

Rhapsodist in the wilderness: Brown's
romantic quest in Edgar Huntly.

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*Edgar Huntly***

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Notes

1. Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, ed. Sydney J. Krause et al. (Kent: Kent State Univ. Press, 1984), p. 3. All subsequent parenthetical citations are to this edition.
2. Mary Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Captivity and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, Who Was Taken by the Indians and the Destruction of Lancaster, in 1676* (Lancaster, MA: n.p., 1828), p. 30. All subsequent parenthetical citations are to this edition.
3. This phrase was part of the title of the first edition (1682).
4. In *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middle town: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973), Richard Slotkin writes, "almost from the moment of its literary genesis, the New England Indian captivity narrative functioned as a myth, reducing the Puritan state of mind and world view, along with the events of colonization and settlement, into archetypal drama" (p. 94). The influence of the captivity narrative on *Edgar Huntly* does not escape Slotkin (p. 95).
5. Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland: or the Transformation. An American Tale* (Kent: Kent State Univ. Press, 1978), p. 3. All subsequent parenthetical citations are to this edition.
6. Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (New York: Holt, 1962), p. 1.
7. Alexander Cowie, *The Rise of the American Novel* (New York: American Book, 1951), p. 21. Sydney J. Krause summarizes the conventional view of how an unbridled imagination could endanger both readers and writers of fiction: "let the probing romantic imagination tamper with those certitudes [of order, sobriety, sanity, optimism, and faith in the knowable state of man], let an unsettling subjectivity stir up elements of ambiguity, delusion, perversity, and the whole saving balance of the rational world collapses into nightmare." "*Edgar Huntly* and the American Nightmare," *SNNTS*, 13 (1981), 298.
8. Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 42. Bell argues that Brown, for all his temerity, did not suppress completely "a basic fear, essentially similar to the fears of contemporary novelists, of the origins and effects of imaginative fiction" (p. 60). One hundred and twenty years after the publication of Rowlandson's *Narrative*, writers found themselves caught more and more between the tradition of utilitarian prose and the new kind of prose Brown chose to write. Bell thinks that for Brown as well as for other "early American writers of fiction, the conflict between didacticism and sensibility was particularly intense because, even while it raised questions that were clearly and directly relevant to their own ambiguous position as imaginative writers in a hostile culture, they could not openly acknowledge this relevance" (p. 28).
9. Critics commonly view Brown as, in that tired phrase, a (if not *the*) father of American fiction. For instance, Bill Christopherson believes *Edgar Huntly* "adapted the Gothic genre to American concerns, reinventing its archetypes in the process; originated two other major American genres—the western and the detective story; gave to American literature an image—the cave, or pit—that writers as diverse as Poe, Cooper, Melville, and Twain would capitalize on; introduced the Indian in his most mythic form to American romance; brought new depth to a fiction of psychodrama; and uncannily anticipated . . . postmodernism." "'Father of the American Novel': Brockden Brown in the '80s," *Western Humanities Review*, 39 (1985), 77.
10. Charles Brockden Brown, *The Rhapsodist*, in *The Rhapsodist and Other Uncollected Writings*, ed.

Harry R. Warfel (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1943), p. 6. All subsequent parenthetical citations are to this edition.

11. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), p. 218.

12. Davidson, pp. 238, 239, 253.

13. Alan Axelrod explains Brown's reactionary move: "the Faustian schemes of earlier years, allied to the dangerous utopianism of a Ludloe and Ormond, courted the custom of the devil. The projects of his later life were instead the plodding and measured occupations of one who professed a conservative Philadelphia Christianity." *Charles Brockden Brown: An American Tale...*

RHAPSODIST IN THE WILDERNESS: BROWN'S ROMANTIC QUEST IN *EDGAR HUNTLY*

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More than a century before Charles Brockden Brown conceived a novel based on "incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness,"¹ Mary Rowlandson had survived her three month captivity with "savages" warring against settlers in New England. Early in *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, she says she "cannot express to man the affliction that lay upon my spirit,"² yet she proceeds to describe in vivid detail not merely her spiritual, but her physical affliction too. Rowlandson's chronicle has been read as an allegory of the New World Christian seeking salvation after being abducted into the wilderness by what the Northern colonists considered unregenerate heathen. Her prose resembles her mode, the Bible; her setting is filled with richly symbolic rivers, depressions, hills, and woods; and as she reflects on her misfortune, she quotes frequently from the Old Testament. In short, her account glorifies, in archetypal Puritan fashion, the "sovereignty and goodness of God"³ by typifying the Indians as "scourges" of colonial sinners such as herself. Her trials are those every Christian must undergo in order to be worthy of God.⁴

Over the next century, religious didacticism like Rowlandson's evolved—first in Europe, of course—into the moral earnestness of sentimental fiction. During Brown's brief career, the imaginative basis of the growing romantic movement inspired him to transcend the bondage of utilitarianism in its Puritanic and sentimental forms. Coming of age during the literary transition from colonial and revolutionary functionalism to more "creative" artistic expression, Brown's canonical texts reflect his alliance with the spirit of innovation which in England meant Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Godwin, and in Germany Goethe and Schiller. Though Brown was not as gifted, perhaps, as these giants, in the forewords to the novels written between 1798 and 1800 he was quick to point out his intention to take American fiction to new places, mainly by relating strange and even grotesque motifs to the American experience. For instance, he uses bilquism in *Wieland* as he "aims at the illustration of some important branches of the moral constitution of man,"⁵ and in the magnum opus *Arthur Mervyn* he focuses on the literal and figurative evils of yellow fever which have been "fertile of instruction to the moral observer, to whom they have furnished new displays of the



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