the animal’s nocturnal visitations. During the night, he claims that he “started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face, and its vast weight—an incarnate Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off—incumbent eternally upon my heart!” (*Poetry and Tales* 603). The cat’s aggressive obsequiousness and the narrator’s response to it recall another tale, “William Wilson,” Poe’s most famous contribution to the literature of the double. In that tale, the titular narrator recounts his

³⁴ Lesley Ginsberg connects “The Black Cat” to depictions of the relationship between people and their pets in antebellum culture and argues that the tale “radically undermines the sentimental vision of paternal masters and grateful slaves” that could be found in much southern literature of the period (118). In addition to these sentimentalized justifications of slavery, southerners also resorted to economic arguments as well in their defense of the peculiar institution. In particular, they could, like the hypothetical slaveholder that Charles Dickens cites in his *American Notes*, enlist the help of the picture of human nature promulgated by Adam Smith and deny that inhumane treatment of slaves could be a “general practice” since doing so “would impair their value, and would be obviously against the interests of their masters” (302). In placing perverseness at the center of this tale, Poe may well have discovered another angle from which to critique slavery and in fact shown that economic man and slaveholding man were two very different creatures.

early experiences at an English boarding school where he gains mastery over all of his fellows save one, a colleague with whom he shares a disconcerting number of characteristics, including an identical name and birthday. From the beginning of the tale, Poe indicates that this story of the double should be read as an allegory exploring the workings of conscience. Apparently, Wilson is compelled to project his conscience onto this second Wilson because he has a hard time reconciling some dichotomies, a debility he reveals when he speaks of the school's principal/minister ascending the pulpit for Sunday services: "This reverend man, with countenance so demurely benign...could this be he who of late, with sour visage, and in snuffy habiliments, administered, ferule in hand, the draconian laws of the academy? Oh, gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution!" (*Poetry and Tales* 339). By projecting this element of himself onto a double, the narrator can indulge his worst impulses with impunity. In this regard, the second Wilson fulfills the role Sigmund Freud claims the double originally did, as "an insurance against the destruction of the ego" (356) until he catches up with his miscreant twin on the night he plans to cuckold an Italian duke. Exasperated by his double's continued interference, the narrator murders his duplicate and insures his own death. For similar reasons, the desire to rid himself of a nagging conscience that interrupts the ego's tranquility, the narrator of "The Black Cat" projects the disciplinary eye of surveillance onto his pet. He surely indicates as much when, after murdering his wife, he reports "It is impossible to describe, or imagine, the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom...and thus for one night at least, since

its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; *aye*, slept even with the burden of murder on my soul” (*Poetry and Tales* 605).

But just as “William Wilson” ends by uniting the two titular doubles into one—thinking that he has cornered his adversary, the malevolent Wilson stabs his own reflection in a mirror-- “The Black Cat” similarly concludes with an aural trick that blurs the boundaries between the narrator and his detested pet. Like all who fall victim to the Imp of the Perverse, the Black Cat narrator suffers from a verbal tic that compels him to fill any pause in conversation with his own voice: “In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely uttered what I knew at all” (*Poetry and Tales* 605). Between the narrator’s first call to the departing officers and the howl that condemns him, Poe writes an unbroken sequence of sound, which culminates in the immured cat’s wail from behind his basement walls. The narrator characterizes the scream as being “half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in their damnation” (*Poetry and Tales* 606). Even if he has not literally internalized both participants in Bentham’s scheme, the cat, whom Poe insistently treats as the narrator’s double, has: its voice combines the laments of the damned with the taunts of their demonic tormentors. Furthermore, when he speaks of the cries of the tormented, the narrator, in fact, refers to himself. If this chain of events offers him any consolation, it is that he is responsible for his own capture only indirectly. Had he been a little more circumspect with the police and not entombed his feline nemesis along with his wife’s corpse, he might have eluded the law’s grasp forever.

In his scheming, the Tell-Tale narrator assumes the existence of an externalized power, yet Poe denies him even the dubious consolations he affords to the Black-Cat narrator in this regard. From the beginning of his story, the Tell-Tale narrator is obsessed with maintaining the autonomy of his own mind. When arguing on behalf of his own sanity, for instance, the murderer recounts the pains he undertook to gull his victim into believing that he harbored nothing but amiable intentions toward him:

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded--with what caution--with what foresight--with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him... And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night. So you see he would have had to have been a very profound old man indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept. (*Poetry and Tales* 555-556)

The narrator counts this subterfuge among his signal achievements, especially when he uses it to deceive an adversary whom he mistakenly believes to be as sharp-eyed as his roommate: his supposedly omniscient victim never entertains the possibility that this bonhomie conceals any murderous designs. In practicing such dissimulation, the narrator attempts to bolster the distinction between internal mental realms and external objective

ones. Maddened by the delusion that his housemate can see into the most private recesses of his mind, the narrator does everything in his power to present a convincing façade that will grant him an inviolable mental realm over which he exercises sole dominion, believing that his penchant for deception trumps his victim's imagined perspicacity. In so doing, he is provoked by and in turn defies the power of the panopticon, insisting that its machinery cannot assign to him his "true name." He is simply too clever in his dissimulations.³⁵

Yet from the moment the narrator identifies the object he hopes to elude--"I think it was his eye!"-- he unwittingly reveals the futility of his efforts. The narrator speaks the word "eye" no less than ten times in his tale, each instance referring ostensibly to his victim's visual organ. By sheer dint of repetition, however, the sound of the word obscures its orthography. "Eye" becomes a pun for "I." When he speaks his desire to "rid [himself] of the eye for ever," the narrator punningly indicates that he wishes to rid himself of the "I" forever and live an egoless life free from the burdens of conscience. Poe represents the narrator's identification with his victim in other ways as well. In a passage that Joan Dayan describes as "the collapse into oneness," the narrator claims to have an intimate understanding of his victim's terrified thoughts because he has passed similar nights gripped by identical fears (144). The scene occurs after the old man awakes

³⁵ In creating such an underhanded character Poe taps into some of antebellum America's most profound cultural anxieties. According to Karen Halttunen, America's industrial development and consequent demographic shift to the country's urban cities wreaked havoc with existing structures of authority and methods for social placement. These anxieties became embodied in the figure of the confidence man who threatened to seduce the republic's impressionable youth as they sought their fortunes in the nation's burgeoning cities. For a discussion of these concerns and the remedies offered to a society in a state of flux see Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

and calls out upon hearing the narrator enter his room. The narrator imagines that the old man's groan "was not a groan of pain or grief" but "the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening with its dreadful echos the terrors that distracted me" (*Poetry and Tales* 556). Through such sympathetic identification, Poe frustrates his narrator's attempts to distinguish between inside and outside, self and other, and finally between oppressor and oppressed.³⁶

Poe offers another pun that further blurs the boundaries between subjective and objective realms through the similes the narrator uses to describe the sound he hears and which he fears will betray his secrets. On the night that he murders the old man, the narrator twice imagines that he can hear his victim's beating heart, once just prior to

³⁶ Immediately following these speculations, the narrator records an episode that recalls a similar one in "William Wilson" when the narrator of that tale also sneaks into his rival's room and also shines a lantern onto his face, an event he later recalls in his jailhouse confession: "I looked;--and a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame...Gasping for breath, I lowered the lamp in still nearer proximity to the face...The same name! the same contour of person! the same day of arrival at the academy...Was it, in truth, within the bounds of human possibility, that *what I now saw* was the result, merely, of the habitual practice of this sarcastic imitation? Awe-stricken, and with a creeping shudder, I extinguished the lamp, passed silently, from the chamber, and left, at once, the halls of that old academy, never to enter them again" (*Poetry and Tales* 347). These episodes carry much of the same significance, and Poe undoubtedly intends them to be read in a similar manner: both have to do with doubling, especially in regards to the way that doubles are connected to conscience. "The Tell-Tale Heart" differs however in that the narrator demonstrates his madness from the very beginning of the story. Thus in spite of the visual characteristics he shares with both the panopticon and its human counterpart, Dupin, we are not to assume that the old man actually possesses any omniscient powers. Instead, he simply represents a blank screen onto which the insane narrator projects his paranoid fantasies. He had the bad fortune of possessing the panopticon's external characteristics that the narrator assumes correspond to its superlative powers of perception.

killing him and a second time after he has invited the police into the room where the old man's corpse lies hidden beneath the floorboards. In both cases he describes the sound as “*a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*” (*Poetry and Tales* 559). In the most obvious sense, the simile likens these aural sensations to the muffled ticking of a timepiece shrouded in cotton. The comparison suggests another equally plausible sense as well. “Watch” can also mean to look at or observe. When used as a noun, it can also refer to a soldier's or some other vigilant person's duty, as in “you take second watch.” As I have shown, sight and eyes serve as the emblem for the inspecting agents that the criminals assume exist outside of their minds, an association that links them to the ocular sense of the word “watch.” In creating a synaesthetic pun that links vision to hearing, Poe invites readers to associate the “ringing” that the narrator hears with the old man's vulture eye. The inspecting function the narrator originally associates with sight and that motivates his efforts to keep his guilt hidden has been fully appropriated by hearing. Even if the murderer does not understand that the watcher has been internalized and that it is working to expose his guilt, his language betrays an unconscious awareness of this fact. The synaesthetic pun also recalls Dupin and his opaque eyewear and reminds the reader of the old man and his glassy vulture eye. All three of these suggest the panopticon and its shaded inspector's lodge: a watch enveloped in cotton is not unlike a watchtower occupied by an obscured observer.

Because hearing is one of the more amorphous of the five senses, it serves as the perfect candidate for representing the internalized disciplinary mechanism that the Tell-Tale narrator mistakenly assumes exists outside of his own mind. As if to emphasize the

sense's occasionally ambiguous nature, Poe provides a discussion of the way it operates in the tale. In the same passages where the murderer identifies with his terrified victim, he indirectly offers a discussion of hearing's unreliability:

I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first light noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself-- "It is nothing but the wind in the chimney--it is only a mouse crossing the floor," or "it is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." (*Poetry and Tales* 556-557)

In the darkness of the room, the narrator imagines the frightening uncertainty the old man experiences in trying to determine the origin of the "light noise" he hears. Lacking the more definite forms that would be provided by light and vision, he attributes the sound to a number of sources. The narrator engages in a similar struggle later when he tries to determine the origin and objective reality of sounds that enter his own consciousness through what he describes as his overly acute sense of hearing. At first, he reports that "[He] fancied a ringing in [his] ears" which under the continuous gaze of the police becomes "more distinct" and "gained definitiveness" until at "at length [he] found that the noise was *not* within [his] ears" (*Poetry and Tales* 559). The uncertainty over whether the sound comes from an exterior phenomenon or an internal sensation depicts the confusion resulting over the uncertain location of the omniscient observer: is he to be found in the old man's vulture eye or in a ringing in the ears? Of course, Poe has

prepared his readers for this association from the beginning of the tale. When the narrator indicates that he suffers from overly acute senses, he claims that he “heard all things in the heaven and in the earth” and “many things in hell” (*Poetry and Tales* 555).

Apparently, his hearing is especially attuned to places associated with punishment and reward.

Just as power requires neither a supernatural cat nor a preternaturally observant Dupin to unearth the Tell-Tale narrator’s crimes, so too has it moved beyond the need for a “dozen stout arms” to demolish the walls behind which he has repressed his misdeeds. In addition to taking inordinate pride in his capacities for deception, the tale’s narrator also boasts of the precise control he exercises over his own body. When describing his nocturnal visits to his housemate’s room, he offers definitive proof of his obvious sanity:

And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man’s sleep! It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this? (*Poetry and Tales* 555).

Such extraordinary bodily discipline degenerates into frantic activity when the police come to investigate a reported shriek. When they first arrive, the narrator has little difficulty maintaining his composure, so much so that after leading them into the room where he killed, dismembered and secreted his victim, he persuades the deputies of his innocence: “The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them” (*Poetry and Tales* 559). Immediately after he has acquitted himself, however, the narrator begins to histrionically perform his guilt, engaging in increasingly frenetic displays, as the ringing in his ears grows more distinct. At first he speaks with “a heightened voice” which rises to a “high key” until he claims that he “raved” and “swore.” He accompanies this heightened verbal activity with exaggerated bodily motions “pac[ing] the floor to and fro, with heavy strides” swinging “the chair upon which [he] had been sitting, and grat[ing] it upon the boards” (*Poetry and Tales* 559). While the narrator is “excited to fury by the observation” of the men, the police retain their placidity, sitting impassively by and “chatt[ing] of familiar things” (*Poetry and Tales* 559). As was the case with his victim, the narrator cannot countenance the looks of others. The mere gaze of these chatty officers causes him to reveal his crime. The investigators aggravate the narrator’s deteriorating mental state by appearing indifferent to his performance, a characteristic that parallels one of his victim’s most provocative features. While the old man’s glassy eye renders him unreadable, the narrator nonetheless attributes omniscient capabilities to him. Similarly, while the police are present, the murderer assumes that his own thoughts are broadcast into the world while he is met by the smilingly disingenuous officers who surround him. Thus does Poe represent a further step toward power’s eventual

etherialization: throughout the narrator's obstreperous performance, the lawmen remain absolutely motionless, transferring all of the tale's energy to him, whereupon he transfers "knowing" to them.

Tracing the panopticon's psychological effects to their inevitable conclusion, Poe represents the workings of disciplinary power at their most elegant in "The Imp of the Perverse." The murderous narrator of "The Imp" is far less preoccupied with eyes than are the killers of either "The Black Cat" or "The Tell-Tale Heart," undoubtedly because he has discovered a way to commit murder without leaving any evidence detectable by nineteenth-century forensics. As a result, the story glosses over the drama of investigation so central to the other tales: instead of the poker-faced contest between the criminal and the law, the narrator reports of his victim that "The next morning he was discovered dead in his bed, and the Coroner's verdict was, 'Death by the visitation of God'" (*Poetry and Tales* 830). Of course this does not mean that the murderer escapes detection. After enjoying the fruits of his crime for many years, he begins to suffer from the delayed onset of the same problem that afflicted the Tell-Tale narrator: "But there arrived at length an epoch, from which the pleasurable feeling grew, by scarcely perceptible gradations, into a haunting and harassing thought" (*Poetry and Tales* 830). The narrator recounts how the pleasure he took in escaping detection transformed itself into an anxious feeling that his guilt might be discovered. Seeking an analogous situation that could help his readers apprehend the nature of this thought, the narrator explains:

It is quite a common thing to be thus annoyed with the ringing in our ears, or rather in our memories, of the burthen of some ordinary song, or some unimpressive snatches from an opera. Nor will we be the less tormented if the song in itself be good, or the opera air meritorious. In this manner, at last, I would perpetually catch myself pondering upon my security, and repeating, in a low, undertone, the phrase, “I am safe.” (*Poetry and Tales* 831)

Poe once again figures the workings of discipline’s internalized machinery through the occasionally disorienting sense of hearing, yet this narrator, unlike his predecessor in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” never questions where the sound originates. In keeping with a tale that begins with a self-conscious examination of perverseness, he fully understands his own collusion in the revelation of his crime, yet this knowledge does nothing to help him avoid his inevitable fate. “One day, whilst sauntering along the streets” the narrator “arrest[s] himself in the act of murmuring” his mantra and recognizes the danger he now poses to himself. Just as his Tell-Tale counterpart does, the narrator begins to act in ways guaranteed to arouse suspicion: “I walked vigorously—faster—still faster—at length I ran. I felt a maddening desire to shriek aloud...I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. At length, the populace took alarm, and pursued me” (*Poetry and Tales* 831). This frenetic activity culminates in a confession offered by an internalized agent that the narrator nonetheless characterizes as alien: “Could I have torn out my tongue, I would have done it, but a rough voice resounded in my ears—a rougher grasp seized me by the shoulders...I became blind, and deaf, and giddy; and then, some

invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon my back. The long imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul” (*Poetry and Tales* 831). The narrator is so removed from the confessing voice, he has to rely on hearsay to represent it: “They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell” (*Poetry and Tales* 831). Thus does Poe represent the workings of a genuinely efficient mode of social control that has surmounted the need for even the affably inert police of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Given sufficient time and a minimally attentive audience, the perpetrators themselves insure that murder will inevitably out.

The Carceral Market

“The Imp of the Perverse” not only represents Poe’s most streamlined depiction of disciplinary power, it also carries the most economic connotations of the confessional gothics as well. Whereas the narrators of “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” are prompted to murder by alcoholic rage and paranoid delusion respectively, this killer alone cites an economic reason for his crime: “Having inherited his estate, all went well with me for years” (*Poetry and Tales* 830). Coupled with the narrator’s pecuniary motive, the tale also provides the most fully elaborated discussion of the perverse, which I argue that Poe advances to rebut the picture of the self-interested, self-improving human found in Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. We must recall that in his description of perversity, the narrator contrasts the “intellectual or logical man” with the “understanding

or observant man.” The first deduces a picture of human nature from certain axiomatic principles and fails to account for the perversity that the latter routinely encounters in his empirical investigations. In describing these two, Poe could well have been contrasting the boosterism of those who celebrated the emancipatory potential of America’s emerging market economy with his own more dismal experience of the forces of literary production. When describing the economic conditions of nineteenth-century America, many of Poe’s contemporaries relied upon *a priori* models of behavior inherited from Smith’s economic theories and their apparent confirmation in figures such as Benjamin Franklin, whose autobiography chronicled his rise from “Poverty and Obscurity” to “a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World” and became a bestseller in the antebellum period, exemplifying capitalism’s proclivity to reward those who diligently labor in their calling (Franklin 1).³⁷ As someone who labored in this economy and who was exposed to all of its privations, Poe was acutely aware of the difference separating myth from reality. He understood, for instance, that the capitalist economy in which he worked distributed its benefits unevenly and that the myth of self-interest that justified it did not accurately represent the condition of wage earners peddling their work in the marketplace.

This awareness is most clearly demonstrated in “Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison House,” which was published in the same year as “The Imp of the Perverse,” and which represents a realist counterpart to the gothic tales of perverse narrators who

³⁷ For the lack of correspondence between material conditions and middle class ideology see Halttunen’s *Confidence Men and Painted Women*; Sellers’ *The Market Revolution* and Foner’s *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*. For the role of Franklin as archetype of capitalist success see Wood’s *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*.

invariably help to effect their own destruction. Writing of a representative “poor devil” author who accepts an invitation to contribute to a literary magazine and promptly submits his work to the publisher, Poe describes the methods through which the nation’s literary capitalists avoid disbursing even the paltry wages they offer. After several silent months and many frustrated attempts at contact, the “poor devil” learns that his piece has been published but that the magazine’s owner does not pay contributors until six months after their work has been released. Satisfied with this response, the writer returns home only to succumb to starvation, thereby relieving his patron of any financial obligation toward him. Unlike the early stage of capitalism depicted in J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, this economic system is neither founded “upon the basis of nature, self interest,” nor does its laborer’s rewards “follow with equal steps the progress of his labor” (70). Instead, the efforts that the “poor devil” undertakes to secure his fortunes by engaging in the production of literary commodities, contrary to the promises of “free enterprise” ideology, end up promoting his own demise. In creating such a “poor devil” author, Poe was undoubtedly referring to his own experience as a literary drudge who was at times prevented from pursuing his own self-interest by the existing relations of production. Poe offers straightforward description of this relationship in a letter addressed to Daniel Bryant where Poe describes his frustrated efforts to found a literary periodical while working as the salaried editor of *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*. According to Poe, the magazine’s owner, William Evans Burton, whom he refers to as a “man of capital,” promised to assist him in establishing himself as an independent proprietor if he would postpone his entrepreneurial endeavors for six months

and work for him instead. Poe claims that while he worked for Burton he “was continually laboring against” himself since “Every exertion” he made “for the benefit of ‘Graham’, by rendering that Mag: a greater source of profit rendered its owner at the same time, less willing to keep his word with me” (*The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, 205).

When Poe claims that he was “continually laboring against” himself while he was employed for Burton, he links himself to the “poor devil author” who labors for another’s benefit and to the perverse narrators of his gothic tales of murder and confession, who are similarly hobbled in their pursuit of self-interest. In so doing, he critiques the ideology of free enterprise at its foundation by positing a view of human nature that directly contradicts the one found in Adam Smith and shared by many of his intellectual heirs.

For Poe, literary drudges such as himself and his poor devil author resemble no one so much as his confessional murderers, all of whom believe that they are providing for their own welfare and securing their fortunes when, in fact, they are laying the foundation for their inevitable destruction.

CHAPTER THREE

“TELL THEM OF SCENES OF POLLUTION AND BLOOD”: THE
MONSTROUSNESS OF COMMODIFICATION IN *THE NARRATIVE OF
THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND AMERICAN SLAVE*

In his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass reveals some of the motivations that prompted him to publish *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* a decade earlier. After recounting his introduction to the abolitionist movement and his recruitment by William Lloyd Garrison to become an itinerant lecturer for the American Antislavery Society, Douglass recalls the objections raised by some incredulous auditors who disputed his claim to being an escaped slave. According to these skeptics, the abolitionist speaker invited their suspicions because “‘He don’t tell us where he came from—what his master’s name was—how he got away—nor the story of his experience. Besides, he is educated, and is, in this, a contradiction of all the facts we have concerning the ignorance of the slaves’” (267). Douglass appears to have composed the *Narrative* as a rejoinder to people such as these: while he demurs at revealing the methods through which he gained his freedom in the 1845 work, he does in fact disclose the place of his birth, name the people who claimed ownership of his body, and describe the surreptitious efforts he undertook in teaching himself to read. In so doing, Douglass satisfies the demands of those readers who may have sympathized with

his abolitionist goals, yet who were wary of any accounts that lacked a persuasive level of empirical detail.

For all the good it might have accomplished toward swaying readers who were caught between their antislavery sentiments and their culture's rules of evidence, Douglass' emphasis upon the facts nonetheless threatens to undermine one of the *Narrative's* chief rhetorical aims as well. In his dedicatory epistle to the 1845 work, Wendell Phillips hints at some of these pitfalls when he claims that, as a Maryland slave, Douglass had managed to escape some of the more egregious outrages that American bondage could inflict upon its victims in states further to the south. He therefore reasons that since the *Narrative* represents slavery as it "appears with its fairest features," Douglass' readers will be all the more inclined to abhor the institution's more inhumane practices found in the "Valley of the Shadow of Death, where the Mississippi sweeps along" (10). Unfortunately, this particular rhetorical advantage is not free of all liabilities. By acknowledging that slavery was not entirely monolithic, that its brutality varied according to location, Phillips implies that a slave's fortunes depended upon his particular circumstances. In so doing, he provides a potential loophole for southern apologists who could not deny that slaves were occasionally mistreated, but who would attribute such abuse to the maliciousness of individual slaveholders rather than to the institution as a whole. In an effort to obviate arguments like these, Phillips reassures both Douglass and his readers that, despite their apparent uniqueness, his experiences mirror those of other slaves who owe their misery to the system's inherent viciousness rather than to the cruelty of individual masters: "We know that the bitter drops, which even you

have drained from the cup, are no incidental aggravations, no individual ills, but such as must mingle always and necessarily in the lot of every slave. They are the essential ingredients, not the occasional results of the system” (11). In his preface to the same work, William Lloyd Garrison rejects the fatuous notion that slavery could be preserved by anything but the most savage of measures. Speaking of people who are either too ignorant or too interested to admit this self-evident truth, Garrison writes:

Tell them of cruel scourgings, of mutilations and brandings, of scenes of pollution and blood, of the banishment of all light and knowledge, and they affect to be greatly indignant at such enormous exaggerations, such wholesale misstatements, such abominable libels on the character of the southern planters! As if all these direful outrages were not the natural results of slavery...As if whips, chains, thumb-screws, paddles, bloodhounds, overseers, drivers, patrols, were not all indispensable to keep the slaves down, and to give protection to their oppressors!

(8)

When describing slavery’s many evils, both Phillips and Garrison emphasize their inevitability, referring to them as the system’s “essential ingredients” or its “natural results,” a point they amplify by dismissing the idea that there could be anything “incidental,” “individual,” or “indispensable” about them. In so doing, they adhere to one of the primary goals of their movement. As abolitionists, both men sought to represent the systemic nature of slavery’s abuses by demonstrating the way in which one instance

of cruelty resonated with every other. As Phillips' letter indicates, however, this analytic aim was occasionally complicated by the particulars of an individual slave's biography, especially when that individual's experiences, in their relative mildness, seemed to fall short of the most "direful outrages" which slavery was capable of producing.

Like his fellow abolitionists, Douglass also sought to indict the system of slavery rather than individual slaveholders, and he devises an ingenious method for discerning its ubiquitous influence in the events of his own life. He reveals both this end and his method for achieving it in his "Letter to His Old Master," where he informs Thomas Auld that he plans to use him "as a weapon with which to assail the system of slavery—as a means of concentrating public attention on the system, and deepening the horror of trafficking in the souls and bodies of men" (325). As a result of this intention, Auld plays a dual role within the *Narrative*. On the one hand, the proper name "Thomas Auld" refers to a finite individual whose existence could be confirmed by consulting the public records of Tuckahoe County, Maryland. As such, he authenticates the *Narrative* and allows Douglass to refute those skeptics who impugned his credibility because he had previously withheld the factual details of his enslaved life. At the same time, Auld functions as a type, a synecdoche for all men assigned the role of slaveholder by the peculiar institution. In this capacity, he provides Douglass with "a means" for concentrating "public attention on the system," the system which both informed and transcended his own circumstances. In his twofold nature, Auld also manifests a broader tension governing Douglass' representational strategies throughout the *Narrative*. In order to establish himself as a credible witness to the evils of slavery, Douglass situates

his account within a particular spatial and temporal location. In this endeavor, he is aided by the formal techniques of the realist novel. At the same time, Douglass also strives to abstract an image of slavery from his own experience that can be applied to all slaves generally. In these efforts, he has recourse to the techniques of gothic fiction.³⁸ In place of the anecdotal details that define them elsewhere, Douglass employs a gothic typology that submerges his characters' individuality beneath the stereotyped image of a demonic other that would be perfectly at home in the works of Ann Radcliffe or Matthew "Monk" Lewis. In the *Narrative*, Douglass deftly turns what is often cited as one of the gothic's most notorious failings, its reliance upon interchangeable characters, to his advantage. These stereotyped characters allow him to analyze the peculiar institution dialectically and unearth the material totality lying behind the individual facts of his experience.³⁹ Furthermore, Douglass uses the figure of the gothic monster to apprehend slavery's essentially brutalizing nature, a nature that found its iconic expression in that *locus classicus* of nineteenth-century human commodification, the auction block.

³⁸ In noting certain parallels between gothic fiction and the slave narrative, I am preceded by Kari Winter and her groundbreaking work on the connection between the female gothic and the slave narrative *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 179-1865*.

³⁹ By dialectical analysis, I mean the type of thinking that Georg Lukács recommends in *History and Class Consciousness*. There, Lukács claims that "in the teeth of all [the] isolated and isolating facts and partial systems," which are the result of the "fetishistic character of economic forms" and the "reification of all human relations," dialectics "insists on the concrete unity of the whole" (6). Lukács further claims that is only within the context of such thinking, "which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a *totality*, can knowledge of the facts hope to become knowledge of *reality*. This knowledge starts from the simple (and to the capitalist world), pure, immediate, natural determinants described above. It progresses from them to the knowledge of the concrete totality, i.e. to the conceptual reproduction of reality" (8). Thus, at the heart of Lukács' method lies the concept of totality, which to me seems akin to the abolitionists' notion of "system," which they use to describe slavery.

The Gothic and Realist Novel

In his seminal work, *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt claims that, when applied to the modern novel, the adjective “realist” refers primarily to the epistemology that guides the genre’s approach to representing reality. Arguing against critics who equate the novel’s realism with its emphasis upon the seamy side of life, Watt redirects his readers’ attention away from “the kind of life [the novel] presents,” and toward “the way it presents it” (11). According to Watt, the novel shares certain fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality with the modern philosophical realism that originated at about the same time and which departed radically from the medieval tradition that preceded it. Unlike their modern counterparts, medieval philosophers sought truth in “universals, classes or abstractions” (11). Defined as they were by such objects, these philosophers believed that their primary task was to “rally against the meaningless flux of sensation and achieve a knowledge of the universals which alone constituted the ultimate and immutable realities” (16). In the literary arena, this belief in universals led classical writers to draw upon a finite number of plots and to people their narratives with general human types. In recent centuries, however, many of these assumptions have undergone a radical transformation. As Watt explains, the modern period’s “general intellectual orientation” is “most decisively separated from its classical and medieval heritage by its rejection—or at least its attempted rejection—of universals” (12). In the post-Renaissance world, the pursuit of knowledge has been reoriented so that it is undertaken by individual investigators who focus their attention on the sensual “particulars of experience” that

were disdained by their intellectual predecessors (12). The consequences for the novel, the preeminent narrative form of the modern period, are many. Principal among these is the displacement of characters that conformed to the “general human types” of classical and medieval literature by others that resembled the unique individual drawn from contemporary life.⁴⁰ According to Watt, this innovative form of characterization is analogous to “the rejection of universals and the emphasis on particulars which characterizes philosophic realism” (15). With its emphasis upon the individual, the novel is “surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords to the individualization of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environments” (Watt 18). Watt concludes his analysis with a suggestive comparison, linking the novelist’s readers to another “group of specialists in epistemology, the jury in a court of law” (31). Like their juridical counterparts, readers of the modern novel “want to know ‘all the particulars’ of a given case—the time and place of the occurrence; both refuse to accept evidence about anyone called Sir Toby Belch or Mr. Badman—still less about a Chloe who has no surname and is ‘common as the air’; and they also expect the witnesses to tell the story ‘in his [sic] own words’” (31). It is in fact, reasonable to link both the novel reader and the impaneled juror with the auditors at an abolitionist lecture since they too wanted to know “all the particulars” of Douglass’ case and faulted him for not telling his story “in his own words.”

⁴⁰ For a sociological account of the rise of the individual outside of literature see Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex and Marriage: In England 1500-1800*.

From its first appearance, the gothic novel has differentiated itself from its realist counterpart both in terms of the world it represents and the characters who inhabit its pages. In the preface to the 1765 reissue of *The Castle of Otranto*, the first work to style itself a “Gothic Story,” Horace Walpole explains that in composing his narrative, he had attempted “to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been copied with success” (9). When speaking of romances of the “modern” variety, Walpole intends the realist novel, especially as it is represented by the “example of Samuel Richardson” (Clery xiii). According to the author of *Otranto*, novelists such as Richardson had “damned up” the “great resources of fancy, by a strict adherence to common life” (9). In an effort to counteract such quotidianism, Walpole granted “the powers of fancy” greater liberty within his work so that he might place his characters in “more interesting situations,” i.e. in supernatural settings (9). Despite his introduction of the supernatural, though, Walpole nonetheless insists that his characters, like those of the modern romance, are true to life and that they “think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions” (10). Subsequent critics have disagreed and censured both Walpole and other practitioners of the gothic for their “wooden characterization” and for “peopling their stories with mere ciphers” (Clery ix, xvii). Elizabeth Napier provides a typical specimen of such criticism when she claims that within gothic novels “Particularization of character is rare...Most Gothic villains look alike and virtually all heroines do...Characters in the Gothic are often, in fact, so highly generalized or idealized that no truly individual portraits emerge

at all” (35). Not only do the authors of early gothic fiction produce characters who are easily confounded with one another, but they also force their human actors to convey intense emotion through histrionic display. Far from producing the depth effects associated with rounded characters, such operatic gestures are profoundly superficial: “the more florid the emotional display, the more, as readers, we are discouraged from seeking the reasons for such a display. Our clues reduced to a series of conventional gestures (screams, shudders, faints, sighs), we are virtually prevented from developing anything more than a programmed response to stock Gothic situations” (Napier 33). Taken together, both the interchangeability and superficiality of gothic characters amount, at least for Napier, to a dismal artistic performance, unpersuasive in its representation of human character.

While some advocates of the gothic have sought to counteract such dismissive readings by claiming that the genre explores the subterranean depths of the human psyche, others have historicized the spatial model of the self upon which such evaluations, in both their favorable and derogatory forms, depend. Andrea Henderson, for instance, interprets the interchangeability of gothic characters not as evidence of artistic ineptitude but as a perceptive analysis of the way in which people themselves were evaluated in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Henderson argues that, in the late 1700’s, as older, aristocratic methods of evaluating character became less relevant, “a market based model of identity that had long been emerging,” and which treated people as though they were commodities, “rapidly gained prestige” (226). Henderson explains that this market based model situates “identity along a continuum”

bounded on one end by an “essential’ and private identity that is...developed through labor” and on the other by “a social identity that is relationally determined and associated with consumption” (226). In terms of the criteria it employs, the first pole is akin to Karl Marx’s notion of use value since it reckons a person’s worth by focusing on characteristics that are inherently useful: by their very nature, frugality, diligence and other such virtues offer certain advantages to the person who possesses them. The second pole, on the other hand, resembles the political economist’s concept of exchange value, referring less to intrinsic qualities than to those whose value is determined relationally. Even if they will do little toward advancing a person within commercial society, eloquence and refined sensibility may be valuable as a consequence of their relative scarcity. Henderson claims that the English Romantics, from whom many contemporary critics have learned to value the autonomous, integral self, relied entirely upon the first pole in their creation of “Canonical Romantic interiority” (226). In so doing, they mounted a “profound resistance to commodification” (240). Yet because this resistance was predicated upon a repudiation of the second pole, the Romantics prove far less adept at registering the pressure that exchange value could exert on the self that was valued for its inherently good qualities. The writers of the early gothic, on the other hand, incorporated both methods of personal valuation into their novels, and created a form of characterization that is “strongly bifurcated”:

On the one hand, the characters are offered to the reader as entirely coherent and distinct personalities and we are asked to value and respond to them according to

these personalities. These personalities, moreover, appear to be exact expressions of, and are fundamentally tied to, their private and intrinsic merit. On the other hand the novel represents them as mysterious in relation to one another and presents them in a series of shifting interrelations. (232)

Henderson further argues that many of the central tensions within these novels revolve around the conflict between the two methods for evaluating character. Speaking of Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, she writes: "Again and again, a character's 'real' value stands opposed to his or her social value: when Valancourt tells Emily he is ruined financially, she determines that she must not involve herself with him, and yet, 'she was compelled to admire his sincerity'" (233). Henderson concludes by arguing that much of the vehemence which has accompanied the critical dismissal of the gothic can be attributed to the genre's foregrounding of the role that exchange value plays in the evaluation of human character within bourgeois society: "The gothic novel's formal features display too openly the way the capitalist class as a whole is in many ways an upstart class whose hegemony is not, in fact, grounded in utility, sincerity and nature" but that it may in fact be "little more than a 'mercurial exchange value or 'bubble,'" a hollow puppet, a woman, a commodity, a coin." (240). Henderson's findings appear all the more apposite in light of the metaphors of mechanization, "programmed response," and mass production, the "stock Gothic situations" that Elizabeth Napier uses in her strident dismissals of the genre.

In his *Narrative*, Douglass draws upon the techniques of both realist and gothic fictions and upon the range of characterization in the gothic itself. When he wishes to authenticate his work, the realist novel, with its “largely referential use of language,” allows him to situate his account within a particular time and place and to populate it with quite specific human beings (Watt 32). At the same time, these particularized environments and individualized characters hinder Douglass’ efforts at revealing the way in which the system of slavery invariably exerts a homogenizing influence on the events of every bondsman’s life. When the rhetorical situation demands typicality rather than specificity, though, Douglass is aided by the more interchangeable characters of the gothic novel. By treating one demonic slaveholder as the uncanny repetition of another, the author of the *Narrative* represents a systemic reality that transcends the individuals who participate in it. Douglass further relies upon the precise model described by Henderson of a self divided between use and exchange value. If market forces threatened Romantic notions of selfhood generally, then slaves were especially vulnerable to such pressures since their very status as human beings was undermined by the fact of their literal commodification. Like the gothic novelists Henderson describes, Douglass therefore creates a form of characterization that is “strongly bifurcated” between the fully individualized identities that distinguish the many individuals inhabiting Douglass’ text and another that results from the deformational influence that the system of slavery invariably exerts upon all who venture into its orbit.

Douglass' Realism

Douglass begins the *Narrative* as though he were answering the many cavils raised by the auditors he would later describe in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, supplying them with all the details that a skeptical audience might demand. Starting with a précis of his vital statistics, Douglass informs his readers that he “was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county Maryland” (12). To all this, the former slave adds information regarding his genealogy, explaining that his “mother was named Harriet Bailey” and that “She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored and quite dark” (12). As to his owners, Douglass claims to have “had two masters,” the first of whom was named “Captain Anthony—a title which, I presume, he acquired by sailing a craft on the Chesapeake Bay” (14). In those places where he is unable to satisfy his reader’s curiosity, Douglass attributes his omissions to slavery itself rather than to his imputed mendacity. Speaking of his inability to tell his own age, Douglass explains that “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it...I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of the slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit” (12). In these opening sentences, Douglass has transferred his denunciation of slavery from the realm of the abstract to that of the concrete, anchoring the *Narrative* in a precise location and associating it with a specific group of people. Skeptics who were bent upon impugning his credibility could no longer claim that “He don’t tell us where he came from—what his master’s name was” (267). By providing “all the particulars” of his case, including the “time and place of the

occurrence,” Douglass reveals his most fundamental debt to the realist epistemology that Watt associates with both the modern novel and the rules of evidence in a court of law.

Elementary though it is, this debt has profound consequences for the discussion of Douglass’ credibility in the public sphere. Whereas his pre-*Narrative* detractors might have suggested that his account was pure fantasy, a tale conjured out of thin air, those intent upon denying his truthfulness after its publication did so on entirely different grounds. In a letter published shortly after the release of the *Narrative*, for instance, A.C.C. Thompson, a neighbor of Thomas Auld, claims that the work “bears the glaring impress of falsehood on every page” and that “the whole [is] a budget of falsehoods, from beginning to end” (88-89). Unlike the incredulous auditors of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, however, Thompson does not dispute the fact of Douglass’ enslavement. Instead he confirms it, describing him as an “unlearned and rather...ordinary negro,” incapable of having written the *Narrative* since it was undoubtedly authored by “an educated man, and one who had some knowledge of the rules of grammar” (89). Since he was acquainted with both Douglass and the *Narrative*’s major actors, one might expect Thompson to substantiate his claims with a point-by-point refutation of the former slave’s account. Such is not the case. After a perfunctory nod to the demands of empirical epistemology, Thompson offers a rebuttal of the *Narrative* that is decidedly *a priori* in its orientation. When he seeks to defend Thomas Auld against Douglass’ representation of his “hypocritical meanness,” Thompson does not cite a single act of obvious generosity. Rather, he points to Auld’s being an “honorable and worthy member of the Methodist E. Church” who was “only notable for his integrity and impeccable Christian character”

(90). Similarly, when speaking of the “accused murderer” Austin Gore, Thompson never actually contradicts the charge that the overseer killed the slave Demby, but, in what may be one of his most patently evasive non-denials, claims that he believes him to be “a worthy member of the Methodist Episcopal Church” who “was formerly an overseer for Col. Lloyd, and at this time, all who know him think him anything but a murderer” (90). In each of these cases, Thompson refuses to engage Douglass’ text in the inductive register in which it is written. For the empirically-minded audiences of both the realist novel and the *Narrative*, the issue of Gore’s culpability or Auld’s tightfistedness cannot be settled by noting their religious affiliation. Such questions can only be resolved by the pertinent facts of their respective cases. Since Thompson avoids these so studiously, it appears that Douglass has prevailed in the factual arena and that slavery’s apologists would have to find other grounds upon which to wage their battle.

In addition to situating his *Narrative* in a precise geographic location and connecting it to a group of specific individuals, Douglass also describes the particular economic environment in which his experiences transpired. After reiterating the location of Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, the former slave lists some of the commodities it produced: “The plantation is about twelve miles north of Easton in Talbot County, and is situated on the border of Miles River. The principal products raised upon it were tobacco, corn, and wheat. These were raised in great abundance; so that, with the products of this and the other farms belonging to him, [Colonel Lloyd] was able to keep in almost constant employment a large sloop, in carrying them to market in Baltimore” (16). Douglass then provides a thumbnail sketch of the plantation’s managerial structure that

includes some discussion of the way in which the slaves were provisioned: “The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars” (16-17). In his enumeration of such details, Douglass accomplishes a number of things. On the one hand, with each additional fact, he increases the likelihood that an empiricist audience would accept the validity of his account. Beyond such quantitative assistance, Douglass’ ethnography also locates slavery within the same world inhabited by his readers. In this regard, his text departs from much of the literature surrounding slavery both pro and con. Whereas southern apologists mythologized the relationship between master and slave using the pastoral image of the happy darkie bound to a benevolent white father, and Christian abolitionists viewed the African bondsman as a latter-day Israelite toiling for an American Pharaoh, Douglass embedded his account of the peculiar institution in the world of nineteenth-century commodity production.⁴¹ As such, he reveals a further debt to the realist novel by locating the *Narrative* squarely within an economic domain that had less to do with either Arcadian idylls or the history of the Hebrew nation than it did with the production of goods for a growing international market.

⁴¹ For a description of slavery pastoralized and Douglass’ debunking of this myth, see Bodizock’s “The Cage of Obscene Birds.” For the use of biblical typology in abolitionist literature see Tompkins’ chapter “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History” in her *Sensational Designs*, and Lowance’s “The Slave Narrative in American Literature.”

At times, Douglass pays as much attention to the individualization of his characters as he does to the particularization of their settings. His distinctive individuals range from the initially kindhearted Sophia Auld to her miserly brother in law, Thomas, whose superlative meanness prompted him to deprive his slaves of the very sustenance they needed to survive. Even those people who serve as overseers bring a certain degree of individuality to their reviled occupation: while Mr. Freeland incorporates a modicum of decency into his awful trade, the implacable Mr. Gore inspires nothing but terror in those unlucky enough to cross him. Amidst these diverse actors, Douglass offers one of his most complex portraits in his depiction of the “nigger breaker” Edward Covey. Douglass undoubtedly individualizes Covey to the degree he does because of the pivotal role he plays in the former slave’s eventual redemption: when describing the year in which he lived with Covey, Douglass claims that his reader will see both “how a man was made a slave” and “how a slave was made a man” (47). During the first six months of this stay, Douglass worked as a field hand, laboring six days a week and spending his one day of rest in a “beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake” (45). This drudgery was occasionally punctuated by severe beatings which Covey would administer upon almost any pretense, abusing Douglass for not possessing an intuitive knowledge of how to handle a team of oxen or for collapsing from exhaustion while working on one of the hottest days of the year. Given such cruelty, one might well expect that Douglass would have indulged a perfectly understandable resentment and depicted his onetime tormentor as little more than a savage demon. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the author of the *Narrative* found inspiration in his animosity, especially in those places where he justifies

the nickname by which he and his fellow slaves referred to Covey: “the snake.”

According to Douglass, Covey earned this sobriquet through his capacity for subterfuge and for keeping his slaves in a perpetual state of anxiety as to his whereabouts. This proclivity for deception ran so deep that when Douglass compares him to the overseer with whom he subsequently lived, Mr. Freeland, he claims that, while the latter “was open and frank,” Mr. Covey “was a most artful deceiver, and could be understood only by such as were skillful enough to detect his cunningly-devised frauds” (33). When Douglass describes him as such, he comes as close as he ever does to creating a one-dimensional characterization. Yet the character of Edward Covey always exceeds his reptilian image, even when Douglass marshals evidence to further justify the name “the snake.” In one particular instance, Douglass claims that Covey’s duplicity extended to his religious practice and that the negro breaker “seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the Almighty” (45). To illustrate such audaciousness, Douglass refers to Covey’s habitual pieties which consisted of “a short prayer in the morning and a long prayer at night,” during which “few men would at times appear more devotional than he” (44). Yet Douglass indicates that this apparent piety could not withstand close inspection:

The exercises of his family devotions were always commenced with singing; and, as he was a very poor singer himself, the duty of raising the hymn generally came upon me. He would read his hymn and nod at me to commence. I would at times do so; at others, I would not. My non-compliance would almost always produce

much confusion. To show himself independent of me, he would stagger through with his hymn in the most discordant manner. (45)

On one level, this anecdote illustrates the rank hypocrisy of religious slaveholders, functioning in a manner similar to the story of how Covey purchased a female “breeder” in the hopes of augmenting the amount of his human stock via natural increase. When this woman gives birth to twins, Covey and his wife are duly thrilled and “nothing they could do for Caroline during her confinement was too good, or too hard, to be done” (45). While this latter tale partakes of the same acerbity that elsewhere characterizes Douglass’ attitude toward the complaisant religion of the South, the story of Covey’s embarrassment adds little to his depiction as a slaveholder and therefore seems at odds with the work’s ideological aim of representing the typicality of Douglass’ experiences. Whatever the description loses in terms of allegorical transparency, however, is made up for by the individualized portrait it provides of Covey.

Douglass’ Dialectical Gothic

For all the seeming individuality of his characters or the particularization of his settings, though, Douglass never allows either of these to entirely escape the homogenizing influence that the gothicized system of slavery invariably exerts on its human participants. The former slave first unveils the gothic world that lurks behind the particularities of his realist depictions when he recalls the first time he witnessed Captain Anthony whipping his Aunt Hester. Explaining that his master had forbidden her from

visiting a slave known as “Lloyd’s Ned,” Douglass describes the barbaric episode that followed her disobedience:

Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her to the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d---d b--h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool and tied her hands to the hook. (15)

Despite the potential for sensationalism inherent in the scene, Douglass renders it using an extreme version of the documentary mode found in other places throughout the *Narrative*, providing both a minute account of Captain Anthony’s procedure as well as a detailed inventory of the paraphernalia devoted to sadistic rituals such as these. Douglass intensifies the clinical nature of the description by relying on some rather generic verbs: Captain Anthony “*took* her to the kitchen...*told* her to cross her hands...*tied* them with a strong rope, and *led* her to a stool...*made* her *get* upon the stool and *tied* her hands to the hook.” Unlike their alternatives “dragged,” “ordered,” and “forced,” the words “took,” “told,” and “led” do not necessarily connote violent actions but could just as likely be found in a description of an usher leading a woman to her seat at a wedding. The contrast between the actions depicted and the language used to describe them is somewhat jarring and recalls one of those nightmares of helplessness in which one is rendered powerless by

heavy limbs or some other impediment to action.⁴² As such it seems well suited for representing the experience of a young boy forced to watch his aunt being beaten by a jealous master. In order to prevent these from becoming so much inert matter, Douglass treats the scene and its many objects as a single iteration of the brutality endemic to slavery, explaining that he had “often been awakened at the dawn of day” by his aunt’s “heart-rending shrieks,” whom Captain Anthony “used to tie up to a joist and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood” (14). Both the adverb “often” and the imperfect tense “used to tie up” indicate that despite its particularity, the scene could easily be exchanged with many others.

⁴² Douglass’ description of this brutality may well have been inspired by Edgar Allan Poe’s 1843 “The Cask of Amontillado,” which also depicts a shackling procedure. After luring an enemy, Fortunato, into catacombs that also serve as a wine cellar, the narrator Montressor chains him to the walls of the cavern: “In an instant he had reached the extremity of the niche, and finding his progress arrested by the rock, stood stupidly bewildered. A moment more and I had fettered him to the granite. In its surface were two iron staples, distant from each other about two feet horizontally. From one of these depended a short chain, from the other a padlock. Throwing the links about his waist, it was but the work of a few seconds to secure it. He was too much astounded to resist. Withdrawing the key I stepped back from the recess” (*Poetry and Tales*, 852). Using an elliptical style, particularly through the figure of zeugma—“From one of these depended a short chain, from the other a padlock”—Poe incorporates the rapidity with which Montressor binds his victim into his sentence patterns. He adds to this some very specific verbs: compared to Douglass’ “took,” “told,” and “led,” Poe’s “arrested,” “fettered,” and “throwing” are both more precise and more kinetic. Stylistically, then, I believe the passages are quite different. At the same time, though, Douglass may have learned a lesson in the value of understatement when it comes to depicting violence from Poe. Unlike the murderous narrators found in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat,” Montressor appears to be a rather dispassionate killer who maintains his self-control while immuring his enemy alive. As such he is one of Poe’s most disturbing murderers, and while Douglass suggests that Captain Anthony is motivated by jealousy, Douglass’ rendering of the scene disconnects the otherwise passionate Captain from that emotion and thereby aligns him with Montressor. Of course, Montressor’s closest analogue is to be found in the overseer Austin Gore who takes no pleasure in whipping the slaves he tyrannizes but does so only from a sense of duty. But here, it appears that Douglass has infused Captain Anthony with some of Montressor’s characteristic sangfroid.

In addition to these verbal cues, Douglass also establishes a figurative scheme through which to read this individual instance of abuse, claiming that it was “the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be witness and participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass” (15). Unlike the scene’s stool, joist and rope, the infernal gate through which Douglass passes does not refer to any particular object in the room. One should not imagine, however, that it is any less real than these more substantial items. Instead the gothic portal refers to a typological reality that boils these multiple outrages down to their essence, allowing Douglass to represent slavery in its totality by linking the episode to both the many occasions on which Hester was beaten as well as to the many outrages to which the young Douglass and slaves like him were subjected. In emphasizing the hellish nature of this episode and slavery in general, Douglass further connects Captain Anthony to the many other perpetrators who committed similar crimes against their fellow human beings, all of whom have their demonic nature revealed. On almost every occasion that Douglass retells one of his experiences or introduces another slaveholder within his *Narrative*, one can rest assured that that character or event will be figuratively connected to this archetypically infernal experience. Such a connection may amount to little more than a single adjective, as when Douglass recounts the occasion on which a neighbor of Colonel Lloyd’s murdered one of the grandee’s slaves for having trespassed on his land while fishing for oysters. Douglass refers to this event as a “fiendish transaction” (25). The diabolical connection may be indicated through a more elaborate description, as happens when Douglass speaks of the

slave traders who came to taunt him and his confederates after their planned escape has been foiled: “we had been in jail scarcely twenty minutes, when a swarm of slave traders and agents for slave traders, flocked into jail to look at us, and to ascertain if we were for sale. Such a set of beings I never saw before! I felt myself surrounded by so many fiends from perdition. A band of pirates never looked more like their father, the devil” (60).

Thus does Douglass indicate that whatever differences may separate one act of cruelty or the person who inflicts it from another, when viewed in the context of slavery, the same people and events all end up looking remarkably alike. Through such gothic means, Douglass focuses his readers’ attention on the system behind these events rather than on the individuals that serve as its medium.

Douglass is justified in representing the interchangeability of these many instances of cruelty by more than rhetorical expediency; instead, his uncanny repetitions and their erasure of difference mirror one of the principal intellectual processes upon which the trade in human flesh is founded. The former slave first learned of this process when he was about ten or eleven years old, and his old master, Captain Anthony, died without having written a will. As a consequence, all of his property, human chattel included, had to be gathered together so that its value could be determined and divided equally among his surviving heirs. The young Frederick was therefore summoned from Baltimore so that he could be included within this appraisal. Placed in such a situation, Douglass and his fellow slaves faced what Phillip Fisher has cited as “The central psychological and social evil of slavery [which] is the separation of families: the selling of children or wives or uncles or fathers to separate buyers and with such sales the

permanent severing of family ties” (101). Although he refers specifically to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Fisher’s remarks apply equally to the *Narrative*, especially in those places where Douglass describes the anxiety he experienced as he contemplated the possibility of being permanently separated from both kith and kin. Injurious as it is to the slave family, the anticipated separation accounts for only a portion of the scene’s viciousness, much of which belongs to the valuation preceding it. Speaking of this appraisal, Douglass emphasizes its “narrow examination,” which transgresses all norms of propriety, subjecting “Men and women, old and young” and “married and single” alike to its “indelicate inspection.” In its indelicacy, this inspection is not only unabashedly lecherous but imprecise as well. Whereas a person endowed with a delicate sensitivity would be attuned to nuance, Douglass’ appraiser fails to recognize even the most obvious differences distinguishing one object from another:

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young married and single were ranked with horses, sheep and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow inspection. (36)

Not only do gender, age and marital status dissolve within this inspector’s gaze but even something as fundamental as species escapes its attention. Horses, men, pigs, children and women are all jumbled together within its view. It seems that Douglass speaks quite literally, then, when he claims that the appraisal allowed him to see “more clearly than

ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder” since it placed human beings on a par with the brute creation (36). Despite its apparent obtuseness, however, this inspecting eye is perfectly suited for the job it has been assigned, having been tasked with nothing more than establishing the value of Captain Anthony’s property. Differences that signify elsewhere cease to matter when these objects are scrutinized by an inspector who views them as pieces of property. Any consideration of marital status, age or zoology would only serve to hinder the task of equal division, which requires a purely quantitative rather than qualitative analysis. In essence, Douglass has perceived the process of abstraction upon which all forms of commodification depend and which Karl Marx would describe some twenty years later in *Capital*.

Marx, we must remember, begins his analysis of capitalist society by describing the commodity form upon which its wealth is built. He defines the commodity as “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (125). A commodity’s ability to satisfy human needs, what Marx terms its use-value, depends solely upon its physical characteristics: the use-value of wheat results from its caloric content, the use-value of a compass needle its magnetic properties. By the same token, a thing’s physical characteristics disqualify it for other uses: a loaf of bread makes a poor navigational instrument, for instance. Marx concludes that “As use-values, commodities differ above all in quality” (128). At the same time, a commodity is, by definition, an object that is exchanged. In order to exchange items with different use-values and therefore different qualities, people must place them in a relationship of equivalence that focuses on something other than their physical characteristics. Marx

claims that commodities can be exchanged despite their differences, because they all contain a certain amount of congealed human labor, a purely quantitative rather than qualitative measure: x amount of wheat can be exchanged for y amount of iron because they were both manufactured using roughly the same amount of labor. With its emphasis upon something other than physical characteristics, Marx concludes that “the exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its abstraction from their use-values” (127). In other words, to exchange a commodity, a person must disregard the physical properties that determine its use-value and suppose the quantity of labor that produced it. Douglass discovers this same process of abstraction at work in the valuation to which he was subjected as a young man. Whatever they might have meant elsewhere, the differences separating men from women, the young from the old and the bestial from the human, counted for little on the auction block. Like Marx’s use value, such distinctions “differ above all” in “quality.” Yet when they were conceived of as property, all such distinctions disappeared and this process of human commodification depended entirely upon an “abstraction from use-values.”

When such a process is applied to inanimate objects it seems commonplace, when to human beings it assumes a far more monstrous appearance. And indeed, Douglass populates his *Narrative* with a number of figures that bear a striking resemblance to the fantastic creatures found within gothic fiction and whose monstrousness is intimately connected to the human commodifications upon which slavery depends. In an analysis of what he terms art horror, Noel Carroll observes that fictional monsters tend to inspire a twofold reaction in the characters with whom the audience presumably identifies. In

addition to terrifying the sympathetic characters, monsters also inspire a strong sense of “revulsion, nausea and disgust” (22). While the reasons for their fearsomeness may be more obvious, monsters do, after all, pose a genuine threat to the characters they menace, their ability to disgust requires greater explanation. Drawing on the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas, Carroll suggests that monsters disgust because they are impure, a quality that Douglas associates with the transgression or violation of a culture’s schemes of categorization. Speaking of the dietary laws in the book of Leviticus, for instance, Douglas claims that the Mosaic code prohibits the eating of shellfish because these seagoing creatures straddle the conceptual boundary separating aquatic from terrestrial animals. Within Hebrew culture, animals that live in the sea should swim and have fins, while things that live on land should walk upon their legs. Since they both live in water and creep upon the ocean floor, crustaceans such as shrimp and lobster do not properly belong to either of these categories. As a result of their ambiguous nature, these animals constitute a category mistake and are therefore taboo. According to this same principle of categorical transgressiveness, various bodily ejecta such as feces “spittle, blood, tears, sweat, hair clippings, vomit, nail clippings, pieces of flesh” count as impure because they “figure ambiguously in terms of categorical oppositions such as me/not me, inside/ outside, and living/dead.” Carroll rounds out this list of things impure by referring to objects that “raise categorical misgivings by virtue of being incomplete representatives of their class, such as rotting and disintegrating things, as well as those that are “formless, for example, dirt” (32). Using this list of impure exemplars, Carroll claims that most

monsters “are beings or creatures that specialize in formlessness, incompleteness, categorical interstitiality, and categorical contradictoriness” of the type listed above (32).

While Carroll takes most of his monsters from film, Douglass likely drew inspiration from one of the most memorable category transgressors in all of literature: the creature that the eponymous Victor Frankenstein assembles in Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein*. On the most fundamental level, Frankenstein’s creature, like the zombie, vampire, or ghost, disrupts the categories that separate life from death since he owes his existence to the fact that his creator has become “capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter” (Shelley 53). Even before his creation, the creature is defined by his monstrousness since his creator obtains the knowledge necessary for giving him life by spending his “days and nights in charnel houses,” places that are the quintessence of the rotting and disintegrating things that evoke the disgust associated with category transgression (53). In addition to blurring the lines separating life and death, the creature also crosses the border dividing animals from humans since the “dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of [Frankenstein’s] materials” (55). And, finally, when Frankenstein actually gives the creature life, he is horrified by the product of his labor:

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful.

Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with

his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips. (58)

Although the creature's "yellow skin" and "straight black lips" suggest a racially multivalent creature, H.L. Malchow has argued that "Shelley's fictional creation in many respects parallels the racial stereotypes of the age" (10). In addition to his black lips and black lustrous hair, the creature also possesses superhuman strength, can survive in hostile environments and is subject to volatile emotions. As Malchow demonstrates, all of these characteristics connect him to the images of African slaves as these appeared in the popular discourse of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. Coupled with these associations is the fact that the creature is stitched together from bits of flesh drawn from both the slaughterhouse and the morgue and therefore represents an extreme form of the brutalization that occurs on slavery's auction block where human beings are treated as commodities and thereby forced to hold "the same rank in the scale of being" as common livestock (Douglass 36). As such, Frankenstein's monster provided Douglass with a suggestive avatar of the concept of monstrosity which informs his representations of the peculiar institution throughout the *Narrative*.

Douglass renders slavery in explicitly monstrous terms when he strives to embody the "system" through the figure of personification. According to Eric Savoy, the American gothic is defined primarily by its "strange tropes, figures, and rhetorical techniques" (168). Among these tropes, prosopopeia or personification looms especially large. Through this figure "abstract ideas (such as the burden of historical causes) are

given a 'body' in the spectral figure of the ghost [or monster]. It is also the strategy that enables the dead to rise, the ghostly voice to materialize out of nowhere, and objects to assume a menacing pseudo-life" (168). Like Savoy's abstract ideas, the disparate collection of laws, ideologies and institutions that constituted the system of slavery had a similarly spectral existence. In order to materialize these, Douglass relies upon this quintessentially gothic trope when he refers to "the jaws of slavery" or "its foul embrace," (19, 28). After having grappled with and subdued the slave breaker Covey, Douglass speaks of the "deep satisfaction" he experienced, which can only be appreciated by someone who "has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery" (50). In these cases, Douglass conveys the tenaciousness with which slavery retains its human prey by either figuring the institution as some part of the human body associated with grasping, jaws and arms, or as a nominalization of an action associated with these body parts, an embrace. Douglass offers his most elaborated materialization of slavery when describing the apprehensiveness that both he and his fellow slaves experience as they contemplate what might befall them should they successfully escape their immediate bondage. On the one hand, stands the dim possibility of actually attaining freedom, while on the other lies grim-visaged slavery itself: "a stern reality glaring frightfully upon us,--its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our own flesh" (57). Although I call these figures personifications, they barely qualify for the designation: beyond their clothing, arms and menacing eyes, they remain more an assemblage of vaguely anthropomorphic parts and attributes. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to classify them as instances of catachresis, which Savoy defines as "a figure

for which there exists no precise literal referent, merely a ‘something’ that can appear verbally in no other way” (171). However one wishes to define them, these inchoate figures serve Douglass’ purposes admirably. In their nebulousness, they, like Carroll’s monsters and the system of slavery itself, are both terrifying and impure. On a most basic level, the personification of slavery inspires fear through its cannibalistic appetite, feeding “greedily” upon Douglass’ flesh and wearing the bloody evidence of previous meals. In addition to testifying to its anthropophagic tendencies, slavery’s crimson robes also suggest the impurities generated by human commodification. As Carroll explains, blood and other bodily fluids provoke reactions of impurity because they transgress the categories of “me/ not me, inside/ outside and living dead” (32). In his preface to Douglass’ work, William Lloyd Garrison invites readers to associate blood with impurity when he speaks of describing “scenes of pollution and blood” to slavery’s disingenuous apologists (8). Douglass further hints at slavery’s impure nature when he figures the institution through body parts, referring to jaws, arms or embraces. Through such metonymic personification, Douglass represents the impurity of American slavery through “Categorical incompleteness [which] is also a standard feature of monsters of horror” (Carroll *Philosophy*, 33). By its very nature, slavery was a violent institution. Hence, Douglass’ picture of its ensanguined robes refers to the literal blood it has on its hands. On another level however, the presence of blood amplifies the effect of slavery’s multiple disruptions of categories.

Douglass incorporates the principle of categorical transgressiveness into his representations of the actual individuals drawn from his enslaved life. One blatant case

appears in his depiction of the ruthless overseer Austin Gore, the man most at home in the role assigned him by the peculiar institution. To indicate the perfect fit between Gore and his occupation, Douglass relies upon chiasmus, a figure that bisects a sentence into two mirrored syntactic halves. Speaking of Gore, the former slave claims that “He was just the man for such a place, and it was just the place for such a man.” Whenever Gore addressed the slaves over whom he exercised authority, “His words were in perfect keeping with his looks, and his looks were in perfect keeping with his words” (23). Douglass complements these tautological formulations by enumerating the actual characteristics that qualify Gore as a superlative overseer. As might be expected, these consist primarily of an unflinching devotion to duty and a total suppression of any qualities that might mollify his rigorous treatment of the people over whom he exercises authority. Douglass explains that “though a young man [Mr. Gore] indulged in no jokes, said no funny word, seldom smiled.” And while he preferred whipping slaves to speaking to them, he appeared to derive no pleasure from doing so: “When he whipped, he seemed to do so from a sense of duty, and feared no consequences. He did nothing reluctantly, no matter how disagreeable; always at his post, never inconsistent. He never promised but to fulfill. He was, in a word, a man of the most inflexible firmness and stone-like coolness” (23). Amongst these more predictable qualities, Douglass refers to a trait that appears to be only marginally related to Gore’s aptitude for producing docile slaves. In language that echoes the circular formulations connecting Gore to the institution of slavery, Douglass describes the expert overseer as being “just proud enough to demand the most debasing homage of the slave, and quite servile enough to crouch, himself, at the feet of

the master” (23). Here, Douglass uses zeugma, a figure in which a single verb governs two distinct clauses. In this case, “was” governs the two adjectival clauses “just proud enough” and “quite servile enough.” While the two clauses of the zeugma mirror each other syntactically, they contradict each other semantically, pride and servility being opposites. Despite their contradictory nature, both of these characteristics find a home in Austin Gore making him a category mistake, and, therefore, according to Carroll’s definition, a monster. Thus, even though the overseer is not himself forced to undergo the indelicate inspection of an appraisal and occupy the same rank as common livestock, he nevertheless bears the institution’s identifying mark, a mark which is intimately connected to the commodification that Douglass first observes as a young man and which informs his fantastic personifications of the system.

Not only does Gore represent a category mistake in being composed of equal parts servility and pride; he is made equally monstrous for transgressing the boundary separating the human from the mechanical. If a slave were unlucky enough to find himself the object of Gore’s accusation, remonstrance would gain him nothing: “To be accused, was to be convicted, and to be convicted was to be punished; the one always following the other with immutable certainty” (23). When Gore broke his silence, “He spoke but to command, and commanded, but to be obeyed” (23). Through this description, Douglass portrays Gore as the consummate master. Immune to the apprehensions that might have plagued others who found slavery less congenial to their conscience, Gore seems more than capable of exercising the unjust authority conferred upon him by the institution. At the same time, the description also depicts a man who has

subordinated any recognizably human characteristics to his role as overseer. For punishment to follow accusation with “immutable certainty,” Gore must jettison not only his compassion but his judgment as well, and his aptitude for command appears to have come at the price of his free will. In place of the man capable of deliberation, stands an automaton whose algorithmic behavior invariably follows the dictates of the peculiar institution. Seen in this light, Gore’s mechanical behavior mirrors that of the human chattel over whom he has dominion: despite the fact that they occupy the opposing poles of mastery and subjugation, slavery has deprived both master and servant of their agency and imparted an unnervingly mechanical air to their behavior. In his transgression of the boundary separating the mechanical from the human, Gore exemplifies what Bill Brown refers to as the “American Uncanny.” For Brown, the American uncanny finds its privileged expression in those moments within American culture when mechanized racist memorabilia such as the “Jolly Nigger Bank” spring to life as in Spike Lee’s 2000 film *Bamboozled*. Like other instances of uncanny automata, these moments produce their particular effects because they are ontologically ambiguous, transgressing the boundary that separates the living from the dead, the animate from the inanimate.⁴³ As such they reenact the “ontological scandal” perpetuated by slavery through its commodification of human beings and hence its breakdown of the person/ thing binary (197). For Douglass, however, slavery dehumanizes everyone it touches, and, in his *Narrative*, Austin Gore

⁴³ In his apparent loss of agency, Gore resembles another monster associated with slavery: the zombie. According to Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, “Zombification conjures up the Haitian experience of slavery, of the disassociation of man from his will, his reduction to a beast of burden at the will of a master” (239).

feels the effects of monstrous commodification just as strongly as do the slaves he tyrannizes.

Just as slavery could produce overseers terrifying in their implacability, so too could it generate others who tended to inspire laughter rather than fear. Douglass describes one such man in the person of Thomas Auld. Unlike Gore, who was “the most dreaded by the slaves,” Auld was “an object of contempt” (23, 42). Where Gore inhabited his role with a terrifying gracefulness, Auld couldn’t even qualify as a respectable mimic: “His airs, words, and actions, were the airs, words, and actions of born slaveholders, and, being assumed, were awkward enough. He was not even a good imitator...Having no resources within himself, he was compelled to be the copyist of many” (40). And while the mere sound of Gore’s voice could produce “horror and trembling,” Auld could only occasionally command the respect necessary for having his slaves address him as master. In terms of the emotional response they produce, these men occupy the extreme positions of a polarity defined at one end by fearfulness and at the other by contempt, yet when Douglass identifies the source of Auld’s contemptibility, their differences seem less than absolute.⁴⁴ According to Douglass, Auld’s slaves think so little of him because of his forever being “the victim of inconsistency,” and that in “the enforcement of his rules he was at times rigid, and at times lax. At times, he spoke to his slaves with the firmness of a

⁴⁴ In an analysis of certain films that combines elements of horror and comedy, Noel Carroll once again offers an illuminating perspective from which to view Thomas Auld’s contemptibility. For Carroll, horror blends easily into comedy and comedy into horror because both genres feature figures that specialize in impurity. As I have shown, the impure figures in horror are monsters. The impure figures in fictions that inspire laughter are clowns. As Carroll observes, “The anthropological literature in ritual clowns identifies clowns as categorically institial and categorically transgressive beings” (“Horror and Humor” 155).

Napoleon and the fury of a demon; at other times, he might well be mistaken for an inquirer who had lost his way” (40). At first glance, these details appear to widen the gap separating Auld from Gore, especially since the latter derives much of his fearfulness from being “always at his post, never inconsistent” (23). Yet when viewed from a slightly different perspective these differences recede into the background. While Gore may be unfailingly consistent in his dealings with his slaves, his consistency is not an organic feature of his character but rather is relationally determined. When we recall Douglass’ characterization of him as being “just proud enough to demand the most debasing homage of the slave, and quite servile enough to crouch, himself, at the feet of the master,” the two men actually converge: Gore’s combination of pride and servility bear a striking resemblance to Auld’s behaving at times like a Napoleon and at others like a stranger who has lost his way. Thus, despite their seeming differences and even their apparent opposition, both men are defined, at least partially, in terms of categorical incoherence. By defining them in terms of their inconsistencies, Douglass connects both men gothically to his monstrous personification of slavery and hence to the appraisal scene which displayed the system’s tendency to erase individual differences in the service of commodification. When such individual differences fade into the background, Douglass reveals the insidious influence of the system of slavery itself.

Douglass offers his most dramatic representation of slavery’s homogenizing influence when he recounts the way in which it transformed his Baltimore owner, Sophia Auld, from a kind-hearted woman into just another iteration of the slaveholding demon endemic to the institution. As a consequence of having spent all of his life on a Maryland

plantation, the young Douglass had become familiar with the fiendish variety that the system of slavery was likely to generate. When he travels to Baltimore, however, and meets Sophia, a woman who had “never had a slave under her control...and prior to her marriage...had been dependent upon her own industry for a living,” Douglass encounters someone completely outside the orbit of his experience (28). Describing their first meeting, Douglass attempts to recapture the astonishment he felt upon beholding his new mistress. When she answers the door, for instance, he claims he was met by a sight that he “had never seen before; it was a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions. I wish I could describe the rapture that flashed through my soul as I beheld it. It was a new and strange sight to me, brightening up my pathway with the light of happiness” (27). This initial impression is confirmed by subsequent experience of her kind deeds: “I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. She was entirely unlike any other white woman I had ever seen” (28). When the young Frederick adopts the groveling posture slavery has taught him, Sophia displays nothing but embarrassment: “The crouching servility usually so acceptable a quality in a slave did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it...The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her. Her face was made of heavenly smiles and her voice of tranquil music” (29). In short, Miss Sophia is the paragon of nineteenth-century womanhood: “she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach” (31). Douglass

attributes both Miss Sophia's virtue and her singularity to her having "been dependent upon her own industry for a living," explaining that she "was by trade a weaver, and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery" (28). When he connects Sophia's individuality and virtue to the work she has done, Douglass emphasizes that portion of the self cultivated through labor and associated with use value, representing her as one of those "entirely coherent and distinct personalities," which "appear to be exact expressions of, and are fundamentally tied to, their private and intrinsic merit" (Henderson 232). Soon enough, however, the exercise of irresponsible power begins to work its insidious effects upon Miss Sophia, deforming her into yet another iteration of slavery's monotonous characters, fully interchangeable with the many others who have been shaped by its homogenizing influence. After her husband demands that she stop teaching Douglass to read, Sophia adapts herself to her newfound situation with astonishing celerity:

The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.

(29)

Like many of the other slaveholders Douglass describes, Miss Sophia becomes a gothic demon under the peculiar institution's influence. As such, her individuality disappears

and in her hellish nature, she becomes indistinguishable from Captain Anthony and his “infernal purpose,” (15), Mr. Severe and his “fiendish barbarity” (17) and the demonic fury of Thomas Auld (40). Like other people who have come into contact with the institution, Miss Sophia also becomes the abode of contradictory characteristics when her “tender heart became stone” and her “lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness” (31). In representing Miss Sophia’s precipitous transformation, Douglass demonstrates the way in which individuals always succumb to the pressures of the institution. In so doing, he puts to rest any remaining notions that the conditions of slavery could be ameliorated by the kind individual. The flaws in such an institution ran too deep to be amended by the individual. As such it required abolition, not reform.

History and the Gothic

In her *Gothic America*, Teresa Goddu makes a compelling case for treating the American gothic as a socially engaged rather than an escapist genre, arguing that it provides a language for articulating those historical horrors that have been repressed in an effort to create an American identity that is founded upon “new-world innocence” and “equality” (10). As such, the gothic “serves as a primary means for speaking the unspeakable in American literature” (10). Chief among these ineffables is the bloody institution of slavery. Despite the fact that the gothic serves as the best available means for apprehending slavery’s nightmarish violence, however, Goddu claims that writers who use the genre always run the risk of dematerializing the repressed history they have brought to light. Goddu claims that this dematerialization occurs when authors seek to

extract some form of universal truth from the individual acts of violence they depict, and she cites Crèvecoeur's representation of the caged slave condemned to death for having murdered an overseer in the Charles Town section of his *Letters from an American Farmer* as an exemplary instance of this tendency. After using the gothic to unearth the repressed secrets of American slavery, Crevecoeur, according to Goddu, backpedals and manages to distance himself from the scene's violence: "Contemplating not the man but his fate, he turns the slave into an abstraction that he can then distance and universalize" (20). Against such dematerializing uses of the gothic, Goddu offers the example of Frederick Douglass, explaining that when the former slave describes the scene in which Captain Anthony whips his Aunt Hester, he may well translate the event "into a symbol of slavery" but, unlike Crevecoeur, "refuses to abstract the horror by turning it into a timeless trope of terror" (138). Douglass' description remains tied to the actuality by going "to great lengths...to particularize the scene" (139). Based upon such arguments, it appears that when Goddu speaks of the material, she means primarily the particular. For her, the gothic represents history most effectively when its detailed renderings of violence act as ballast against any abstracting impulses that seek to integrate the story of American bondage into a universal history of human oppression.

In a similar manner, Eric Savoy and Robert K. Martin articulate their own theory of the gothic by distinguishing it from those of their predecessors, referring specifically to Donald A. Ringe's *American Gothic* and Louis S. Gross's *Redefining the American Gothic*. According to Savoy and Martin, Ringe and Gross may provide "insightful readings of texts, of moments, but their gestures toward comprehensivity, toward

‘tradition,’ by way of rather uniform synecdochic examples fail to convince” (vii). To fully understand Savoy’s and Martin’s critique, it helps to reread the opening sentence of their introduction: “If gothic cultural production in the United States has yielded neither a ‘genre’ nor a cohesive ‘mode’ but rather a discursive field in which a metonymic national ‘self’ is undone by the return of its repressed Otherness, then a critical account that attempts to reduce the gothic to an overarching historical consistency—a matter of ‘essentials’ and ‘accidentals’—will be of limited use” (vii). The key to understanding the distinction that Martin and Savoy make between their own and their predecessors’ work resides in their use of the terms synecdoche and metonymy. Both refer to figurative language that substitutes a part for a whole. These two figure differ, however, in the type of relationship they posit between the objects compared. In metonymy the whole is *reduced* to a part that does not necessarily partake of the whole’s essence, as in the imperative “all hands on deck,” where “hands” substitutes for sailor. By contrast, when the part contains the essence of the whole and suggests a microcosm/ macrocosm relationship between the terms of the comparison, then it is a synecdoche.⁴⁵ Based upon this distinction, it appears that Savoy and Martin object to literary histories of the gothic that treat particular works as synecdochic expressions of an American gothic essence. In contrast to such synthesizing studies, the editors of *American Gothic* are “committed to pluralism” and they seek to provide a “composite of ‘interventions’ that explore specific issues—in the histories of gender and race, in the cultures of cities and scandals and

⁴⁵ My understanding of these two figure relies heavily upon Hayden White’s discussion of them relies heavily upon Hayden White’s *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* especially pages 31-37.

sensations, in the psychodynamics of representation—in order to advance particular and distinct theoretical paradigms” (vii). And in place of the “symbolic or allegorical” criticism of previous generations, they “propose a set of concretized readings” that do not efface “the real” by translating gothic darkness into moral rather than racial terms (xi).

In their epistemological preference for the concrete over the abstract and their reliance upon the critical categories of race and gender, Goddu, Martin and Savoy reflect a dominant trend within the study of American culture that has been defined by its “commitment to the primacy of *difference*—of the marked differences, that is, in the experience of Americans as determined by their class, ethnicity, race, gender, or sexual preference” (Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* 382). Given their commitments, it comes as no surprise that such critics would also insist upon situating the texts they read within the particularities of the material world and remain leery of the universalizing tendencies of their predecessors. As I hope to have shown, however, abstraction and allegorical reading do not serve the interests of complacency alone. Instead, they can play an important role in revealing the presence of institutional realities that stand somewhere between the particularities of an individual situation and an apolitical universalism. In fact, critics who disavow abstraction altogether will have a hard time discerning the evidence of any systemic realities at all, and they run the opposite risk of not being able to see beyond the individual, one of the principal dangers that Douglass himself faced in composing his *Narrative*. When Goddu claims that the gothic provides a language for “speaking the unspeakable,” she refers primarily to the genre’s ability to represent the ineffable violence of slavery, yet what was also unspeakable, or at least incapable of

being represented directly, was the systemic reality that made slavery's individual acts of violence possible in the first place. In his efforts to represent this transpersonal reality, Douglass was aided by the formal techniques of gothic fiction, which allowed him to adumbrate the institutional forces that shaped the lives of all slaves including that of his own. And while he may well have occasionally treated facts as a means rather than an end, he did not, therefore, dematerialize history. Instead he brought another level of materiality into focus, for, as the example of Marxism teaches us, materiality and materialism can refer to more than just brute matter.⁴⁶ As Frederic Jameson explains, "Marxism...is not a mechanical but a historical materialism: it does not assert the primacy of matter so much as it insists on an ultimate determination [of social phenomena] by the mode of production" (Jameson 45). In order to reveal workings of the mode of production, Georg Lukacs invokes the concept of the totality and insists that "Only in [a] context which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a *totality*, can knowledge of the facts hope to become a knowledge of reality" (8). Marxism, then, provides a materialist account of the world that does not equate particularity exclusively with the real and that even encourages the practice of allegorical reading and abstraction. When Douglass and his fellow abolitionists sought to represent the system of slavery rather than individual slaveholders, they too were emphasizing a mode of production and attempting to integrate the individual facts of slavery into a picture of an economic totality and hence were pursuing

⁴⁶ While Goddu never claims that Douglass is himself guilty of such a dematerialization, she consistently claims that the white writers she examines do, even when they appear to be pursuing the same aims as someone like Douglass.

a project that shared many similarities with Marxist practice defined by both Luckacs and Jameson. In this, they were aided by the techniques of gothic fiction. Instead of dematerializing history, however, the gothic allowed Douglass to emphasize a different level of material reality. And while it would be unwise to disregard Goddu's warning about the gothic's tendency to dissolve history into fantasy, we should also be aware of an equally grave danger for anyone wishing to demonstrate the power of transpersonal realities that is posed by a too heavy emphasis upon the particular. As recent historical events such as the collapse of Enron and the sadistic abuses committed by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison have shown, the trope of the "bad apple" or "rogue soldier" acting outside of institutional bounds is often used to prevent a close examination of the institution. Such defenses demonstrate the way in which the material as "the particular" can be used to exculpate what may very well be the consequences of corrupt institutions rather than just depraved individuals.

CHAPTER FOUR

WESTERVELT'S TEETH: THE COMMODIFIED WORLD IN
HAWTHORNE'S *THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE*

“We, who are born into the world’s artificial system, can never adequately know how little in our present state and circumstances is natural, and how much is merely the interpolation of the perverted mind and heart of man. Art has become a second and stronger Nature.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne

“The New Adam and Eve.”

In his preface to his 1852 *The Blithedale Romance*, Nathaniel Hawthorne includes a disclaimer that is bound to disappoint readers who have picked up the novel in the hopes of satisfying a hankering for Transcendentalist gossip. The former Brook Farmer explains that although he had the community in mind when he composed the romance and that he “occasionally availed himself of his actual reminiscences,” the characters found in its pages are nonetheless “entirely fictitious” (1-2). Had he intended for his readers to equate his characters with his “former excellent associates,” he would have committed a “most grievous wrong” considering “how few amiable qualities he distributes among his imaginary progeny” (2). In making such a claim, Hawthorne appears to have been sincere

since he treats his fellow utopians no less magnanimously in the private letters he wrote eleven years earlier while still an active member of the community.⁴⁷ In the same preface, Hawthorne also discourages his readers from trying to divine his opinions concerning the political notions that gave rise to the institution as well, claiming that he does not “put forward the slightest pretensions to illustrate a theory, or elicit a conclusion, favorable or otherwise, in respect to socialism” (1). This proviso, however, is far less persuasive since his narrator, Miles Coverdale, undergoes a disenchantment that mirrors the

⁴⁷ When he describes a man whom his then fiancée, Sophia Peabody has mischievously named Mr. Dismal View, for instance, Hawthorne discovers a humor that belies his dour physiognomy. As he explains, Mr. Dismal View is really not dismal at all “for, if he do not laugh himself, he makes the rest of us laugh continually” (*Selected* 84). This is especially true when he and the other fugitives from the city are at work on a pile of manure, and he “keeps quoting innumerable scraps of Latin, and makes classical allusions, while we are turning over the gold mine; and the contrast between the nature of his employment and the character of his thoughts is irresistibly ludicrous” (*Selected* 84). Hawthorne’s generosity even persists under apparently acrimonious circumstances. Long after agricultural work had lost its Arcadian luster, and he became convinced that he had been deluded to think that his duties would leave him ample time for writing, Hawthorne refrains from maligning his fellow utopians. In a letter dated July 18th and addressed to David Mack, a signatory to the Brook Farm collective, Hawthorne appears to struggle with his resentment over his disappointed expectations. Hoping to correct the mistaken impression that he considered the community’s founder, George Ripley, a hard taskmaster, Hawthorne explains that “I have never felt that I was called upon by *Mr. Ripley* to devote so much of my time to manual labor, as had been done since my residence at Brook Farm... We have never looked upon him as a master, or an employer, but as a fellow laborer on the same terms as ourselves, with no more right to bid us perform any one act of labor, than we have to bid him” (*Selected* 89). Instead, the members of the community owe their arduous labors to “circumstances, which were as much beyond his control as our own” (*Selected* 89). While Hawthorne regrets having spent the summer “with so little enjoyment of nature and my own thoughts,” he nonetheless absolves Ripley of all blame since he “cannot be held responsible for the disagreeable circumstances which cause” his disappointments (89).⁴⁷ Based upon the letters’ generous attitude and the more acerbic portraiture of the novel, it seems safe to conclude that Hawthorne meant what he said when he explained in the preface that though his characters “might have been looked for, at Brook Farm” they “by some accident, never made their appearance there” (3).

disillusionment that Hawthorne voices in his letters. In both the letters and his novel, this loss of faith occurs in tandem with the market economy's infiltration into both Brook Farm and Blithedale. As an experiment in practical Christianity, Brook Farm sought to embody the ideals of the New Testament in a West Roxbury farm by leaving behind New England's commercial world and establishing a life closer to nature, God and the ideal realm he inhabited, a goal that Hawthorne appears to have thought attainable at least near the beginning of his stay. As his tenure at Brook Farm lengthened, however, Hawthorne found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the community's spiritual ends with the gross materiality of its tasks. He is particularly exercised by a mound of manure that he and his fellow Brook-Farmers have labeled the "gold mine." In an especially revealing passage, Hawthorne recognizes the futility of trying to escape the effects of the marketplace via a Transcendentalist retreat into nature: "It is my opinion...that a man's soul may be buried and perish under a dung-heap or in a furrow of the field, just as well as under a pile of money" (*Selected* 87). In equating the metaphorical goldmine with a "pile of money" and imagining that a furrow's powers of entanglement equal those of the marketplace, Hawthorne undermines the distinction separating the agricultural community from the artificial city upon which the success of Brook Farm is predicated.

In many ways the fictional community of Blithedale really does resemble Brook Farm. Like Hawthorne, the novel's narrator, Miles Coverdale, begins the narrative believing in the community's prospects and confident that he and his associates have separated themselves from the artificial world of New England commerce. In time, however, Coverdale loses his faith in Blithedale and the Transcendentalist notions that

have informed its creation, and his crisis of faith is precipitated by the market's infiltration into his utopian community. To represent the intrusion of marketplace artificiality into the pastoral retreat of Blithedale, Hawthorne creates the figure of the mesmerist Westervelt. Although the pastorally minded Coverdale struggles mightily to disown Westervelt and the perspective he represents, Hawthorne, using the gothic figure of the double, makes it clear that the two men are in fact mirror images for each other. In so doing, he mounts a devastating critique of the belief shared by most Transcendentalists that the many ill effects occasioned by America's antebellum economy could be remedied by a return to nature and the eternal truths enshrined therein. More specifically, Hawthorne focuses his skeptical powers on Ralph Waldo Emerson and the theory of "correspondences" he outlines in his foundational work *Nature*.⁴⁸ After revealing the retreat into the natural world to be a dead end, Hawthorne suggests that the social

⁴⁸ The scholarship devoted to Hawthorne's relationship to Emerson and the Transcendentalists in general is fairly extensive. For a review of the work published prior to 1984 see Joel Myerson's *The Transcendentalists: A Review of Research and Criticism*. In advancing my specific claim that Hawthorne has Emerson and his theory of correspondences in mind in *The Blithedale Romance*, I build upon the work of a number of critics. John T. Irwin situates both Emerson's theory and Hawthorne's symbolist practice in the nineteenth century's interest in hieroglyphs and claims that "Hawthorne was skeptical of the ease with which the opaque emblem of the world became transparent for Emerson" (121). For a reading of the motif of grapes within *T.B.R.* as hieroglyphs, see Judy Schaaf Anhorn's "'Gifted Simplicity of Vision.'" My own analysis comes closest to those advanced by James McIntosh, who claims that "in Blithedale [Hawthorne] gives the back of his hand to 'correspondence' whether conceived as an element of style in descriptive writing or as philosophy. All attempts to find symbolic meaning in observed natural detail are targets of Hawthorne's skepticism. He engages in a serious parody of correspondence" (95). According to McIntosh, Hawthorne levels this criticism at Emerson to demonstrate the inadequacy of Emerson's philosophy for bringing order to the incoherence of nineteenth-century life. McIntosh never specifies exactly what the source of this incoherence is except for the diminished relevance of the older cultures of New England. I locate the source of this incoherence in the market revolution.

problems of the antebellum economy can only be addressed with material, rather than transcendental solutions.

The Market, Meaning and Transcendentalism

In the era that witnessed Transcendentalism's initial flourishing and Brook Farm's foundation, the United States underwent an economic revolution that produced a number of changes that reverberated through all levels of American society and culture.

According to Lance Newman, these changes were especially dramatic in

Transcendentalism's New England home where the period between the Revolution and the Civil War saw "Economic and political power that had been relatively dispersed among the merchants, clerics and farmers of colonial New England...consolidated into the hands of the increasingly wealthy owners of commercial and industrial capital" (25).

This concentration of wealth "produced a society increasingly organized around one goal: the pursuit of profit. It was a deeply contradictory society in which spectacular technological innovation and wealth coexisted with new forms of grinding poverty and exploitation" (25). The move toward a market economy also spurred the greatest rate of urbanization in American history: "In 1790, 90 percent of New England's population lived on farms averaging 128 acres, or in small towns of no more than 2500...By 1860, though, one third of the population lived in towns and cities with more than 2500 residents" (Newman 26). As compared with previous generations of Americans who

viewed wage labor as an affront to their yeoman pride, a greater percentage of these urbanites worked for someone else: “from 1800 to 1860, the overall percentage of the population who worked for wages rose from 10 to 40 percent” (26).⁴⁹ These changes in the economic base were accompanied by some profound transformations in the domain of culture as well. As Charles Sellers explains, subsistence farmers had traditionally relied upon a “vast repertoire of orally transmitted tales, ballads, jingles, and aphorisms” that “resonated folk conviction that the fruitful earth and all natural objects were alive and filled with spirits and magical possibilities...The spirits and demons that populated their landscape and awed their children they accommodated as angels, devils, and witches to the Christianity they formally professed” (29). Such animistic thinking was ill adapted to the emerging economic order and soon found itself supplanted by the “marketlike, self-regulating, mechanistic cosmos of Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke” wherein “rational empiricists could maximize hedonic income by manipulating inert matter” (Sellers 30). Sellers’ claim that the Enlightenment model of a universe composed entirely of “inert matter” displaced the folk beliefs of the American farmer bears a striking resemblance to Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s thesis that the “program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy” (3). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment accomplished this disenchantment using the same principle of equivalence underlying commodification, which “makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities. To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately

⁴⁹ Eric Foner describes the persistence of such yeoman attitudes through the end of the nineteenth century in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*.

to the one, becomes illusion...Unity is the slogan from Parmenides to Russell. The destruction of gods and qualities alike is insisted upon" (8). When Adorno and Horkheimer speak of "the many mythic figures" being "brought to a common denominator, and reduced to the human subject" and "The multiplicity of forms" being "reduced to position and arrangement, history to fact, things to matter," they describe the very transformation that Sellers refers to when he speaks of angels, devils and witches being converted into "inert matter" (7). Thus, in addition to producing a number of radical social changes, the market revolution also replaced a belief system that invested the world with spiritual significance with a commodifying gaze that converted the universe's irreducible particularity into units of exchangeable quantity.

Critics have long recognized that these transformations horrified the Transcendentalists, who were nearly unanimous in their rejection of commercial society and its values. According to Perry Miller, for instance, Transcendentalism represents "the first outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization" (ix). Similarly, in his recent history of the movement, Philip F. Gura writes that "from their emergence in the early 1830s...at least through the early 1850s, [the Transcendentalists] cultivated a vibrant openness to social and cultural ideals that directly challenged the materialism and insularity that were already hallmarks of American culture" (xiv). Even Sellers, who refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson as the "high priest of bourgeois/ middle class culture," nonetheless acknowledges "the many transcendentalists who wrenched their lives into variously resisting the bourgeois order" (380). Among these less complacent members of the movement, Sellers includes George Ripley who "quit the

pulpit for communal socialism,” George Bancroft who “eschewed both pulpit and experimental education for Locofoco history and politics” and Margaret Fuller who “gallantly bore the burdens of smart womanhood through schoolteaching, philosophical ‘conversations’ for self-improving ladies, literary editorship of Greeley’s *Tribune*, feminist manifesto, Italian revolution, and scandalous romance cut short by shipwreck”(380-381). As Sellers’ thumbnail sketch indicates, the transcendentalists adopted a variety of programs for resisting the capitalist order they opposed. These various programs were united, however, by the common belief “that the way to redeem society was to get back in touch with the divinely ordained laws of nature...Once they had been moved, the Transcendentalists’ first instinct was to look beyond the often brutal realities of class society into a realm of moralistic abstractions. But they consistently returned to this world, bearing programs—often ill conceived, always heroic—for redemption. Always the programs were based on a belief in the restorative discipline of nature” (Newman 42-43). In the Transcendentalist mind, the deepening inequality, rapid urbanization, and growth of wage-labor were linked to the disenchantment of the natural world described by Sellers, Horkheimer and Adorno. To remedy the many social ills they saw growing around them, the Transcendentalists sought to reacquaint themselves with the eternal laws of nature and realign their nation’s institutions with these.

Ralph Waldo Emerson provides perhaps the most famous statement of this belief in his Transcendentalist manifesto *Nature* published in 1836. Emerson begins the essay by distinguishing rather gothically between an eternal natural world and an inherited past defined by its artificiality: “Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the

fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism” (*Essays and Lectures* 7). While the members of his own age rely too heavily upon tradition, the ancestors to whom they defer were truly original: “The foregoing generations beheld God and Nature face to face; we through their eyes” (*Essays and Lectures* 7). After placing both the past and the present at opposite ends of the nature/ artifice dichotomy, Emerson poses a series of rhetorical questions intended to rouse his contemporaries from their languorous devotion to the past and motivate them to attend more closely to the natural world:

Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us and not the history of theirs...why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields.

There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. (*Essays and Lectures* 7)

In Emerson’s eyes, the past signifies far more than just blank antecedence. Instead, it is the *dead* past represented by the “sepulchres of the fathers” or by their “dry bones.” That’s why the past and its artificiality are treated in somewhat gothic terms. Emerson opposes this gothic past to nature, and he concludes the passage by exhorting his readers to begin the work of founding a culture upon nature’s everlasting truths that is appropriate to their age: “Let us demand our own works and laws and worship” (*Essays and Lectures* 7). Both this passage and the work as a whole share a number of

characteristics with the traditional American jeremiad: after identifying the degenerate state into which its readers have fallen, it contrasts them with their heroic forbears and outlines a program intended to help its readers mend their ways. *Nature* differs from more typical instances of the form, however, when it equates degeneracy with an unwavering obedience to a gothicized past which it associates with artificiality. In place of such servility, Emerson recommends that his readers reacquaint themselves with the natural world. As such, he adopts the Jeremiad to Transcendentalist ends, providing the perfect vehicle for the movement's theory of declension and regeneration.

In a later portion of the work, Emerson uses this theory of decline to explain the corruption of language, to which he offers his theory of "correspondences" as a remedy. Emerson begins the section titled "Language" by identifying three axioms upon which his theory is built: "1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit" (*Essays and Lectures* 21). To illustrate the first principle, Emerson traces the etymology of a number of words that denote certain moral qualities and that originally referred to some aspect of the physical world. Thus "*Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression* the crossing of a *line*; *supercilious* the *raising of the eyebrow*" (*Essays and Lectures* 20). Valuable though they are, Emerson claims that such correspondences constitute "our least debt to nature" (*Essays and Lectures* 20). Of greater importance is the second principle that claims that it is not "words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic" and that "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the

mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch" (*Essays and Lectures* 20). In pristine cultures that have not been defiled by cities, language remains firmly anchored to both natural and spiritual facts. As Emerson suggests in the introduction, however, people who fetishize tradition often find themselves in a reflexive culture disconnected from nature's sanative influence. This retrogression usually occurs when a nation's writers defer to their antecedents and thereby do more than write insipid prose but also corrupt their fellow men: "When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise,-- and duplicity and falsehood, take place of simplicity of truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will, is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not" (*Essays and Lectures* 22). Even the optimist, Emerson believes that such problems have their remedy since "wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things" (*Essays and Lectures* 23).

In advancing his theory of correspondences, Emerson reinvests the natural world with the spiritual significance of which it had been stripped by the commodifying Enlightenment gaze and thereby reverses the process of disenchantment described above. In the words of Michael T. Gilmore, Emerson attempts to "salvage the world as commodity by infusing it with Soul" (25). The sage adumbrates this intention when he contrasts the commodifying gaze of the wood cutter with the regenerate vision of a Transcendentalist. Where the former sees a mere "stick of timber," the latter apprehends

“the tree of the poet” (*Essays and Lectures* 11). When someone like Emerson looks at a forest, he differs from the woodcutter in that he does not abstract it into x amount of board feet; instead, he discovers “the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old...Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right” (*Essays and Lectures* 11). Emerson’s protégé Henry David Thoreau contrasts these two visual modes even more emphatically. After providing a richly textured description of Flint’s Pond, Thoreau inveighs against “the poverty of our nomenclature,” when he considers the identity of the Flint who lent his name to the body of water. Speaking of some “skin-flint who loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar, or a bright cent,” Thoreau imagines that such a man would think “only of its money value” and regret “only that it was not English hay or cranberry meadow” (478-479). The pond “did not turn his mill, and it was no *privilege* to him to behold it” (479). Thoreau claims that he respects “not his labors, his farm where every thing has its price; who would carry the landscape, who would carry his God, to market, if he could get any thing for him” (479). On such a man’s farm “nothing grows free, whose fields bear no crops, whose meadows no flowers, whose trees no fruits, but dollars; who loves not the beauty of his fruits, whose fruits are not ripe for him till they are turned to dollars. Give me the poverty that enjoys true wealth” (479). With their concern over the effects of commodification and their desire to view the natural world as something other than exploitable material, passages such as these provide a hint as to what Emerson means

when he defines Transcendentalism as “idealism as it appears in 1842,” especially when he speaks of the way that idealism “falling on Unitarian and commercial times makes the peculiar shades of Idealism which we know” (*Essays and Lectures* 193-198).

Hawthorne’s satirical object in *The Blithedale Romance*, Brook Farm, represents a practical application of some of the ideas that Emerson articulates in *Nature*. The community’s belief in “the restorative discipline of nature” is partially revealed in the letters that the community’s founder George Ripley exchanged with Emerson when he tried to enlist the latter in his socialist experiment. Emerson, of course, declined, and he did so in terms befitting the radical individualism, which he professed, explaining that “all I shall solidly do, I must do alone” (Myerson, *Transcendentalism* 311-312). Despite their differences, though, both men were committed to a similar set of goals and a similar set of theoretical assumptions on how to achieve them. For instance, both Emerson and Ripley hoped to mollify the class divisions that had hardened during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Emerson sought to achieve this end by “acquiring habits of regular manual labor, and in ameliorating or abolishing in [his] house the condition of hired menial service” and in coming “one step nearer to nature than this usage permits” (Myerson, *Transcendentalism* 312). In like manner, Ripley explains that his community will strive “to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual” (Myerson, *Transcendentalism* 308). When Emerson speaks of his desire to “come one step nearer to *nature*” and Ripley says he hopes to “insure a more *natural* union between intellectual and manual labor,” they reveal a common belief in the

restorative power of the natural world. These same principles are also on display in an article that Hawthorne's sister in law, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, wrote for Transcendentalism's principal journal *The Dial*. In the article, Peabody expresses a distrust of urban life that is common to many Transcendentalists when she asserts that cities "originated not in love but in war. It was war that drove men together in multitudes, and compelled them to stand so close and build walls around them" (11). She further claims that cities deprive their inhabitants of the "sensuous apprehension of Creation—the great symbol of God" (12). Faced with such an insalubrious environment and "reacting from different social evils," the members of Brook Farm have felt it "necessary to come out in some degree from the world and form themselves into a community of property, so far as to exclude competition and the ordinary rules of trade" (Peabody 11). The community members have chosen the agricultural life because it is "the most direct and simple in relation to nature" and because it brings the material world one step closer to the ideal: "A true life, although it aims beyond the highest star, is redolent of the healthy earth. The perfume of clover lingers about it. The lowing of the cattle is the natural bass to the melody of human voices" (Peabody 11). Texts such as these suggest that both the residents of Brook Farm and their sympathetic observers imagined the community as a practical application of the Transcendentalist belief in the restorative discipline of nature that Newman describes.

Artificiality and the Gothic

In their desire to reunite words with things and things with spiritual ideals, the Transcendentalists display a nostalgia which Jean Baudrillard claims has been common to westerners living during the past four hundred years. According to Baudrillard, this nostalgia yearns for a time when a “magical obligation...kept the sign chained to the real,” and that preceded our own, in which “capital has liberated the sign” from such naiveté “to deliver it over to pure circulation” (60). Faced with such Transcendentalist longings, Hawthorne found the perfect vehicle for critiquing such nostalgia within the gothic, which tends to foreground rather than repress the artificiality of modern life and the divorce of sign from substance behind it. As Jerrold E. Hogle indicates, the first novel to bill itself as a “Gothic Story,” Horace Walpole’s 1764 *The Castle of Otranto* is composed of one fakery after another:

a counterfeited pedigree, at least two counterfeited authorships, a place-name that was more a word than a known location, a use of symbols from what many now saw as a counterfeited and outmoded form of Christianity...All of this, moreover, is perversely fitting to a ‘Story’ that sees the cause of all the hauntings in it to be a counterfeited will that apparently left the Castle of Otranto to the grandfather of the current prince, even though that grandfather was only the chamberlain and ultimately the poisoner of the Castle’s true founder. (Hogle, “Ghost,” 26)

Drawing upon the work of Baudrillard, Hogle argues that, by incorporating this pervasive artificiality, Walpole's novel and its progeny provide "a haunting announcement of...the increasing economic, ideological, and psychological gap—the gap of the counterfeit—between visible signs and their buried cultural foundations" ("Ghost" 33). As a genre, the gothic is well positioned to do this because it originated in post-Renaissance England, which witnessed "the first irreversible and widespread effulgence of a truly mercantile or pre-capitalist economy" (Hogle, "Ghost" 30). In a similar vein, Andrea Henderson argues that the gothic may not have fared especially well among middle-class critics because it reveals an embarrassing truth about the contingent nature of bourgeois identity: "The gothic novel's formal features display too openly the way the capitalist class as a whole is in many ways an upstart class whose hegemony is not, in fact, grounded in utility, sincerity and nature" but that it may in fact be "little more than a 'mercurial exchange value or 'bubble,'" a hollow puppet, a woman, a commodity, a coin." (240). Even in its less recognizably gothic moments, as when specters step out of portraits, the literary mode nonetheless remains obsessed with the widening gap between the modern cultural world and the material universe. Terry Castle argues, for instance, that Ann Radcliffe's wildly popular *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) owed much of its success to the fact that it "encapsulated new structures of feeling, a new model of human relations, a new phenomenology of self and other" (125). Building on Philippe Ariès' claim that Westerners have sought to separate themselves from the physical fact of death since medieval times, Castle argues that *Udolpho* exemplifies this cultural tendency in what she refers to as the "spectralization of the other." As Castle demonstrates, characters

within Radcliffe's novel tend to value mental images of people above people themselves. They do this because their memories, unlike the people themselves, seem immune to the vicissitudes of death and decay. Out of such insecurities are born romantic reverie and an attenuated relationship to the material world. As each of these critics ably demonstrates, the gothic foregrounds the artificiality of modern life. As such, I find it ideally suited to Hawthorne's task of demonstrating the futility of the Transcendentalist project for overcoming marketplace artificiality via a return to the natural world and its eternal truths.

To critique the Transcendentalist notions upon which Brook Farm was founded, Hawthorne had a suitable model in the Americanized gothic, which had long adopted a skeptical attitude toward the assumptions of the American Enlightenment. Like the Transcendentalists who succeeded them, Enlightenment thinkers looked to the natural world as a source of eternal truth that could be used to counteract the mistaken notions and the inherited artificiality of the past. This attitude is especially prominent in Thomas Paine's 1794 *The Age of Reason*, which seeks to distinguish between true and false forms of religion. According to Paine, the religious err when they incorrectly apply the term "revelation" to the written scriptures upon which monotheistic belief is founded. For Paine, revelation refers to "something communicated *immediately* from God to man" (667). As he demonstrates, though, the scriptures that generally pass for revelation fail to meet the requirements of this simple definition, for revelation can be revelation only to the person to which it is directly revealed. Once someone transmits the revelation to another, it ceases to be revelation and instead becomes hearsay: "Revelation is

necessarily limited to the first communication. After this, it is only an account of something which that person says was a revelation made to him” (668). Paine is particularly skeptical when speaking of the written scriptures, since these amount to nothing more than hearsay multiplied. Speaking of the Virgin Mary, Paine explains that any reasonable person would require greater proof than a woman’s “bare word” that she was with child “without any cohabitation with a man” (668). In the case of the New Testament, though, readers are deprived even of this “for neither Joseph nor Mary wrote any such matter themselves. It is only reported by others that *they said so*. It is hearsay upon hearsay” (668-669). After impugning the credibility of the scriptures, Paine goes a step further and claims that the “continually progressive change to which the meaning of words is subject, the want of an universal language which renders translations necessary, the errors to which translations are again subject” render human language an unreliable “vehicle for the word of God.—The word of God exists in something else” (680). That something else is the natural world. As Paine explains

It is only in the CREATION that all our ideas and conceptions of a *word of God* can unite. The creation speaketh an universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they be. It is an ever existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations

and to all worlds; and this *word of God* reveals to man all that is necessary for man to know of God. (687)

In his insistence upon the sovereignty of the natural world, which resists all forms of human artifice, Paine professes a faith that shares much with that espoused by Emerson. Like the Transcendentalists, Paine also believed that human morality could be improved through the study of the natural world and hence the divine word of God. After recalling from memory the 19th Psalm which speaks of the sublimity of the Universe and the almighty hand that fashioned it, Paine asks the rhetorical question “What more does man want to know than that the hand, or power, that made these things is divine, is omnipotent. Let him believe this, with the force it is impossible to repel if he permits his reason to act, and his rule of moral life will follow of course” (689). Thus, despite the epistemological differences that separated Enlightenment empiricism from Transcendentalist idealism, both movements placed their faith in the natural world. As a consequence, the literary skeptics that they each inspired could exploit the movements’ common weaknesses using similar techniques.

To critique such Enlightenment optimism, Charles Brockden Brown published America’s first gothic novel *Wieland*. Set in the period between the French and Indian War and the American War for Independence, the novel tells the story of the Wieland family, focusing particularly on the brother and sister Theodore and Clara. After their father, a religious enthusiast, dies under mysterious circumstances in the temple he has built for his devotions, the children inherit his estate and enjoy an ideal upbringing

according to eighteenth-century standards: they are raised by an aunt who “seldom deviated into either extreme of rigour or lenity” and who provided them with instruction “in most branches of useful knowledge” while preserving them “from the corruption and tyranny of colleges and boarding schools” (22). In addition to this fine education, the Wielands also practice a religion of which Paine would undoubtedly have approved since “it was the product of lively feelings, excited by [their] own happiness, and by the grandeur of external nature” (24). During the course of their childhood, the Wielands become acquainted with Henry and Catharine Pleyel. When he reaches his majority, Theodore marries Catharine and the three move onto the estate Theodore has inherited from his father. Apropos of their neoclassical inclinations, the Wielands rededicate their father’s Calvinist temple to the goddess Reason and furnish it with a bust of Cicero reputedly modeled on an original unearthed around Modena.

All appears to go well with this group until they begin to hear mysterious voices on the grounds of their pastoral retreat. Theodore first hears one of these disembodied voices while walking from his house to the temple where he has left a letter from his wife. The voice sounds like Catharine’s and warns him that he is in danger and to go no farther on the path to the temple. When Theodore returns to the company of his wife and friends, they deny that she has left the room. The characters hear these voices a number of further times. On one occasion, the voice informs Pleyel that a woman he loves is dead and on another wakes Clara from a dream in which her brother beckons her forward, warning her to avoid the abyss to which he summons her. Because of their admonitory nature, Clara imagines that the voice must belong to something akin to divinity: “Here

were proofs of a sensible and intelligent existence, which could not be denied. Here was information obtained and imparted by means unquestionably super-human” (52). Clara is also convinced of the voices’ benevolent nature: “I was impressed with the belief of mysterious, but not of malignant agency. Hitherto nothing had occurred to persuade me that this airy minister was busy to evil rather than to good purposes. On the contrary, the idea of superior virtue had always been associated in my mind with superior power. The warnings that had thus been heard appeared to have been prompted by beneficent intentions” (52). After these apparently helpful warnings though, the mysterious voices begin to speak in far more sinister tones: obeying what he imagines to be a divine injunction, Theodore murders his wife, children and a young woman whom he has taken into his household. Whether good or bad, the voices’ first appearance coincides with the arrival of a young man named Carwin. As it turns out, Carwin, rather than any supernatural agent, is responsible for at least some of them: while he denies responsibility for the voice that enjoined Theodore to murder, he acknowledges having warned him away from the temple and Clara away from her brother. Given the fact that the Wielands practiced a form of religion that derives its truths from nature rather than the revealed word of scripture, I believe that Brown might well have had something like Paine’s deistic religion in mind when he created this archetypal American family. In this first American gothic, then, Brown creates a world in which the word of God embodied in nature, can, contrary to Paine’s claims, be counterfeited by someone like Carwin who can skillfully assume a variety of identities and voices and whom Clara imagines as having made a Faustian compact to gain the supernatural aid of a demon (205-206). Thus, from

its very inception, the American gothic, like its British counterpart, has been preoccupied with the artificiality of the modern world. As such, it provided Hawthorne with a set of thematic concerns and characters that were well suited to his own aims of critiquing the Transcendentalist discipline of nature.

Hawthorne and the Transcendentalist Discipline of Nature

As part of his efforts to critique the Transcendentalists, Hawthorne creates a first-person narrator who is initially invested in their beliefs. As a Transcendentalist, Coverdale has read several of the movement's principal texts and is personally acquainted with one of its most prominent members. While recovering from a debilitating cold, Coverdale explains that he "read interminably in Mr. Emerson's Essays, the Dial, Carlyle's works, George Sands' romances, (lent me by Zenobia,) and other books which one or another of the brethren or sisterhood had brought with them" (52). During this same period, he receives a letter from his friend Margaret Fuller. Clearly, Coverdale's interaction with the Transcendentalists and their ideas precedes his arrival at Blithedale, and he undoubtedly has joined out of sympathy with their aims. In addition to such explicit links, Coverdale also reveals his indebtedness to the movement when he figures his embarkation in terms that both Emerson and Peabody would have undoubtedly approved. As the narrator and his companions begin their journey to Blithedale, they remain for a time within the confines of an urban landscape that cramps their overgrown magnanimity. Recalling the episode, Coverdale remembers "how the buildings on either side, seemed to press too closely upon us, insomuch that our mighty hearts found barely enough room to throb

between them” (11). In addition to producing such claustrophobic effects, the city can also defile that archetype of purity, the snow, which looked to the poet’s eye “inexpressibly dreary, (I had almost called it dingy,) coming down through an atmosphere of city smoke” (11). Against such sordidness, nature’s purifying abilities are helpless within the city. No sooner has this dingy snow landed than it is “molded into the impress of somebody’s patched boot or over-shoe” (11). As the pilgrims distance themselves from the city, however, nature’s restorative influence begins to predominate: “But--when we left the pavements, and our muffled hoof-tramps beat upon a desolate extent of country-road, and were effaced by an unfettered blast, as soon as stamped—then there was better air to breathe. Air, that had not been spoken into words of falsehood, formality, and error, like all the air of the dusty city!” (11). Thus does Coverdale imagine his journey as a flight from the corrupt city into the refuge of nature, a narrative choice that aligns his early views with those of the Transcendentalist Emerson.

Upon arriving at the community, Coverdale situates his narrative, which is, in fact, an instance of a very old story, the retreat to pastoral nature as to a recovered Eden, within a specifically nineteenth-century context that transforms it into a flight from the market revolution.⁵⁰ When he and his fellow sojourners arrive at the farmhouse, Coverdale claims that he “felt so much the more, that we had transported ourselves a

⁵⁰ As a number of critics have noted, *Blithedale* fits within the paradigm of the pastoral, the earliest examples of which occur in the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia, making the genre as old as writing itself. On the pastoral’s antiquity see Leo Marx’s “Pastoralism in America.” On the pastoral presence within *Blithedale* see Anhorn’s “‘Gifted Simplicity of Vision.’” and Pearce’s “Day Dream and Fact.” For a discussion of the American tendency to confuse this literary mode with reality, a tendency of which Transcendentalism is not entirely innocent, see Leo Marx’s foundational *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*.

world-wide distance from the system of society that shackled us at breakfast time” (13). He experiences this amplified feeling of separation when he compares the fuel within the community’s fireplace with the coal grate in his apartment. Unlike the fissile coal, which is easily divided into saleable quantities, the farmhouse’s fire is built with “great, rough logs and knotty limbs, and splintered fragments of an oak-tree” (13). Such rough-hewn timber signifies the community’s withdrawal from the market economy “since those crooked and unmanageable boughs could never be measured into merchantable cords for the market” (13). The coal and wood also evoke a number of secondary connotations as well. While the unmarketable wood is drawn from organic nature, the coal has been dug from the earth. As such it carries the same chthonic associations that the “dry bones” and the “tombs of the fathers” do within Emerson’s descriptions of the past. In fact, like the previous generations Emerson describes, this petrified vegetation had once encountered the sun firsthand. Having become fossilized, though, it does not fit with the current age and will undoubtedly cast a Plutonian glow on those who rely upon it rather than the unmanageable oaks, which provide a more immediate, and therefore healthier, relation to the natural world. Through this emblematic mineral, Hawthorne subtly links the market to the underworld and in the process begins to gothicize the commercial order.

In addition to mapping the events of his own life onto the movement’s narrative of decline and regeneration, Coverdale also performs the quintessentially Transcendentalist act of discerning spiritual truths in the material world using Emerson’s theory of correspondences. In the passage discussed above, where the narrator notices that the dingy snow can do little to rejuvenate the corrupt city, he invests this mundane

event with moral significance: “Thus the track of an old conventionalism was visible on what was freshest from the sky” (11). He performs a similar act of interpretation after arriving at the farmhouse and momentarily enjoying the warmth of the fire. As he looks out the windows of his refuge, Coverdale reads the gathering darkness as typifying the doubts that haunt those who embark on a project as bold as their own:

there was a look of gloom, as the twilight fell silently and sadly out of the sky, its gray or sable flakes intermingling themselves with the fast descending snow. The storm, in its evening aspect, was decidedly dreary. It seemed to have arisen for our especial behoof; a symbol of the cold, desolate, distrustful phantoms that invariably haunt the mind, on the eve of adventurous enterprises, to warn us back within the boundaries of ordinary life. (18)

Even when not performing such explicitly typological readings, Coverdale nonetheless tends to treat materiality as a way-station en route to world of the ideal. Imagining the cheerful appearance that their fire projects through the windows, Coverdale speaks of a “solitary traveler” who finds “nothing so pleasant and encouraging...on a stormy night, as a flood of firelight, seen amid the gloom. These ruddy window-panes cannot fail to cheer the hearts of all who look at them” (25). From this description of an imaginary wayfarer, Coverdale vaults to the figurative level, speaking of the metaphorical fire they have lit as a spectacle for the world. Referring once more to the window-panes, he asks his fellow utopians “Are they not warm and bright with the beacon-fire which we have

kindled for humanity?" (25). Apparently, when Coverdale looks upon the physical universe, he finds a world laden with spiritual meaning. Even when he encounters sights that might oppress another's spirits, the poet heeds these stern admonitions which always seem to point him in the right direction: when the farmhouse is enshrouded with the gloom that typifies his own misapprehensions, he can rest assured that "Nature, whose laws I had broken in various artificial ways" was then comporting "herself towards me as a strict, but loving mother, who uses the rod upon her little boy for his naughtiness and then gives him a smile, a kiss, and some pretty playthings, to console the urchin for her severity" (62).

While Coverdale may begin the novel convinced that Blithedale has escaped the influence of the artificial city, Hawthorne is less sanguine about the community's having achieved this goal, and he registers this skepticism by making it apparent that Blithedale's members have imported the urban world into their pastoral retreat. Hawthorne associates the values of urban life with the character of Zenobia. Upon his first encounter with her, Coverdale describes her in terms that waver between emphasizing her apparent simplicity and a latent sophistication that such ingenuousness may simply disguise. On the night of his arrival, the poet explains that Zenobia "was dressed as simply as possible...Her hair was put up rather soberly and primly, without curls, or other ornament, except a single flower" (15). So far, so good. Zenobia appears perfectly suited to her rustic surroundings: her clothing is simple and her coiffure borders on the austere. When Coverdale describes the single flower in greater detail, though, he suggests that this simplicity may be a thin veneer that skillfully conceals a latent

affectation, since it “was an exotic, of rare beauty, and as fresh as if the hot-house gardener had just clipped it from the stem...so brilliant, so rare, so costly as it must have been, and yet enduring only for a day, it was more indicative of the pride and pomp which had a luxuriant growth in Zenobia’s character, than if a great diamond had sparkled among her hair” (15). Coverdale detects this artificiality once more when Zenobia reenters the room. As she does, she glances at her reflection in a mirror, notices that the flower “had grown rather languid,” and casts it as “unconcernedly as a village girl would throw away a faded violet” (21). According to Coverdale, this act of unselfconscious self-consciousness produces a “singular, but irresistible effect—the presence of Zenobia caused our heroic enterprise to show like an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, a counterfeit arcadia in which we grown-up men and women were making a play-day of the years that were given us to live in” (21). In her seemingly insignificant act of artifice, Zenobia reveals the persistence of her own artificiality, and, since she is a representative member, that of the entire community as well. After offering these many hints that the Blithedaleers have not in fact left the city’s artificiality behind, Coverdale describes his first night of fitful sleep and claims that had “I made a record of that night’s half waking dreams, it is my belief that it would have anticipated several of the chief incidents of this narrative, including a dim shadow of its catastrophe” (38). He then provides an ominous picture of what greeted his eyes as he looked out the window during one of these moments: “Starting up in bed, at length, I saw that the storm was past, and the moon was shining on the snowy landscape, which looked like a lifeless copy of the world in marble” (38). Tied as it is to the narrative’s ultimate catastrophe, this vision

undoubtedly foreshadows the night of Zenobia's suicide, an event that transforms this vibrant woman into a refractory corpse, which Coverdale treats as a grotesque culmination of the novel's many instances of artificiality. As Silas Foster struggles to force Zenobia's body into a respectable state, Coverdale imagines that had Zenobia anticipated the gaucherie of her death pose, she would "no more have committed the dreadful act, than have exhibited herself to a public assembly in a badly-fitting garment!" (236). From such a conjecture, Coverdale concludes that the "world has come to an awfully sophisticated pass, when, after a certain degree of acquaintance with it, we cannot even put ourselves to death in whole-hearted simplicity" (237). At the same time, the description of a world duplicated in marble points to the capitalist order that was earlier signified by the coal that Coverdale opposes to the unmarketable wood in the community's fireplace. Transformed by the light of the moon, the once familiar landscape loses its spiritual significance and resembles the devitalized world of inert matter that Horkheimer and Adorno associate with commodification. Whether it is through his repeated invocations of the theater or his encounter with the masqued revelers in the forest, Coverdale repeatedly suggests that the world has indeed "come to an awfully sophisticated pass." These many instances of artificiality all contribute to the impression that so long as a person keeps company with his fellow human beings, the odds of his ever realizing the Transcendentalist dream of reuniting words with things remains elusive. He may indeed find himself unable to escape the gothic universe defined by the "ghost of the counterfeit," where specters emerge from portraits and New England landscapes are turned to stone.

But if the community does not fulfill its promise of becoming the nineteenth-century equivalent of John Winthrop's city upon a hill, then perhaps its members might adopt Emerson's dictum that "all I shall solidly do, I must do alone" as their motto and align themselves with nature on an individual basis.⁵¹ In the *Blithedale* chapter titled "The Wood Path," Hawthorne allows Coverdale to do just that when he places him at the center of an experience which reads as though it were scripted by the principles articulated in *Nature*. The chapter's indebtedness to Emerson is indicated from the very beginning when Coverdale pines for a vacation. Hoping to "get the ache of too constant labor out of [his] bones, and to relieve [his] spirit of the irksomeness of a settled routine," Coverdale takes a holiday, which he anticipates spending "all alone, from breakfast-time to twilight in the deepest wood seclusion that lay anywhere around us," explaining that "Though fond of society, I was so constituted as to need these occasional retirements, even in a life like that of Blithedale, which was itself characterized by a remoteness from the world" (89). In removing himself from the semi-isolated community, Coverdale heeds one of *Nature*'s chief prescriptions. There Emerson recommends a radical form of solitude as the starting point for any communion with the natural world: "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone,

⁵¹ In his essay "Emerson, Hawthorne and *The Blithedale Romance*," Gustaaf Van Cromphout argues persuasively that like Emerson, Hawthorne believed that any ameliorative efforts that concentrated on the reform of institutions were doomed to failure unless they were preceded by a reformation of the human heart. In a sense, I agree with Cromphout. My argument differs in that I read *The Blithedale Romance* as a critique on what Newman has termed the "restorative discipline of nature" common to all Transcendentalists whether they practiced Emersonian self-reliance or were reformers like Ripley.

let him look to the stars” (*Essays and Lectures* 9). Coverdale increases this intellectual debt when he borrows one of Emerson’s favorite figures: “Unless renewed by a yet farther withdrawal towards the inner circle of self-communion, I lost the better part of my individuality” (89). The phrase “inner circle of self-communion,” echoes both the epigraph of *Nature*, which speaks of “A subtle chain of countless rings,” and Emerson’s “Circles,” which places the self at the center of a universe of concentric circles: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end” (*Essays and Lectures* 403).⁵² After laying this foundation, Coverdale once again uses Emerson’s theory of correspondences to discern moral truths embedded in the physical landscape. As he makes his way through the wood, the poet searches “for some side aisle, that should admit [him] into the innermost sanctuary of this green cathedral; just as, in human acquaintanceship, a casual opening sometimes lets us, all of a sudden, into the long sought intimacy of a mysterious heart” (90). By referring to the forest as a “green cathedral,” Coverdale transforms the wood into a pantheistic temple and quickly interprets the revelations offered by this book of nature: a break in the forest corresponds to an entrée into a more intimate level within a human relationship. The identification between Coverdale and Emerson nears perfection when the poet describes the reverie into which he falls in the presence of such spiritual truths. In perhaps one of *Nature*’s best known passages, Emerson recounts the “perfect exhilaration” he achieves while “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddle, at twilight, under a clouded sky” (*Essays and Lectures* 10). This crossing leads to an ecstatic

⁵² For an alternative, though not necessarily contradictory read of circular and spherical figures in Hawthorne’s work see Dryden’s *Nathaniel Hawthorne* especially pgs. 60-68.

experience wherein the Transcendentalist communes with both the natural world and the “Universal Being” that lies behind it. Immersed in this experience, Emerson claims that “all mean egotism vanishes” and that he becomes “a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance” (*Essays and Lectures* 10). Although he expresses himself in far more pedestrian terms, Coverdale portrays a similar experience that promises spiritual rebirth through the momentary loss of self: “So much was I absorbed in my reflections—or rather, in my mood, the substance of which was yet too shapeless to be termed thought—that footsteps rustled on the leaves, and a figure passed by, almost without impressing either the sound or sight upon my consciousness” (90). As he searches for an appropriate noun with which to characterize his mental state, the aspiring Emersonian initially speaks of his being completely absorbed in his “reflections.” Yet, as a word that implies an internal spectator who takes thoughts themselves as his object, reflection suggests a level of self-consciousness inconsistent with this experience, and Coverdale quickly opts for a word that indicates no such observer, choosing instead “mood,” a noun that comes much closer to Emerson’s disappearance of “all mean egotism” or to his “transparent eye-ball.” Unlike his intellectual model, though, Coverdale’s loss of self does not result in his merging with the “currents of the Universal Being.” Instead, his experience is interrupted before any such transcendence can occur, and his narrator’s hopes of practicing the discipline of “nature” in any form start to unravel.

No sooner does the fugitive poet achieve his elevated spiritual state than he is dragged back into the sordid realm of the finite by an emissary from the commodified world of the city, the mesmerist Westervelt. After describing his fleeting moment of transcendence, Coverdale introduces the obstreperous person who interrupts it: "A moment afterwards, I heard a voice at a little distance behind me, speaking so sharply and impertinently that it made a complete discord with my spiritual state, and caused the latter to vanish as abruptly as when you thrust a finger into a soap bubble" (90). As might be expected, Coverdale is completely nettled by Westervelt's appearance, especially when the mesmerist presumes to call him friend. After an initial fit of petulance, though, Coverdale becomes far more preoccupied with the incongruity between the dapper interloper and his rustic surroundings. In place of the wild man he expects, Coverdale encounters a citified dandy whom the poet describes as "young, seemingly a little under thirty, of a tall and well-developed figure and as handsome a man as ever I beheld" (91). The mesmerist complements these good looks with smart attire: "He was rather carelessly, but well and fashionably dressed... There was a gold chain exquisitely wrought, across his vest. I never saw a smoother or whiter gloss than that upon his shirt bosom, which had a pin in it, set with a gem that glittered, in the leafy shadow where he stood, like a living tip of fire. He carried a stick with a wooden head, carved in vivid imitation of a serpent" (92). All of these details define Westervelt in terms of a general artificiality, but when Coverdale describes his hair, beard and moustache as "coal-black," however, he links him to a particular type of artificiality: commodification. When Coverdale opposes the coal he burns in his apartment to the community's unmarketable

firewood, he treats it as the emblem of the gothicized market system he has left behind. In using the adjective “coal-black” to describe Westervelt, Coverdale thus links him to marketplace artificiality, making him a sort of commodified man. Given these connotations, Westervelt’s arrival signifies far more than just an annoying interruption. Instead, it announces the infiltration of the commodity form into an apparently pristine area of nature and thereby demonstrates the futility of the Transcendentalist project of trying to escape the ill effects of the market revolution via a return to the natural world.

As the chapter proceeds, Hawthorne consolidates the link between Westervelt and the world of commodities. After asking about Zenobia and receiving a peremptory response, Westervelt turns “aside his face, for an instant, with a brief laugh,” which Coverdale interprets “as a noteworthy expression of his character” (93). Then, after Westervelt has drawn a rather unflattering portrait of the reformer Hollingsworth, he once again bursts into his characteristic laughter:

Here the stranger seemed to be so much amused with his sketch of Hollingsworth’s character and purposes, that he burst into a fit of merriment, of the same nature as the brief metallic laugh already alluded to, but immensely prolonged and enlarged, In the excess of his delight, he opened his mouth wide, and disclosed a gold band around the upper part of his teeth; thereby making it apparent that every one of his brilliant grinders and incisors was a sham. This discovery affected me very oddly. I felt as if the whole man were a moral and physical humbug; his wonderful beauty of face, for aught I knew, might be

removable like a mask; and tall and comely as his figure looked, he was perhaps but a wizened little elf, gray and decrepit, with nothing genuine about him save the wicked expression of his grin. The fantasy of his spectral character so wrought upon me, together with the contagion of his strange mirth on my sympathies, that I soon began to laugh as loudly as himself.

By-and-by, he paused, all at once; so suddenly, indeed, that my own cachinnation lasted a moment longer. (95)

Among other things, Westervelt's "fit of merriment" indicates the extent of his artificiality, which goes beyond anything else encountered in the novel. Not only does he wear tailored clothing and finely wrought accessories, but even his teeth are an illusion. These phony incisors are especially troubling to Coverdale since the poet occasionally provokes people into revealing something about themselves selves by inciting them into verbal indiscretions. When he encounters someone whose vocal outbursts reveal yet another layer of artifice, Coverdale wonders how deep such imposture can run and imagines that the man who stands before him may be nothing more than a wizened little elf beneath an artificial surface. This fantasy suggests the spectralized world of the gothic, which has already come to represent a universe in which capital has broken the "magical obligation, that kept the sign chained to the real" and "deliver[ed] it over to pure circulation" (Baudrillard 60).

In addition to incorporating the gothic's preoccupation with artificiality, the episode also displays that mode's key emotion, fear. When Coverdale describes his

reaction to Westervelt's sham teeth, he can do no better than explain that the knowledge affected him "very oddly." He is more precise when he later encounters the mesmerist in a hotel across the way from his boarding house. There, the poet explains that his "dislike for this man was infinite. At that moment, it amounted to nothing less than a creeping of the flesh, as when, feeling about in a dark place, one touches something cold and slimy, and questions what the secret hatefulness may be" (172). When Coverdale speaks of a "creeping of the flesh," he places his odd response within the category of the frightening. Despite his fear, however, Coverdale ends up identifying with Westervelt when he joins him in his fit of laughter. Given this ambivalence and Coverdale's wavering between feelings of repulsion and attraction, the poet's unsettling experience qualifies as an instance of the uncanny, a specific type of fear that Sigmund Freud describes in his 1919 essay by that name. As we have seen, for Freud, the word uncanny denotes those fearful experiences that combine elements of both the foreign and the familiar. Borrowing a phrase from Friedrich Schelling, Freud further explains that the uncanny "is the name for everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light" (345). Using these two definitions, Freud incorporates the uncanny into his general theory of psychic ontogeny and claims that people experience the emotion when repressed infantile beliefs suddenly reemerge, however disguised, into consciousness. Freud's description of the uncanny fits the circumstances of *Blithedale* quite well. For instance, when Coverdale recalls Zenobia's attitude toward the mesmerist, which could serve as an equally valid description of his own, he anticipates Freud's definition of the uncanny quite well, characterizing their interaction as a form of "mysterious familiarity and estrangement"

(156). And, when he describes Westervelt's general demeanor, Coverdale could well have borrowed Schelling's phrase, explaining that "there was in his eyes...the naked exposure of something that ought not to be left prominent" (92). Perhaps most important, though, is Freud's notion that people experience the uncanny when repressed thoughts suddenly reemerge into consciousness. If Freud is correct, then Coverdale must owe his uncanny feelings to the fact that Westervelt represents some repressed portion of himself, and indeed this appears to be the case. As Dana Brand eloquently describes the relationship between the two men "Westervelt is the epitome of everything Coverdale the cosmopolitan aspires to be and everything Coverdale the communitarian is unconvincingly attempting to transcend" (144). Among the various members of the community, Hawthorne's narrator has worked especially hard to escape the ubiquitous artificiality and the ill consequences of the market revolution throughout the novel. When he encounters the commodified man Westervelt, who is shot through with artificiality, he experiences the uncanny because much of the artificiality remains within himself.

The consequences of this revelation are far reaching indeed, suggesting that both the Transcendentalist project, whether in its communal or its Emersonian forms, are doomed to fail because of the far reach of commodification. The chapter begins with Coverdale leaving the community and venturing into the surrounding wood. Once he arrives at a sufficiently lonely spot, he discerns the moral truths embedded in the natural world and quickly falls into a reverie that shares much with the transparent eyeball moment that Emerson describes in *Nature*. No sooner has this occurred than the reverie is interrupted by a man who hails from the opposite end of the Transcendentalist dichotomy

that divides the cultural realm from the world of nature. After a few moments of irritation and ambivalence, Coverdale identifies completely with the mesmerist. In short, Coverdale starts the chapter aligned with the natural world, participating in a quintessentially Emersonian experience. He ends up identifying with the mesmerist and hence with the city and its artificial economy.⁵³ In traversing the distance between these two terms, Coverdale collapses the crucial dichotomy that defines the putative aims of *Blithedale* and other Transcendentalist projects founded on the restorative discipline of nature. By having his narrator alternate so readily between Transcendental idealism and what is supposed to be its opposite, Hawthorne suggests a disconcerting symmetry between the two, implying that Westervelt and his sham spiritualism are in fact doubles for Coverdale and his Emersonian discipline of nature.⁵⁴ In creating a disenchanting

⁵³ Hawthorne includes similar moments of risibility in his two tales “My Kinsman Major Molineux” and in “The Birthmark.” The story of the first centers on Robin, a young country youth who heads to colonial Boston in the hopes of making his fortune with the help of a powerful kinsman, Major Molineux. After a night of disappointments and confusion, Robin finally encounters the major who has been tarred and feathered by a gang of proto-revolutionaries. As the mob presents him with his disgraced kinsman they begin laughing, and Robin, apparently terrified and overwrought joins in and like Coverdale laughs longer and louder than anyone else in the crowd. In such episodes, Hawthorne discovered the perfect vehicle for representing such ambivalent identifications. “The Birthmark,” which was published while Hawthorne resided in Emerson’s “Old Manse,” narrates the tale of the scientist Aylmer who marries a woman who is perfect but for a minute handprint on her face. Aylmer becomes obsessed with the idea of perfecting his wife’s beauty by removing this single blemish, and he devises an obscure method for removing it. As he nears success, he and his earthy assistant join together in a moment of sympathetic laughter at what they have done, signifying the union between the idealist and his clayey counterpart. The episode in *Blithedale* draws upon both of these so that Hawthorne creates a scene in which an idealist, Coverdale, identifies with a materialist, Westervelt, and is thoroughly apprehensive about this identification.

⁵⁴ Using the work of Marshall Berman and Sacvan Bercovitch, Gale Temple suggests that the promise of reform as it is represented in *Blithedale* bears a striking resemblance to the

character such as Westervelt, I believe that Hawthorne draws heavily upon Charles Brockden Brown's bilquist, Carwin. Just as Clara Wieland imagines that her family's antagonist has entered into a Faustian compact with the devil, so too does Coverdale think the same of Westervelt. When he later sees the mesmerist in the townhouse across from his city lodgings, Coverdale claims that "Every human being, when given over to the Devil is sure to have the wizard mark upon him, in one form or another. I fancied that his smile with its peculiar revelation, was the Devil's signet on the professor" (158). Perhaps more importantly, though, both men are able to insinuate themselves between their human observers and the natural world from which they seek inspiration. While Carwin uses his powers of bilquism to imitate the voice of some benevolent, "super-human" agency, Westervelt ends up elbowing his way into the spot previously occupied by nature's eternal truths.

promise of self-fulfillment offered by consumer capitalism. In Temple's reading, both reform and capitalism promise fulfillment, which they neither can nor intend to provide. Although he does not refer to them as such, Temple's analysis nonetheless suggests another doubling of the market and Blithedale. For a reading that explicitly speaks of doubling but which identifies patterns that differ from my own, see C.J. Wershoven's "Doubles and Devils at Blithedale." For someone who treats Coverdale and Westervelt as mirror images of each other, see Richard Millington's "American Anxiousness: Selfhood and Culture in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*. According to Millington, "Coverdale finds Westervelt loathsome, then, for mirroring an aspect of selfhood that might need suppressing, the permeation of desire by aggression" (56). The guilt that such a recognition prompts serves a particular purpose within Coverdale's psychic economy: "he evades the guilt that attaches to his voyeuristic raids on the secrets of others so easily because that guilt assuages a deeper one, the guilt of the absence of a self to generate even so oblique a form of desire" (566). For Millington this lack of a self represents a culture wide anxiety over the instability and insubstantiality of the self characteristic of the antebellum market economy. For a study that links mesmerism with the romancer's art and hence implies a connection between the poet Coverdale and the magician Westervelt see Coale's *Mesmerism and Hawthorne*.

In treating Coverdale and Westervelt as uncanny doubles, Hawthorne carries some of Emerson's ideas in *Nature* to their logical conclusion. For instance, when he places the artificial man Westervelt within a comparatively wild place, Hawthorne literalizes some of Emerson's hyperbole. After laboring to establish the dichotomy between the dead past and immortal nature, Emerson offers a clarification that provides little in the way of clarity: "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which philosophy distinguishes as the Not Me, that is both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, Nature" (*Essays and Lectures* 8). By including art in the category of Nature, Emerson appears to have inserted a poison pill into his theory of regeneration. If art is part of nature, rather than a separate domain, it makes little sense to condemn certain types of language because they cling to previous ages and therefore have been severed from the rejuvenating influence of the natural world. Emerson understands the potentially corrosive effects of such an inclusion, but he glibly dismisses them, implying that the problem raised by such equivocal terms is rather inconsequential:

In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. *Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching,

and washing, that an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result. (*Essays and Lectures* 8)

In a later portion of the essay, however, when he is celebrating the sovereignty of the human mind, Emerson reverses the terms of the passage, converting the imposing world of nature into a tractable medium that meekly submits to the imperiousness of the human will. He even provides Hawthorne with the name of the narrative device, the double, that he uses in his critique of the Transcendentalist enterprise:

Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the savior rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up. He forges the subtle and delicate air into wise and melodious words, and gives them wing as angels of persuasion and command. One after another, his victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things, until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will,-- the double of the man. (*Essays and Lectures* 28)

Never one to be tethered by a foolish consistency, Emerson reverses himself almost completely. Far from being “a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing,” the works of humankind have become universal, a virtual reality that nightmarishly realizes the threat posed by the “rotten diction,” to which Emerson refers in *Nature* and which

therefore comes to resemble the duplicate world of marble that Coverdale awakes to on his first night at Blithedale (Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* 23).

In choosing to make mesmerism Transcendentalism's gothic double, Hawthorne is justified by the fact that Emerson cites the theory that gave mesmerism its coherence, animal magnetism, as one of the "examples of the action of man upon nature with his entire force,--with reason as well as understanding" (*Essays and Lectures* 47). In the same passage, Emerson places the practice in the company of "the miracles of enthusiasm as those reported of Swedenborg, Hohenlohe, and of the shakers" (*Essays and Lectures* 47). The name of Emanuel Swedenborg is especially significant, since his ideas are among those that lie at the heart of the theory of correspondences. Despite these similarities, the two practices carried completely different connotations: unlike the highbrow idealism for which Emerson was known, mesmerism was linked in the public imagination to both commerce and sexual impropriety, two associations that had little to do the realm of spirit.⁵⁵ When Hawthorne represents Westervelt in the act of plying his trade, he attaches these very connotations to him and his art, explaining that his speech "was eloquent, ingenious, plausible, with a delusive show of spirituality, yet really imbued with a cold and dead materialism" (200). At a very fundamental level, moreover, Hawthorne may treat the two as doubles because the theory of correspondences shares

⁵⁵ For a discussion of mesmerism's spotted reputation and Hawthorne's ambivalent attitudes toward a practice which shared certain characteristics with his own as a writer of romance see Stoehr's *Hawthorne's Mad Scientists* (32-63), Goddu's *Gothic America* (94-130), Coale's *Mesmerism and Hawthorne*, and Castronovo's *Necro Citizenship* (101-150). In his *Cultures of Letters*, Richard Brodhead suggests a further link between Westervelt and the antebellum market economy when he reads the mesmerist as an impresario figure in the mold of P.T. Barnum (56).

many characteristics with the commodification it was meant to resist and which Westervelt represents. According to Michael T. Gilmore,

For Emerson...the taint of commodity is transcended by spiritualizing matter and exchanging it for meaning instead of money. As this procedure suggests, he remains unwittingly indebted to the marketplace. In economic terms, a commodity has both use value and exchange value; similarly in Emerson's terms, things both exist in their own right and stand for something else. Indeed the whole third step of Emerson's argument in *Nature* reveals his profound ambivalence about the market economy. It makes clear just how much there is in common between treating nature as a commodity and "degrading nature"—a favorite word of Emerson's in this connection—by "suggesting its dependence on spirit." (29)

Whatever his justification, though, Hawthorne clearly treats the theory of correspondences as equivalent to the process of commodification. In so doing, he denies Coverdale the consolations of Transcendentalist idealism, forcing him instead to confront the material realities of nineteenth-century America's market revolution.

For having disabused him of his Transcendentalist illusions, Coverdale cannot forgive the mesmerist whose "tone represented that of worldly society at large, where a cold skepticism smothers what it can of our spiritual aspirations, and makes the rest ridiculous" (101). The poet resents him especially for having given him the jaundiced perspective through which he now views his friends, for when he looks at Hollingsworth,

Zenobia and Priscilla “The essential charm of each had vanished” (101). Despite this animosity, however, and despite the obvious chicanery of his profession, the mesmerist nonetheless turns out to be a reliable source of truth whose ability to discern other people’s motives contrasts sharply with the other characters’ self deception. Westervelt demonstrates this superior acumen when he unpacks the motivations that lie behind Hollingsworth’s interest in Zenobia. After inquiring after her, Westervelt refers to “a certain holy and benevolent blacksmith...a philanthropical lecturer, with two or three disciples, and a scheme of his own, the preliminary step of which involves a large purchase of land, and the erection of a spacious edifice, at an expense considerably beyond his means...He hammers away upon this one topic, as lustily as ever he did upon a horse-shoe” (94). After offering this unflattering though accurate portrait, Westervelt coyly asks “Do you know such a person?” To this Coverdale responds with a shake of the head and a turn of the heels. Expert that he is in both the arts of discerning motivations and playing them to his advantage, Westervelt lures the narrator back into the conversation by offering another piece of tantalizing information that the poet voyeur cannot resist: ““Our friend,’ he continued, ‘is described to me as a brawny, shaggy, grim, and ill-favored personage, not particularly well-calculated, one would say to insinuate himself with the softer sex. Yet, so far has this honest fellow succeeded with one lady, whom we wot of, that he anticipates, from her abundant resources, the necessary funds for realizing his plan in brick and mortar!”” (94) After revealing the philanthropist’s true motivations, Westervelt indulges in the fit of laughter that reveals his artificial teeth. As if to emphasize the mesmerist’s clear-sighted analysis, Hawthorne has earlier included a

scene in which Hollingsworth had as much as confessed to the very designs that Westervelt imputes to him. While taking a stroll around the community's grounds, Coverdale recommends a more retired location for what he assumes will be the marital cottage his friend plans on sharing with Zenobia. To this misunderstanding, the incredulous blacksmith replies in appropriately Winthropian terms: "But I offer my edifice as a spectacle to the world...that it may take example and build many another like it. Therefore I mean to set it on the open hill-side" (80). Despite this relatively unambiguous indication that Hollingsworth plans to build a prison, Coverdale remains baffled by his friend's interest in "educating the public taste in the department of cottage architecture" (80). In addition to such acuity, Westervelt speaks quite sensibly when he laments the needlessness of Zenobia's suicide, especially since "Her mind was active and various in its powers...her heart had a manifold adaptation; her constitution an infinite buoyancy, which (had she possessed only a little patience to await the reflux of her trouble) would have borne her upward, triumphantly for twenty years to come" (240). To these observations Coverdale responds with his customary venom. Yet, after wishing an evil fate upon him, the poet admits that Westervelt's observations "possessed their share of truth" (241). By juxtaposing his idealistic narrator's repeated misinterpretations against the mesmerist's perspicacity, Hawthorne prods his readers into reluctantly identifying with the latter's materialist perspective. In so doing, he differs from the naïve Coverdale who imagines that his double is capable of perceiving truth despite the fact that "He was altogether earthy, worldly, made for time and its gross objects, and incapable—except by a sort of dim reflection, caught from other minds—of so much as

one spiritual idea” (241). The novel points in an opposite direction, though, when it suggests to the contrary that the mesmerist owes his penetrating insight to his immersion in such earthly realities.

In his immunity to the spiritualizing insights that blind Coverdale to the harsher realities of the material world, Westervelt is not alone. Some of the novel’s most sympathetic characters adopt a similar perspective and offer equally bracing analyses that contradict Coverdale’s Transcendentalist vision. Whereas Hawthorne’s narrator regards Priscilla’s waifish pallor as an “impalpable grace” that “lay so singularly between disease and beauty,” Zenobia explains that “She is neither more nor less...than a seamstress from the city...Poor thing! She has been stifled with the heat of a salamander stove, in a small, close room, and has drunk coffee, and fed upon dough-nuts, raisins, candy, and all such trash, till she is scarcely half-alive; and so, as she has hardly any physique, a poet, like Mr. Coverdale, may be allowed to think her spiritual” (101, 34). After Zenobia has diagnosed the young woman’s disease, Silas Foster prescribes a material cure: “Give the girl a hot cup of tea, and a thick slice of this first-rate bacon...That’s what she wants. Let her stay with us as long as she likes, and help in the kitchen and take the cow-breath at milking time; and, in a week or two she’ll begin to look like a creature of this world” (31). Based upon the farmer’s tendency to offer such earthy advice, Russ Castronovo identifies Foster as a “radical democrat.” According to Castronovo, “Unlike the true democrat who adopts a transcendent perspective that abstracts a body without organs from material conditions, the radical democrat contextualizes citizenship, creating dialogue between people, production, and consumption” (142). If these

recontextualizations qualify Foster as a radical democrat, then Westervelt deserves the title as well, since he offers an equally clear-sighted analysis of Priscilla's unhealthy appearance. After revealing both Hollingsworth's selfish motives and his own connection with the commodity culture, Westervelt describes Priscilla in terms that refute the true democrat's decontextualization:

She is one of those delicate, nervous young creatures, not uncommon in New England, and whom I suppose to have become what we find them by the gradual refining away of the physical system, among your women. Some philosophers choose to glorify this habit of body by terming it spiritual; but in my opinion, it is rather the effect of unwholesome food, bad air lack of out-door exercise, and neglect of bathing, on the part of these damsels and their female progenitors; all resulting in a kind of hereditary dyspepsia. (95)

Even Coverdale himself can occasionally resist his proclivity for spiritualization. When Priscilla first enters the farmhouse, he identifies her pallor's true cause: "her face was of a wan, almost sickly hue, betokening habitual seclusion from the sun and free atmosphere" (27). No sooner has he made this diagnosis than he is saved by an ideological "fantasy" that occludes the material conditions that produce such waifs: "The fantasy occurred to me, that she was some desolate kind of creature, doomed to wander about in snow-storms, and that, though the ruddiness of our window-panes had tempted her into a human dwelling, she would not remain long enough to melt the icicles out of her hair"

(27). It is this latter fantasizing, Transcendentalist element of his character that so resists Westervelt and his acuity.

In their concerted efforts to push Coverdale into identifying with the materialist perspective, the novel's characters merely seek to reintroduce him to repressed truths that he, on some level, already knows. In fact, Coverdale offers a candid appraisal of Transcendentalism's efforts of reform that mirror those of the novel. In the chapter titled "The Convalescent," Coverdale discusses the socialist theories of Fourier with Hollingsworth, focusing on his millennial fantasy that the Earth's oceans will be transformed into lemonade. Amidst such rubbish, Coverdale finds one point that rankles the prison reformer, who claims that he can never forgive Fourier, for "He has committed the unpardonable sin! For what more monstrous iniquity could the devil himself contrive, than to choose the selfish principle—the principle of all human wrong, the very blackness of man's heart, the portion of ourselves which we shudder at, and which it is the whole aim of spiritual discipline to eradicate—to choose it as the master workman of his system?" (53). After this outburst, Coverdale identifies the idea that separates the Frenchman from reformers such as the Transcendentalists: "He makes no claim to inspiration. He has not persuaded himself—as Swedenborg did, and as any other than a Frenchman would, with a mission of like importance to communicate—that he speaks with authority from above. He promulgates his system, so far as I can perceive, entirely on his own responsibility" (54). In praising Fourier for not claiming a divine warrant and in contrasting him with Swedenborg, Coverdale offers the starting point for reform that is consonant with the novel's events, one that takes human beings as they are, rather than as

they imagine themselves and one that, like the materialist readings offered by Westervelt and other characters, leads back to the marketplace. As Hollingsworth indicates, Fourier bases his theories upon its fundamental principle, self-interest.

Uncanny Commodities

Leo Marx begins his discussion of the pastoral impulse in American literature with an episode drawn from Hawthorne's notebooks. In the entry, Hawthorne enjoys a fleeting moment of repose before having this experience disrupted by the shrill whistle of a locomotive. For Marx this episode represents the archetypal instance of the machine in the garden motif that he finds scattered throughout American literature. I believe that Coverdale's encounter with the mesmerist Westervelt represents a variation on the motif that could be termed the commodity in the garden. Both episodes inspire emotions that are related to fear: when characters encounter a locomotive in a seeming area of wilderness, their response is usually structured as an instance of the "technological sublime," and they become convinced of the futility of trying to elude the juggernaut of industrialization via a pastoral retreat. When Coverdale encounters Westervelt, on the other hand, he experiences the uncanny. In treating this commodified man as a source of the uncanny, Hawthorne is not alone. In his description of commodity fetishism, for instance, Karl Marx uses language that could have well originated in a gothic romance. Citing a table as an illustration, Marx explains that although it has been transformed from mere wood into a table, the "table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends

sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (163-164). To understand the commodity’s fantastic nature, Marx claims “we must take flight into the misty realm of religion” where “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations with each other and with the human race” (165). Marx undoubtedly employs such anthropomorphizing language because, as he explains, in the act of exchange these inanimate objects appear to acquire the essentially human characteristic of sociality:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra sensible or social. (165)

As Marx has earlier indicated the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of socially valuable labor measured in time that goes into its creation. The commodity form conceals this fundamental fact: “The determination of the magnitude of value by labor-

time is therefore a secret hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities” (168). As a political economist, Marx revealed this repressed truth and pointed his readers back to the realm of the social. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne does no less. Like Marx, he too pushes his narrator and, by extension, his readers into a confrontation with the material world of nineteenth-century America.

In figuratively endowing an inanimate object with powers of volition and speaking of the revelation of the repressed truths of sociality, Marx performs an analytical task that very much resembles the one undertaken by Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance*. When he speaks of an enchanted table capable of standing on its head and spinning some incredible tales out of its grotesque brain, Marx is not too far from Coverdale who imagines that Westervelt’s exterior conceals “a necromantic, or perhaps a mechanical contrivance in which a demon walked about” (188). When he seeks to reveal the social relations behind the fantastic world of commodities and hence lead his readers back to an engagement with society, Marx enlists himself in the same cause that animates the radical democrats in Hawthorne’s novel who continually deflate Coverdale’s spiritualizations and thereby recontextualize citizenship and hence create “dialogue between people, production, and consumption” (Castronovo 142). If Irving Howe is correct in his claim that Hawthorne “was as far from the Marxist imagination as anyone could be,” then this apparent congruence between the aims of both *Capital* and *The Blithedale Romance* are all the more remarkable, since both men were able to discern the uncanniness of commodities and thereby identify a characteristic experience of modernity.

EPILOGUE

As I have indicated in my introduction, I believe that the tendencies I have identified are not unique to the authors featured in the foregoing chapters. Instead, these writers draw upon a widespread system of cultural symbology. While much has undoubtedly changed since Hawthorne published *The Blithedale Romance*, American authors and polemicists of all stripes still rely upon the same gothic elements that proved so useful to the writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to represent their vexed relationship to the nation's capitalist order. The 1982 American film *Blade Runner*, for instance, contains many of the thematic concerns and motifs that I have examined in this dissertation. Set in Los Angeles in 2019, the film draws heavily upon the Frankenstein myth and the semi-gothic genre of film noire of the 1930's and 40's to depict a world where capitalist development has reached its logical conclusion. The film follows the fortunes of a set of synthetic humans called replicants who have been created to serve as slave labor on Earth's off-world colonies. After a number of bloody insurrections, the replicants have been outlawed on the home planet and a special group of police officers, the eponymous "blade runners," are charged with hunting down and killing replicants who find their way back to Earth. The film opens with a shot that focuses on the corporate headquarters of the Tyrell corporation, whose neo-Aztec architecture dominates the environmentally devastated city over which it looms. Thus does the film's director, Ridley Scott, represent the apotheosis of private power, whose early stages Crèvecoeur discerned over two centuries ago in colonial Charles Town. In the course of the film, it is revealed that the Tyrell corporation has perfected the art of crafting a human

personality to suit its commercial needs through memory implants. In so doing, it has improved upon the coercive methods of the nineteenth-century disciplinary practices which figure so prominently in Poe's tales of murder and confession. Like so many science fiction films before and after, the film centers on a slave insurrection and is preoccupied with breaking down the boundary that defines the human. In this regard, it picks up on many of the concerns common to Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative*. And finally, during his pursuit of the replicants who have returned to Earth, the film's protagonist, a blade runner named Rick Deckard, finds a scale from a snake. When he examines it under an electron microscope, he finds a serial number that links it to a vendor in artificial animals. This serial number suggests that commodification has infiltrated the narrowest recesses of the natural world, a point that was already implicit in the Tyrell Corporation's ability to design creatures indistinguishable from human beings, but which is further emphasized in a scene that shares much with the chapter of *The Blithedale Romance* where the would-be pastoralist Coverdale encounters his double Westervelt who reminds him of the ubiquity of the commodity form.

Given the prominence of the gothic in representing America's relationship with capitalism, why have literary critics not paid greater attention to its presence? The answer to this question varies with the individual scholar. Once again, we do well to begin with Leslie Fiedler. Writing in a time when the distinctions between high and low culture were ascendant, Fiedler needed to persuade his audience that the gothic represented an object worthy of serious academic study and overcome the prejudice surrounding the genre that treated it as a debased form of literature associated with cheap thrills and pulp fiction. To

this end, Fiedler elevated the American gothic to the level of tragedy by focusing on those works such as *Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn* that feature some version of the Faustian bargain where the protagonists willingly embrace their own damnation. For Fiedler, then, the serious American gothic concerns itself with theological questions and functions as a “Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition” (160). Having imbued the American gothic with a certain level of gravitas, Fiedler goes a step further. Perhaps due to his long exposure to this literary mode, he adopts some of its methods for creating a coherent identity and opposes his artistically valid gothicists to a literary double, Edgar Allan Poe, who is made to bear the burden of the gothic’s lowbrow associations. Like Vernon L. Parrington and F.O. Matthiessen before him, Fiedler places Poe outside of the American mainstream and claims that his bizarre fictions are more the consequence of a uniquely diseased mind than a genuine expression of a national ethos: “The odd syndrome of child-love, necrophilia, and incest in Poe is too personal and pathological to shed much light on the general meaning of the latter theme in American literature and life” (416). After having been subjected to this ritual of expulsion, Poe is now ready to bear the weight of those unsavory qualities which the American gothic must shed in its ascent to the realms of serious literature: “Poe lacks as a writer a *sense of sin*, and therefore cannot raise his characters to the Faustian level which alone dignifies gothic fiction...If his own life seems to offer a more genuinely metaphysical shudder, this is thanks not to him but to the Puritan conscience of Griswold, which made of him a kind of vulgar Faust for the American market, just as Baudelaire made of him a *poète*

maudit for the French one” (429). Thus, in Fiedler’s estimate, Poe becomes a sort of commodity, a vulgar Faust intended for mass consumption rather than a serious writer who struggled with weighty moral issues.

In more recent times though, literary critics have been less concerned with maintaining the distinctions that mattered to previous generations. Starting with works such as Jane Tompkins’ 1987 *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, many scholars have expanded the purview of what constitutes legitimate literary criticism and have examined works that would have been reviled by their professional forbearers. In fact, most have treated the old distinctions between high and low culture and the related notions of transcendence and universality as obfuscations that sought to divest literature of its political content and have insisted on resituating literary works within their historical contexts. Despite this sociological turn, though, few have read the American gothic in terms of its relationship to American capitalism.⁵⁶ At times this lack of engagement almost assumes the appearance of a willful avoidance. In their introduction to their collection *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy write that their book “approaches the persistence of the gothic in American culture not by seeking historical comprehensivity or even critical consensus but, committed to pluralism in a field that is inchoate by providing a composite of ‘interventions’ that explore specific issues—in the histories of gender and race, in the cultures of cities and scandals and sensations, in the

⁵⁶ Teresa Goddu represents an obvious exception to this rule since she somewhat discusses the role of the marketplace in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*.

psychodynamics of representation—in order to advance particular and distinct theoretical paradigms” (vii). Since the critical categories of race and gender are often part of a trinity consisting of race, class and gender, I cannot help but pause when I encounter the two alone. In focusing on race and gender while excluding class, Savoy and Martin follow what is in fact a widespread trend within American studies: while many critics have used the first two categories to produce a substantial body of readings and have devised sophisticated methods for discerning the presence of racial and gendered discrimination, they appear to have been far less interested in examining the presence of economic concerns within the works they investigate. Hence, my questions concerning why so little has been written about the gothic’s relationship to American capitalism leads to a larger one and asks why the economic has been neglected by critics of American literature in general.

On the one hand, this neglect may be accounted for by the fact that the United States does a superb job of obscuring the presence of those people who somehow fail to benefit from the promise of American capitalism. In this regard, little has changed since 1962 when Michael Harrington published *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. In this book, Harrington describes how a number of factors, ranging from geography to the mass production of relatively decent clothing, all work to conceal poverty’s presence from the majority of middle-class Americans, resulting in a situation where “The millions who are poor in the United States tend to become increasingly invisible” (2). Separated from the actual evidence of what David Punter identifies as capitalism’s principal barbarities—“the social and economic barbarities of injustice and

forced labour”, — middle-class academics have an even more difficult time discerning their distorted presence in the fictions that seek to unearth such gothic abuses. This national ignorance about capitalism’s rejects may well have been aggravated by the ascendance over the past thirty years of the free-market ideology advocated by Milton Friedman and the University of Chicago style of economic thinking. Among the many goals shared by both Friedman and his fellow neo-liberals, their desire to persuade others that markets resemble nothing so much as natural systems has been paramount. To this ideology’s adherents, people who interfere with the natural workings of the marketplace are both foolish and foolhardy. In their eyes, legislation requiring a minimum wage is akin to legislation requiring minimum rainfall. And while I imagine that few University presidents would advance the same argument in public and call for the abolition of the minimum wage, they have, nonetheless, found an important tool in their attempts to create a flexible academic workforce in the naturalizing strategies of free-market ideology. According to Cary Nelson, the managerial class of the American university has used this market as natural process trope to justify its increasing reliance upon contingent Academic labor. This has even been true within humanities programs that have worked so hard to denaturalize the ideologies of race, gender and sexuality. During the same period in which Edward Said demonstrated that knowledge about a racialized other could be used as part of an apparatus of oppression and in which Judith Butler’s theories of performativity convinced a number of academics that gender roles did not express some inherent biological truth, the Modern Language Association, according to Nelson, “has at once asserted our powerlessness, its nobility, and the inevitability of all existing

economic arrangements. It treats the fake job market, religiously tracking its every twist and turn, as an inevitable fact of nature rather than as a fundamentally exploitative matter of choice” when addressing the declassing of academic labor (Bousquet xvii). Thus, if Nelson is correct, it may well be that so few critics have remarked upon the connection between the economic and the gothic, particularly in regard to its ability to denaturalize economic arrangements, because their interests are best served by ignoring those connections: the myths of naturalization and economic inevitably go a long way toward absolving a group of people of their involvement in the proletarianization of academic labor.

Whatever the causes of the neglect, though, I hope I have clarified the connection between America’s democratic ideals, its dominant mode of production and its tradition of gothic literature. By studying these, I have gained a better understanding of the crucial role that capitalism has played in contributing to our notions of American identity. Based upon what I have learned, it seems as though capitalism has been viewed throughout much of our history as a means through which to achieve the nation’s democratic ideals, a vehicle ideally suited to escaping a “gothic” past of inequality, oppression and abuse. Over the past thirty years, though, that ideological relationship has been reversed and capitalism became the end itself. Within such a cultural context, it has little mattered whether or not the system was producing the oppressive conditions of a gothicized Europe against which writers like Crèvecoeur defined himself since the only freedom that mattered was economic freedom. As we emerge from the disastrous consequences of the Friedmanite revolution and perform a post-mortem on the world he helped create, we

may well wish to develop a more reflective relationship with the nation's economic order and disabuse ourselves of the perhaps comforting notion that economic exploitation occurring within the academy is inevitable. If we do, we may well begin a process of change by examining the relationship between the American gothic and American capitalism.

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