Rethinking Narrativity

What I want to bring to this volume’s collaborative effort of charting new trajectories for a post-exceptionalist American studies is a plea for rethinking our current notions of narrative from the perspective of belonging: not just be-ing, but also longing, the yearning for a place in the world without which it would crumble. In order to feel and direct this longing we need a mediating structure; narrative is that structure. Just think of the many people who write diaries in times of trouble and stop once things have smoothened out; or think of the inner monologue that immediately sets in when realizing that one is lost. My interest is thus not so much in narrative as a form of language use that is predominantly coercive in its drive toward the fixation of meaning in storied form. Rather, I am interested in narrative as a cultural resource of orientation and emplacement; a practice that sustains our being through its capacities to articulate unsettling experiences, conduct the semantic, psychic, and geographic movements unleashed by them within the shifting parameters of space and time, and in due process give meaning and mooring to life by giving narrative form.

Understood in these terms, narrative becomes an indispensable component of dwelling in the world – a proposition with far-reaching consequences for our understanding of narrativity. Most narrative theories are formalist or structuralist, and broader approaches, scarce as they are (Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* and Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot* come to mind) tend to conceive of narrative as primarily invested in matters of human temporality – the problem of time-boundedness and the impossibility to understand the meaning of one’s death. Building on and yet departing from these latter theories, an understanding of narrativity based on the human need to belong brings out its distinct involvement with our existential boundedness in both time and space, our wrestling with “the unutterable contingency of time-place” (Massey 5), with sustaining life and facing death within our ever-shifting life-worlds by narrative means. Much of our storytelling vocabulary is indeed strikingly spatial: we speak of situations, expositions, plots, arrivals; storytelling presupposes emplacement, unfolds specific spatial imaginaries (without which it would be incomprehensible), takes place in particular settings and can have transformative effects on them. Neither
scholarship on space nor scholarship on narrative has explored these correlations so far, and yet they are absolutely instrumental for the task of understanding the production of both space/place and narrative.

Rethinking narrativity along these lines contests notions of narrative as a representational backdrop to the messiness of life that still prevails in literary and cultural scholarship. Approached in this traditional way, narrative’s capacities to mend a troubled sense of belonging are strictly retrospective: categorically removed from life, narrative elucidates what already has been lived. In fact, it can function as a basic form of human understanding precisely because it re-creates – and thus recovers – life from a safe distance not unlike that sheltered room of therapeutic treatment. Yet rather than limiting narrative to operations that are strictly representational, this approach embraces what Margaret Somers has recently called an *ontological* understanding of narrativity: It assumes that life itself is storied in fundamental ways, “that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that ‘experience’ is [mediated] through narratives; […] and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available […] narratives” (613-14).

Which brings me back to the spatial dimension of narrativity addressed above. Unrelated as my research on the recent revaluations of space and those of narrative initially was, I have come to think that there is an epistemetic correlation between the untying of space from its former conception as a stable backdrop to the dynamic operations of time and the untying of narrative from its former conception as a representational backdrop to the messiness of life. Both ‘turns,’ it seems to me, are stirred by what Michel Foucault has famously described as a shift from the epoch of time to that of space, concluding that we are at a moment “when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (22). Tied back to the narrative productivity of belonging, the historical discourse and imagination consolidating in the nineteenth century would then be responding to a world that had become uncertain through the loss of feudalistic orders and providential plots by investing into narrative’s *representational* capacities. Yet the spatial discourse and imagination taking shape in the late twentieth century demands new frames for the task of narrative recovery – and finds them in an *ontologically enhanced relation of life and narrative*. In fact, the new epoch (or episteme) ascribes proactive ‘building’ capacities to a cultural practice that has previously been thought of as merely restorative.

This recent reconception of narrativity is part of a larger turn toward ontology that, in responding to the recent crisis of late or post modernity, has profoundly challenged the typical ways of seeing and doing in the modern world, particularly the conception of the autonomous, self-aware, self-reliant, etc. human subject (see White). Questions of its dependency on the natural, social and cultural environment have thus increased in relevance.
Conceiving this subject through its existentially imposed and narratively sustained need to belong is precisely such an ontological commitment, one that is quintessentially driven by the questions “how to articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively” (White 4), and how these articulations matter. Which brings me to the question of literary narratives. Although removed from the messiness of life and committed to representing rather than living it, they are deeply invested in the narrative productivity engendered by the yearning to belong; they exploit the depрагmatized realm of fiction to stage and explore the narrative productivity of belonging as a life-sustaining practice that springs from an insurmountable need to interpret one’s surroundings and express one’s being in relation to them.

One striking and important way in which the narrative productivity of belonging operates in literary texts is by generating and testing different kinds of ‘narrative agency’ – which I tentatively define as the capacity to make choices about the telling of one’s story and impose them on the world. These narrative agencies take shape against the backdrop of strikingly distinctive (with Bakhtin one may say ‘chonotopic’) conjunctions of spatial and psychic imaginaries, the inner and the outer worlds in which belonging is sought. Literary texts tend to stage and explore narrative agency to the end of cohering disrupted, troubled life-worlds. In doing so, they not only test narration’s capacities to produce and maintain a sense of belonging within the fictional world of the text, but they also make these suturing capacities available for narrative operation – and thus for the existential task of dwelling – beyond their fictional worlds. This ‘articulation effect’ of fiction is framed and limited by given sets of narrative conventions, and thus condemned to reiterating the norms and values inscribed into them. But giving an account of uncertain states of belonging also and just as inevitably entails a wrestling with is the sayable at a certain place and time. In fact, it tends to push narrative production toward and across the limits of what can be said within given norms and conventions with the effect of exposing and transgressing the narrative frames and formulas by which be live; and with the effect of engendering ever-new ‘life-forms’ for the narrative pursuit of belonging. In fact, one way of writing a history of American literature in all its cultural and regional meanderings and cross-fertilizations would be to write it from the perspective of the relentless narrative productivity of belonging that I am about to exemplify in my reading of Charles Brockden Brown’s frontier gothic Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker.

1 The concept of the ‘articulation effect’ is a core element of reception aesthetics. Not unlike Raymond Williams’s notion of ‘structure of feelings’ that cultural forms of expression can make tangible, yet with a more elaborate theorization of the process of transfer at stake, the basic idea is that fiction – as fictionalizing acts that perform a constant border crossing between the world of the text and the world of the reader – propels the articulation of that which has not yet a social correlative. See especially Iser, “Fictionalizing Acts,” and Fluck, “The Role of the Reader.”
But before going in medias res, I want to spell out the intervention into the current field of American studies that I seek to make with this reading. Rethinking current notions of narrativity along the lines mapped out above is an attempt to go beyond the critical paradigm of ‘resistance’ that has gained a hegemonic stance in our field in the wake of the historical turn. Literary texts are now predominantly studied to determine how they are situated in larger discursive fields, and how they participate in regulating the subject positions contained in them. Yet this interpretive framework comes at a cost as it presupposes a relation between a literary text and its recipient that is located first and foremost on a conceptual or cognitive level: a resistant reception penetrates the text intellectually while affective mobilization tends to be seen as merely manipulative. Aesthetic experience thus becomes a mere function of interpellation, and art produces ‘aesthetic regimes’ that need to be scrutinized in order to understand how to resist them. Concerns with belonging question this paradigm in assuming a narrative drive (Peter Brooks would say a ‘narrative desire’) for meaning and form that bears a thoroughly ambiguous relation to ideologies of place and self. No matter how idiosyncratic, incoherent and ‘non-closural’ it may be, any account of losing or regaining one’s sense of belonging is conducted within ideological constraints. And yet out of psychic and social need, account-giving cannot be dismissed. There is, in other words, no radical state of non-belonging that does not construe and make sense of that state by narrative means.

The prescriptive side of narrative is a familiar target of critique in the resistance paradigm – as a subject-forming power to be exposed and disseminated at almost all cost. Yet while narrative is certainly inclined to bring disparate elements into a socially intelligible, coercive form, the narrative activity propelled by the need to belong tends to challenge and transgress established forms, simply because these forms are often unsuited to aptly express what seeks expression. This double-bind of coercion and transgression is indeed a primary motor of literary creativity – which means, in turn, that we can trace, in and through narrative’s inclination to express and give form, both concerns with and limits of belonging at particular conjunctions of time, space, and social being. In approaching the resistance paradigm – usually conceived of as opposing the subject-forming power of the symbolic structures – with an interest in the need to belong that operates in and through these structures, the experiential dimension inherent to any regimic mode of ‘distributing the sensible,’ its relentless involvement with making and unmaking these structuring forces gains critical weight. In fact, the mutually constitutive relation of belonging and narrative posited here insists upon an ecstatic dimension of being-in-the-world, a ‘need to tell’ that drives it. In doing so, it sets out to rethink the troubled relation of narrative and agency. And it asks what ramifications this rethinking has for the study of literary narratives.

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2 The term ‘aesthetic regime’ is drawn from Rancière.
3 Judith Butler has recently taken up this issue in her essay “Giving an Account of Oneself.” See also Ricoeur, Ezzy, and Somers.
4 The idea of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is also drawn from Rancière.
Caught Between Frontier Paternalism and Liberal Capitalism

Published in 1799 and set in the mid-1780s, *Edgar Huntly* speaks from a period of unprecedented disruption and reorganization of American life. There is consensus among historians of the time that it was a “revolution of massive proportions” (Watts, *Romance*)\(^5\). Among the most profound effects was the breakup of a social order that had rested on ‘republican’ values (the common good, civil responsibility, the public sphere) and its replacement by a ‘liberal’ order inclined to individualism and mobility, self-made success and the private sphere.\(^6\) For a short while – coinciding with Brown’s most creative years of literary production between 1797 and 1800 – these two orders existed side by side, constituting what William Hedges has termed a “culture of contradictions” (107). *Edgar Huntly* responds to this situation by imagining a protagonist who falls out of his familiar world. After going to bed one night, he awakes in a pitch-dark cavern, barely dressed and miles away from his uncle’s house, the place where he has been living since his parents were killed in an Indian raid. In one terrible instant the world around him has grown strange. The shock of this realization haunts the tale thoroughly. In fact, it constitutes the story’s implicit threshold of uncertainty, the moment when action – both physical and narrative – becomes imperative. The protagonist’s rehabilitation is bound to his warding off the maddening threat of utter incoherence and unfamiliarity, of restoring a sense of belonging after his ‘fall.’ The narrative that springs from this need traces Edgar’s herculean efforts to meet this task, about which he writes to his fiancée Mary in a letter that takes up the largest portion of the tale; a letter that not only gives an account of its writer’s struggle to return home, but that also, and for my interest in the narrative productivity of belonging even more pertinently, gives voice and form to his desire of recohering his troubled life-world by narrative means.

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\(^5\) During Brown’s short life time (he was born 1771 and died of tuberculosis in 1810) the world order was swept up by the American, the French and the Haitian Revolutions as well as Spain’s loss of imperial hegemony to Great Britain. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, Thomas Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence*, Alexander Hamilton’s, James Madison’s and John Jay’s *Federalist Papers* were published. The Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance became the legal blueprints of colonizing the North American continent. The federal Constitution was signed, and soon thereafter Federalists and Republicans waged a fierce battle over the nature of the democratic order that had been ratified. Outside of established circles of political elites, dissatisfaction with this newly installed order erupted in Shay’s Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion; the Fugitive Slave Law and the Alien and Sedition Acts were ratified to regulate undesired movements of non-citizens. The Napoleonic Wars broke out and produced a vast power-vacuum on the Atlantic that was in turn seized by US oversea tradesmen. The Louisiana Purchase multiplied US territory several times, yet expanded it into parts of the continent’s interior still completely unknown to its non-indigenous population. Under the impact of increasing immigration, expeditions into the new territory were soon followed by settlement.

\(^6\) For historiographic work on this shift see Wood and Appleby. The republicanism-literality debate has also become a major trajectory of scholarship on early American literature. Warner, Ziff, and Gilmore stress the active role that the rise of the novel played in bringing about the gradual fading of the Early Republic’s republican ideology and its publically oriented literary culture.
Brown’s novel bundles and personifies this yearning for narrative in the figure of the letter-writing protagonist who needs to tell his story to resume a place where he can dwell. But he is a sleepwalker, which means that his yearning to belong is in a quintessentially deviant, erring state, and his capacity to give account of what has happened to him is seriously impaired. The result is a letter of epic proportions. Over the course of two-hundred-and-eighty pages, Edgar tells his fiancée about his adventures of trailing a sleepwalking Irishman whom he suspects of having murdered Mary’s brother and his beloved friend. He tells her about killing and eating a ferocious panther, slaughtering numerous Indians, and rescuing a girl who was their captive. About sleeping in an impressive number of strangers’ beds, escaping an ambush by jumping into a river from impossible heights, and fainting several times out of sheer exhaustion along the way. He also tells her about his encounter with a stranger named Weymouth who made credulous claims about the money that Mary had unexpectedly inherited upon her brother’s death, urging her to return it. And eventually, he tells her about finding out that he, too, is a sleepwalker, and that it was indeed his sleepwalking that brought him into the wilderness and made him a stranger to himself.

Loosely framed by the epistolary form, the narrative is restless and inconclusive. It contains stories within stories, changing narrators, characters that emerge out of nowhere and disappear again, plotlines that are elaborately built up and just as unexpectedly dropped. In Leslie Fiedler’s fitting words, “[i]t is a charmingly, a maddeningly disorganized book, not so much written as dreamed” (157). For a long time, the lacking coherence of Brown’s fiction was regarded as a major weakness of his work. The situation could hardly be more different today. Brown is now widely celebrated for the “complexity of his response and exploration of key concerns and issues in early national culture” – among them the intersecting debates on republicanism, nationalism, and expansionism, the rise of bourgeois liberalism and its impact on gender dynamics – and praised as an author whose “achievement … lay in his ability to radically challenge both form and content of contemporary writing” (Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro x). In assuming that “Brown’s work adequately, deliberately, and often intelligibly engages or represents a coherent early national culture,” the revisionist scholarship inverts assumptions of earlier criticism, which tended “to see Brown as a prototypical Romantic

7 Conjointly fixed by New Criticism’s normative aesthetics and the predominantly ‘exceptionalist’ concerns of Cold War American studies, Brown’s reputation as an artistically flawed writer remained firmly in place until the early 1980s. It was not until the transnational reconfiguration of early American studies that his reception underwent a profound revision. Three major shifts undergird this development: the break-up of the consensus view of early American ideological history and its underlying assumptions about the relation of individual and society through the republicanism-liberalism debate; the programmatic reevaluation of formerly disregarded genres such as the sentimental and the gothic; and the general expansion of the literary field in the wake of the canon debates. Ironically, by 2009 the tide had turned to such an extent that Waterman, introducing an Early American Studies Special Issue on Brown, wonders if ‘Brown studies’ have taken over the field of early American studies.
The Need for Narrative and the Limits of Narratability

author and framed him as writing against his culture rather than typifying it” (Waterman, “Introduction” 236). Which also means that features such as the maddening incoherence and excessive sentimentality of Brown's novels are now – and will be here – read as historical symptoms whose ‘problematic’ forms are artistically sound and innovative means of expressing a sense of disorientation that was deeply engrained into its contemporaneity.8

Building on and yet departing from these revisionist concerns, my own engagement with Brown's work does not aim at producing historical ‘evidence’ about the larger discursive field in which it is situated and the subject positions that it contains; nor does it seek to determine whether the novel is acting out or striving against the premises of its ideological context. Approaching it with an interest in the need for narrative that uncertain states of belonging bring forth, I seek to trace a struggle of articulation and form-giving that touches upon the shifting foundations of social being at this time. Brown’s fiction is so interesting in this regard, because it seeks to expose and explore these foundations and their limitations. It questions traditional authorities (enlightenment ideas of reason, traditional gender roles and the paternalistic order) and voices latent anxieties about material insecurity and moral corruption in a world mobilized by self-made success. These themes run through Brown’s fiction like a red thread. What Edgar Huntly adds to them is a concern with the frontier, which it imagines as haunted by a colonial past of violence and dispossession that deeply troubles the narrated present and future. In fact, the frontier enters American fiction with this novel. It features prominently, not as the mere allegory of a disturbed psyche that a former generation of scholars has detected in it, but as a “recognizable landscape” imagined as a site of recurring violence and dispossession (Jehlen 162).9 More than a mere background, Edgar Huntly’s frontier setting “provides the literal premises for the possibilities and trajectory of narrative action – inscribing, describing and circumscribing an extrapolative or speculative […] world and giving that fantasized world a significant and visibly signifying shape and temporal dimension” (Sobchack 123). The brutal killings of Edgar’s parents and his infant sibling, the resulting move of the remaining Huntly children

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8 Garbo's Coincidental Art was most instrumental in bringing about this revaluation. His structuralist readings of Brown’s major novels contended that, whatever one might think of Brown’s prose style, his plots were intricately crafted rather than hastily improvised. Later critics extended this revision with the use of narrative discourse and performance theory. See especially Wall Hinds, Barnard, Bellis, Downes, Hagenbüchle, Hamelman, and Keitel.

9 For Jehlen, the novel is “at once seminal and terminal, the first to envision a specifically American psyche and also more or less the last to represent taking possession of the continent not as destined fulfillment but […] as conquest” (161). Earlier readings had valued it primarily for its psychological dimension. Ringe was the first to praise Brown for adding a psychic dimension to the gothic genre. In fact, for him the ‘Americanness’ of Brown’s fiction was not primarily a matter of its setting but of psychologizing narrative techniques. The most influential psychological reading of the novel stems from Fiedler, for whom the protagonist’s destructive desires are forces of the id, which he, in turn, interprets as a token of the conservative underpinnings genuine to American gothic fiction in general.
to their uncle’s house (a farm built at a site that was formerly occupied by a Delaware village), the killings of Edgar’s uncle and his closest friend spring immediately from the settlers’ violent struggles to take possession of their non-native land.

The troubled state of belonging that resonates through this setting gains voice in the first-person account of a figure that becomes the narrator of this story out of a profound experience of loss and insecurity. To come to terms with this uncomfortable state is the narrative’s primary theme and motivation. Yet imagining the novel’s setting in these particular terms and no other inscribes the dwelling places envisioned by the novel with historical remnants of betrayal, loss, and guilt that deeply trouble the ways in which these places can be ‘used’ and ‘lived’ (in the Lefebvrian sense). It has often been pointed out how intensely Edgar Huntly’s fictional assessment of frontier violence draws from historical record, most notably the infamous Walking Purchase of 1737, a fraudulent land deal between European/Quaker settlers and a Delaware tribe that took place precisely at the site Brown chose as the setting of his story, and that is known to have stirred a series of particularly violent revenge raids.10 But while the historical references made by the novel are doubtlessly striking in their accuracy and complexity (and it is likely that the novel’s contemporary readers were familiar with them), they are implied rather than explicated. In stressing this point I do not want to dismiss the importance of tracing and contextualizing these historical markers. However, in terms of the narrative operations performed by the novel, the silent and suggestive nature of these references is significant: they are situated outside of the plotted story, rendered to spaces in-between the lines, and are, in this important sense, not part of what the narratable of this time.

This point is further underscored by the fact that the mise-en-scène of this historical struggle is one of gradual domestication. Whenever the frontier setting is described, it is done by drawing on the picturesque, an aesthetic regime that correlates and binds seemingly random and irrelevant parts together with the effect of containing the ‘unruly’ features of its object of

10 Initiated by William Penn’s sons John and Thomas, the Walking Purchase resurveyed a tract of land measured on the basis of what could be walked by a man along a windy river in a day and a half. Penn’s sons manipulated these conditions by previously clearing straight paths into the wilderness, hiring several walkers in particularly good shape and equipping them with support teams. What would under regular conditions have added up to a walk of about twenty-five miles was thus extended to sixty-four miles and a resulting territory of 1,200 square miles of tribal land that the Delawares then lost to the Pennsylvanian settlers. Scholars have identified “the Elm” (consistently capitalized throughout the novel), which ironically marks the site of Waldegrave’s murder, as a reference to the tree at which the founding of the state was sealed in a peace treaty between Quakers, led by William Penn, and Lenni Lenape/Delaware Indians in 1782. For in-depth accounts of Brown’s use of this event see Krause, Luck, and Sivilis. Rowe discusses the Walking Purchase as a key event of the rise of U.S. imperialism, in which Brown’s novels participate by providing a respective imaginary.
depiction. The houses that Edgar passes on his way from the cavern back to civilization underscore this spatial logic of domestication. Many scholars have written insightfully about these houses, reading them as mirroring a progression in Edgar’s behavior which is most violent at the site closest to the wilderness (Garbo 65; Slotkin 384-93), as visual markers in the frontier landscape that enhance the productive use of the picturesque (Berthold 79-83) and “symbolically reiterate the social order that they host” (Wall Hinds, “Brown’s Revenge” 56), or as manifesting the process of remodeling the period’s notions of national identity (Faherty 56-66). What I want to add to these observations is that these dwellings – all allegories of attempted, yet either precarious or failed belonging – turn the western frontier into a thoroughly social space; a space that becomes visible as an effect of the “interlocking and articulating nets of social relations” (Massey 168) among those who imagine to live in them and those who contest their presence. In fact, the houses depicted by the novel turn the western frontier into a “‘place’ [...] formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location” (168, my emphasis) and deformed by the corrosive forces inscribed into the process of civilization, symbolized by the degeneration of the most lavish house, and by using them as primary sites for the staging of revenge violence.

Interacting with these dark and ambiguous depictions of the (western) frontier, is another, rarely acknowledged but no less foundational fiction of modern America: the eastern frontier of the Atlantic, embodied by the figure of the immigrant or ‘alien other’ and imagined as an unstable contact zone of possible contagion. As Luke Gibbons has pointed out, “in terms of historical grievances and political trajectories, both frontiers represent very different presences on the political landscape: the Native American [inhabiting the western frontier] is territorially defined and seeks to retain – or regain – tribal land; the immigrant [inhabiting the eastern frontier], by contrast, has forsaken the homeland and has chosen to reinvent himself or herself in the New World” (25). Along the same lines of difference, the two frontiers also provide opposing frames for imagining potential dwelling places. In the first

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11 For a longer discussion on the importance of the picturesque in the visual appropriation of the North American continent, see my essay “Transatlantic Landscapes.” In “Narrative Frontiers” Wall Hinds also stresses the imaginative conquest of space thus performed, supporting Mitchell’s claim that landscape can be understood as enacting the “‘dreamwork’ of imperialism, unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose both fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance” (10). For discussions of the picturesque in Edgar Huntly, see Bertold and Lueck.

12 The terms are drawn from Gibbons. For further discussions of this topic, see for example Slotkin, Rowe, and Garner. Garner specifically elaborates on how the racializations of these multiple ‘others’ (including the millions of involuntary immigrants brought from Africa as slaves) and their legal regulation through the Alien and Sedition Acts played a distinctive role in forging an ‘American’ identity. Irish immigrants, whom the Alien and Sedition Act particularly targeted and who play a key role in providing mysterious, potentially evil ‘others’ in Brown’s novels, are employed as instrumental figures not only in forging that identity but also in threatening to destabilize it.
scenario, these places are gained in a territorial conflict with roots in the past that haunts all possible forms of belonging with the question: where do we come from? In the second scenario, they are gained in a conflict about social mobility spinning into the future that haunts the prospect of belonging with the question: where do we go?

In Edgar Huntly, these two frontier imaginaries are not juxtaposed, but they overlap and seep into each another with the effect of complicating the possibilities of dwelling imagined by the novel. The fact that three of the above dwellers at the western frontier – the nameless builder of the hut on its outer edge, the suspected murderer who later becomes an inhabitant of this hut, and the owner of the degenerated ‘mansion’ – are Irishmen clearly points in this direction; that ‘Old Deb’/’Queen Mab’ temporarily lives in the same dwelling as two of them shows how intricately the two frontiers are intertwined. Clithero, the quiet and withdrawn man without a past and the main suspect in the plot that Edgar constructs around his friend’s murder, is the most potent embodiment of the eastern frontier. When “conn[ing] over the catalogue” of his populous neighborhood, Edgar easily singles him out as “the only foreigner among us” (14). In the patriarchal scheme of his community, “this was an exception to the rule. Clithero was a stranger, whose adventures and character, previously to his coming hither, were unknown to us” (14). In this mode of spatial production, the ‘alien other’ without a past must assume the role of the unpredictable, potentially dangerous intruder. Yet what Edgar does not acknowledge, neither in this passage nor elsewhere in his letter, is the uncanny resemblance of Clithero’s position with his own, orphaned and without any viable prospect of land inheritance as they both are.

And yet the paternalistic order that promises to domesticate the frontier is vanishing. Its New World variant, embodied by Edgar’s home community, is doomed to fail because it refuses to integrate those who (like its ‘native son’ Edgar and the ‘alien other’ Clithero) fall outside of the scheme of land inheritance and thus become threats to its cohesion. This is the spatial predicament of the eastern frontier envisioned by the novel. It falters again because it is haunted by the collective guilt of conquest and dispossession that culminates in Waldegrave’s random death and the course of destruction that follows. This is the predicament of the novel’s western frontier. And as if the protagonist is drawn to this guilt, it is a deliberate move toward the latter frontier that sets the narrative in motion: Edgar leaves the road that would take him home to revisit the site of his friend’s murder where he stumbles across the mysterious Irishman and embarks on the kind of “détour, an intention which is an irritation” that constitutes the very material of narrative production (Brooks, “Masterplot” 292). Yet the failings of New World paternalism that it exposes along the way do not create any nostalgic longings for its Old World predecessors. Even its modernized version, embodied by the Irish

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13 Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker, ed. by Krause and Reid. All further references are based on this edition and given in brackets in the main text.
noble lady who marries the proto-enlightenment man of reason and multiple skills (ranging from surgeon via intellectual and teacher to businessman), is bound to vanish, simply because it fails to socially reproduce itself.

Cast against the two faces of this “old-fashioned, even feudal” (Wood, Radicalism 40) economy of landownership and inheritance is the order of liberal capitalism. This emerging order is depicted as a vertically and horizontally mobile “economics of paper currency and speculation” that is run by an equally emerging entrepreneurial class (Wall Hinds, “Brown’s Revenge” 52). Even more distinctly than the space of the frontier, the space unfolding from this order is imagined through the figures that embody it; and as these figures are imagined to be strikingly mobile, the space unfolding from them is constituted by their relentless movements and shifts through abrupt changes in individual itineraries and social relations. Weymouth is the figure that most clearly embodies this order. He appears out of nowhere at the Huntly farm to ask for Edgar’s help in retrieving a substantial sum of money. According to his story, he had asked Waldegrave to keep it for him while going on a trade adventure that took him to the eastern shores of the Atlantic (an itinerary that also associates him with the eastern frontier). In fact, he had put everything he owned into this adventure to maximize his possible gain except for the money (a fortune substantial enough to secure his existence) that he allegedly left with Edgar’s friend. Hoping to return with abundant means to provide for his old father, the wife taken during his travels, and himself, he suffers shipwreck, imprisonment, and a life-threatening disease, and ends up losing everything but his life.

Edgar elaborately recounts this story in a passage that stretches over several chapters, portraying the other not as a cruel capitalist but as a farsighted, responsible, and trustworthy victim of a reckless system. Weymouth’s misfortune and the insecure place into which it has brought him (his loss includes the legal documentation of him transferring the money to Waldegrave so that he can do nothing but plea for its return) is construed as a product of the emerging liberal order rather than a product of false ambition or flawed character. This judgment is underscored by Edgar’s passionate comment about the other’s misfortune:

What a mournful tale! Is such the lot of those who wander from their rustic homes in search of fortune? Our countrymen are prone to enterprise, and are scattered all over the sea and every land in pursuit of wealth which will not screen them from disease and infirmity, which is missed much oftener than found, and which, when gained, by no means compensates them for the hardships and vicissitudes endured in the pursuit. (154)

But Weymouth’s fate is not only tragic for his own sake: the money that Waldegrave had been asked to keep and that Edgar, after listening to the other’s “mournful tale,” promises to help restore is that same money

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14 According to historical record, the unprecedented wealth sweeping the country as a result of these transformations raised the average level of prosperity with the effect of fostering a wide acceptance of the newly emerging entrepreneurial spirit. See for example Appleby, Capitalism; Watts, Republic and Romance.
miraculously inherited by Mary upon her brother’s death. The material security thus promised to her – and to Edgar himself, were they to be married – dissolves through the sudden appearance of its “rightful owner” (154) just as unexpectedly as it had materialized through her brother’s untimely death. In this ironic twist of fate, the place envisioned by Edgar and Mary on the basis of Mary’s inheritance turns out to be a chimera, arising from the unlikely conjunction of two impossible spatial orders: the blood-trenched grounds of the frontier and the unpredictably shifting grounds of the emerging liberal order. Entangling Edgar’s and Mary’s prospect of material security not only with Waldegrave’s untimely death but also with Weymouth’s economic risk-taking makes this second order equally hazardous: it ‘infects’ the old, presumably stable prospect of securing one’s place by means of inheritance with the radical instabilities of entrepreneurial capitalism.

Epistolar Transgressions

If the world in which belonging is sought in this novel emerges from two conflicting orders and their respective modes of spatial production, both are rejected in the figure of the protagonist. Excluded from the patriarchal scheme (first by orphanage, then by the carelessness or choice with which he forecloses the opportunity of becoming Sarsetfield’s and Mrs. Lorimer’s heir), Edgar does not show the slightest professional aspiration that might create a place for him in the emerging world of liberal capitalism. His two outstanding talents – storytelling and box-making – are used for non-commercial ends only; his actions are completely devoted to leisure, and there is no discernible motivation of changing his bohemian way of life. Edgar’s distinctive (self-) positioning outside of the two available orders constitutes the space from which the narrative evolves. In fact, the yearning to belong that drives his narrative is not geared toward emplacing him in either one of those orders; both of them are imagined as uninhabitable. Rather, the narrative is geared toward asserting a sense of belonging through the act of narration itself.

The novel opening is programmatic in this regard. It stages an enunciative act of self-assertion that generates its narrative momentum directly from an ailing state of incoherence; a state in which telling one’s story offers itself as “the only viable form of ‘explanation’” (Brooks, Reading 54):

I sit down, my friend, to comply with thy request. At length does the impetuosity of my fears, the transports of my wonder permit me to recollect my promise and perform it. At length I am somewhat delivered from suspense and from tremors. At length the drama is brought to an imperfect close, and the series of events that absorbed my faculties, that hurried away my attention, has terminated in repose. (5)

If these opening lines unmistakably communicate that the following narrative is brought to us in the form of a letter it needs to be stressed that Edgar Huntly is certainly not an epistolary novel in the traditional sense (like, for example, Brown’s two later novels, Clara Howard and Jane Talbot). And yet the
novel’s toying with the epistolary form is highly significant for its narrative pursuit of belonging. In fact, is bending and transgressing this form brings forth the most important and innovative narrative strategies in this regard.

To better grasp these dynamics I want to consider the evolution of the epistolary genre for a moment. Emerging as the novel’s first popular sub-genre in the mid-eighteenth century, the success of early epistolary novels such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) (both widely read in North America), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774) or Laclos’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1784) is so closely tied to the novel becoming the most influential literary institution of the modern age that one can think of it as substantially evolving from this particular form. Approaching this genealogy with an interest in the narrative productivity engendered by the need to belong makes tangible some rarely acknowledged, yet central aspects about the creative adaption from which the novel’s rise departs. Fictionalizing a pragmatic form of writing whose sole raison-d’être was to maintain a sense of belonging in increasingly mobile social formations, the epistolary novel untangles the dialogic structure inherent to this form from the need to both await and respond to an actual letter. In fact, it exploits this artistic self-sufficiency as a main resource of gratification. The reader of these stories gets to participate in an epistolary exchange without having to create an own narrative account; instead she can fully immerse herself in the reception – the ‘consummation’ – of the narrative. In other words, the lure of this new kind of literature lies precisely in exchanging a real, intersubjective form of dialogue for the imaginary self-sufficiency of fictional narration.

*Edgar Huntly* is a particularly interesting case in this regard since its adaptation of the epistolary form reenacts this process of artistic emancipation. As early as in the first paragraph, a simultaneous borrowing and bending of the epistolary conventions becomes tangible: a reader is directly addressed but the formal line of address and the indication of place and time that are usually part of this genre are omitted with the effect that the reader has to wait, as in a novel, for further clues about the letter’s addressee. And once the epistolary form has been ‘out-used’ for the task of initiating the narrative and establishing its basic frame (the narrator has experienced something so disturbing that he can only now begin to tell about it and needs a ‘real’ interlocutor to be able to tell his tale), the narrative quickly grows into epic proportions, geared toward assuming a totalizing completeness without the addressee’s response. The letter departs from the addressee’s request to stay informed about its writer’s life and ends with the promise that he will visit her “as soon as [he has] seen Sarsefield” and “discuss with [her] in conversation […] [his] schemes for the future” (282). But despite its epic proportions and the novelistic pose of self-sufficiency (for example through its division into chapters), the story that is told is far from complete without the three letters exchanged.

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15 This silencing has a clear gender bias: none of the female characters – Mary, Mrs. Lorimer, Clarice, Shelby’s wife, ‘Old Deb’/‘Queen Mab’ – are allowed to speak for themselves, and ‘Old Deb’/‘Queen Mab’ is even said to speak in unintelligible tongues. For an in-depth discussion of the silenced women in Brown’s fiction see Persons.
between Edgar and Sarsefield that follow the main narrative. In fact, the final correspondence is absolutely crucial for the narrative design. Not only does it introduce a new addressee, but it also grants him a voice of his own. In fact, it leaves the novel’s final pages to a voice that explicitly and substantially challenges the narrative authority that exclusively ruled thus far.

Making up a total of just ten pages, this final correspondence challenges some of the most vital conclusions reached in the epic ‘Mary-letter’: we learn that Clithero is not on his way to recovery but has indeed turned out to be the dangerous maniac about whom Sarsefield had warned Edgar all along; that Edgar, in his obsessive desire to relieve the madman from his equally obsessive conviction of being the murderer of his former patroness (now Sarsefield’s wife), had become entangled in the other’s evil schemes – fulfilling his destiny as Mrs. Lorimer’s murderer – by telling him her whereabouts, and that he nonetheless pleads for Sarsefield’s compassion. The other’s response brutally shatters this hope. In a tone that – especially when read back to back with Edgar’s highly sentimentalized writing mode – comes across as strikingly matter of fact, he rapport only the most basic information: that he left his home immediately upon receiving Edgar’s first letter (which consisted of nothing but a short warning that Clithero is on his way with “mysterious intentions” (283) to see his former patroness) in the urgent pursuit of the madman’s arrest; that while supervising the latter’s deportation to a psychiatric asylum, he witnessed him drowning after going overboard in a final attempt to get away and that in Sarsefield’s absence, Edgar’s second letter arrived and was read by Mrs. Lorimer who was so terrified by what she had read that she lost the child that she was pregnant with.

The harsh and definite “Farewell” concluding Sarsefield’s letter leaves no doubt that their relationship will not be resumed in the future. Yet as definite as this endpoint may be, the unexpected twists preceding it – enforced by the exclamation-mark-like death of the unborn child – produces radical non-closure rather than ‘the sense of an ending’ with vast consequences for the main narrator’s struggle to belong. In fact, the novel’s hybrid structure of epistolary and ‘conventional’ novelistic storytelling – one crafting a series of present moments and projecting an open future, the other retrospectively working toward a meaningful ending – is generated by two conflicting yearnings to belong. The retrospective parts are driven by the longing to resume a place at and through which meaning and familiarity are at least provisionally restored, while the sections breaking with this retrospective mode are driven by the longing to keep all questions of belonging wide open. The narrative thus simultaneously stages a longing for recovery and its rejection. And while the latter, retrospective mode makes up the by far largest part of the narrative, its epistolary initiation and framing, albeit rudimentary, provides a way of binding and coercing the novel’s antagonistic yearnings by construing a narrator who speaks with maximal immediacy and passion from a severely troubled psychic state.

16 The expression is drawn from Kermode. See McArthur for an in-depth discussion of the non-closural dynamics of the epistolary novel.
This also means that narrative agency is most powerfully assumed through the epistolary form. And yet the opening paragraphs unmistakably warn their readers that this agency is seriously impaired. While Edgar’s initial remarks claim that he is finally calm enough to give account of what has happened, he is quick to admit that his account-giving capacity has not been fully recovered, to which he adds that a full recovery might even eclipse the events and experiences that he longs to report. The intricate way in which narrative agency is at once assumed and deferred at the novel’s beginning deserves a lengthy citation:

Till now, to hold a steadfast pen was impossible; to disengage my senses from the scene that was passing or approaching; to forbear to grasp at futurity; to suffer so much thought to wander from the purpose that engrossed my fears and my hopes, could not be.

Yet am I sure that even now my perturbations are sufficiently stilled for an employment like this? That the incidents I am going to relate can be recalled and arranged without indistinctness and confusion? Time may take away these headlong energies, and give me back my ancient sobriety. But this change will only be effected by weakening my remembrance of these events. In proportion as I gain power over my words, shall I lose dominion over my sentiments; in proportion as my tale is deliberate and slow, the incidents and motives which it is designed to exhibit will be imperfectly revived and obscurely portrayed. (5-6)

The double movement of claiming narrative agency while conceding to its insurmountable limitations that is performed here installs the narrative with a tension that pervades it on all formal and structural levels. Yet realizing that his capacity to tell his story is impaired does not diminish the narrator’s intent to tell. To the contrary, he knows that he must tell this story – not only because he has made a promise to his fiancée, but also and maybe even primarily because he needs to separate himself from the experience that haunts him if he wants to resume a place in the world.

At a closer look, the narrator is caught between two equally unattractive evils: the fear that revisiting these experiences may thrust him back into confusion and the concern that he might distance himself so far from what has happened that he can no longer truthfully remember it. In explicating this troubling state, the impaired sense of narrative agency is used to stage and explore a gap inherent to all remembering. As the narrator sets out to tell his story, he discovers within his contradictory feelings – the urge to tell and the delay of telling – a discrepancy between the object of remembrance as it was ‘then’ and his own mental image of it. More than a mere source of irritation, this gap or discrepancy between object and subject of remembrance is a constant site of hermeneutical inspection and thus a constant generator of narrative. In narratological terms, this tension may best be described as a split between ‘experiencing self’ and ‘narrating self,’ the first mobilizing the narrative and driving it into the future, the second contemplating this
process and making sense of it by means of narrative emplotment.\textsuperscript{17} If narrative agency succeeds in generating a sense of belonging, it succeeds because it manages to soothe this gap: an unsettling experience generates a narrative impulse, creates a drive to register its impact, and is then, somewhat belatedly (and thus retrospectively), transformed into a familiar mental object by means of narrative emplotment. This basic narrative ‘situation’ is indeed implicit to any pursuit of belonging.\textsuperscript{18}

This also explains why a novel that toys with epistolary narration provides a particularly interesting case for studying a narrative productivity that stems from the need to belong. Through its highly conventionalized art of crafting a narrative exchange about unsettling events, it is generically inclined to staging and exploring the negotiating process between the experiencing and the narrating self as the very site at which belonging can be gained or lost. *Edgar Huntly’s* opening passage stages nothing less than a war between the two. The narrator longs to tell his story but has the greatest difficulties to separate himself from his experience; to let the narrating self take over. He achieves a truce between the two by drawing the letter’s recipient into his conflict. In fact, the narrative is initiated by the narrator’s articulated wish to reconnect with his fiancée and meet her request to stay informed about his life during their separation. Brooks has compellingly argued that the desire to tell is ultimately “the desire for an interlocutor, a listener, who enters into the narrative exchange” (*Reading* 216) and expects something in return. And yet this novel does not discover the ‘contractual’ nature of storytelling as its narrative draws to a close. Rather, it begins with claim idea that both teller and listener will be transformed by the story and creates a narrator who does everything in his power to subvert the terms of the contract that his listener expects to have entered.

The opening words “I sit down, my friend, to comply with thy request” draw the letter’s recipient – and with her, the reader of the novel – into a binding commitment. What she is asked to give in return for the story is made perfectly clear just a few paragraphs later: let the narrative take possession of her. “Thou wilt catch from my story every horror and every sympathy which it paints. Thou wilt shudder with my forboding and dissolve with my tears. As the sister of my friend, and one who honors me with her affection, thou wilt share in all my tasks and all my dangers” (6). An yet no matter how boldly the longing to possess his addressee it is expressed here, moving her with his story to the point of dissolving their separate identities is only half of the desire driving the narrative. The narrator longs for her to assure himself that

\textsuperscript{17} The terms are drawn from Stanzel. Although not seamlessly translatable, the terms correspond to Roland Barthes’s differentiation between a ‘proairetic code’ (also called the ‘code of action’ or ‘Voice of the Empirical’) and the hermeneutic code (also called the ‘code of enigmas and answers’ or ‘Voice of Truth’). See Barthes, *SZ*. In his discussion of these terms, Brooks writes: “Plot might then be best thought of as an ‘overcoding’ of the proairetic by the hermeneutic code, the latter structuring the discrete elements of the former into larger interpretative wholes, working out their play of meaning and significance” (*Reading* 18).

\textsuperscript{18} The term is also Stanzel’s.
his struggle to extrapolate his story from an experience so disturbing that it shuns narration will be heard and sympathetically received. The longing to be received is indeed crucial to the need to tell that drives this narrative: born from the discovery of the contractual nature undergirding any such need, it is geared toward a listener who, in desiring the narrative, designates the desired locus of belonging. And yet as the novel’s long first letter progresses it becomes increasingly clear that Edgar needs Mary as a listener to bequithe a past disturbance, but he does not want to belong to her in the future. In fact, he longs to separate himself from her once she has desired and received his story.

It is hard to disagree that the story he tells her to this end is inconclusive and confusing: the mystery around Waldegrave’s murderer is lost out of sight and then abruptly resumed at he end by turning him into the victim of a random act of revenge violence; the story of ‘Old Deb’/‘Queen Mab,’ first elaborately built up, is halfheartedly resolved by having her arrested without resistance for inflammatory activity; the narrator’s own sleepwalking is never compellingly reflected. Yet despite all this maze, the further course of Edgar and Mary’s relationship is clearly projected. In a long passage of direct address, situated almost exactly in the middle of the book, Edgar uses the narrative agency of the letter-writer to the fullest and boldest extent when he practically cancels their engagement. In fact, the narrative reaches its greatest conclusiveness in this middle passage. Interrupting the letter’s retrospective narrative for four entire pages, it is by far the longest of its kind. The circumstances, rhetoric and effects of this passage of direct address deserve closer scrutiny.

The passage grows out of recounting Weymouth’s story whose quintessential role for narrating and rejecting the liberal spatial order has already been addressed. After listening to the other’s misfortune, Edgar is convinced that the money that Mary inherited belongs to the stranger and that she must return it. The situation is delicate, however, since neither legal proof nor private documentation exists to substantiate the stranger’s claim. Mary has to solely base her decision on Edgar’s account of the other’s story. But despite the lack of ‘hard evidence’ and in full awareness of the gravity of the consequences – returning the money would thrust her back into poverty, dissolve the financial basis of their marriage, and leave Edgar and his sisters homeless in the near future – Edgar urges her that returning the money is the right thing to do. As if to authorize his bold advice with personal sacrifice, he stresses his own share of the burden and then progresses to announcing his retreat from their engagement:

I know the precariousness of my condition and that of my sisters, that our subsistence hinges on the life of an old man. My uncle’s death will transfer the property to his son, who is a stranger and an enemy to us, and the first act of whose authority will unquestionably be to turn us forth from these doors. Marriage with thee was anticipated with joyous emotions, not merely on my own account or on thine, but likewise for the sake of those beloved girls, to whom that event would enable me to furnish an asylum.
But wedlock is now more distant than ever. My heart bleeds to think of the sufferings which my beloved Mary is again fated to endure, but regrets are only aggravations of calamity. They are pernicious, and it is our duty to shake them off. (156-57)

The use of the substantive form – “precariousness” – stresses the gravity of Edgar’s concern. Bringing in his sisters and the longing to provide for them amplifies it semantically. And although the first paragraph speaks about the future, the verbs are determined rather than speculative; adding “unquestionably” further enforces the closural force of this passage. Edgar’s breakup line is cast against the rhetorical substance of this sacrifice. The legal term “wedlock” turns the prospected marriage into a mere technicality that does not seem to have anything to do with his loving feelings for her. Pitted against this impersonal legal entity, the shared sense of duty and sacrifice offers a vision of unity beyond their disengagement. In the light of the decisiveness of his announcement that “wedlock is now more distant than ever,” the chapter’s final concession – “[t]hese considerations […] will be weighed when we meet” (156) – sounds like an empty promise. Which is another way of saying that the ‘narrative action’ undertaken in this carefully construed piece of rhetoric is at once direct and veiled. Edgar wants Mary to return the money even though this means the end of their future union and he is quite outspoken about his willingness to manipulate her to this end. “I will exert all my influence, it is not small, to induce her to restore [the money]” (144), he assures Weymouth – and thus also tells her since the recapitulated encounter with the stranger is part of his letter.

In changing the contractual terms of their relationship, this announcement also changes the terms of narrative transfer: Edgar does not tell this story in order to arrive at a point where they belong together; he tells it to dissolve the prospect of belonging to her. The motive he gives to her is strictly moral (they cannot build their future on money that does not rightfully belong to them), but the epistolary form creates a narrative surface that is too opaque to gain any ‘genuine’ insight into the narrator’s psychic life. Had he only considered marrying her as long as she had money? Or had he begun to have doubts about marrying her prior to finding out that the money was most likely not rightfully hers, so that Weymouth’s visit came as a handy excuse for dismissing their wedding plans? In rendering these questions indeterminable, this passage makes tangible the limits of asserting stable meanings and predicable conduct inscribed into the narrative by its toying with the epistolary form. No matter how disturbed the letter-writing narrator may be, what he says and how he says it is carefully weighed with regard to the effects he hopes to evoke in his correspondent. In fact, the epistolary form of the narrative veils the narrator’s psychic state by exposing what is said to the anticipated judgment of the correspondent. And while conventional letter writing is subject to a similar kind of distortion, its embeddedness in lived rather than fictional relations relativizes its effects. The literary adaptation amplifies them by putting the recipient in a position in which both sides – and psyches – of the correspondence have to be imagined.
Yet while the epistolary renderings of the novel make it impossible to gain any definite insight into Edgar’s ‘true’ or ‘private’ state of mind, the timing of his turn to a kind of narrative action that the epistolary form enables is striking: it happens right after his account of Weymouth’s story – from which we not only learn that Mary will most likely be poor again, but also that she must be pregnant – and right before Edgar’s mysterious awaking in the pitch-dark cave. His letter to Mary is plotted in a way that strongly suggests that Weymouth’s visit is the cause of Edgar sleepwalking into the wilderness. In fact, this plotting operation connects Weymouth’s visit immediately to Edgar’s transformation into a fearless Indian fighter and the odyssey back to his “natal township” (221, emphasis in the original) that has been swept up by violent revenge attacks of the Delaware Indians during his absence. Placing the prospective passage of direct address and the dissolution of Edgar and Mary’s engagement that it performs right in between these two events assigns the passage with a crucial function in the narrative design of the novel. It both separates the first part (dedicated to the search for Waldegrave’s murderer) from the second part (dedicated to Edgar’s horrifying experience of awaking in the cave and its disconcerting aftermath) but also binds them together. In fact, it seems that narration changes its course so radically because it seeks to interrupt a no-longer-desired trajectory of belonging.

But there is more to this self-serving assertion of narrative agency: It is the ultimate act of dismissing any pursuit of belonging through material means. And if this break-up passage exposes the degree to which belonging depends on narrative it also suggests that it has to be sought in the retrospective parts that take over from here on again. How perfectly fitting that this consequential passage culminates in the narrator’s announcement that he will “[m]eanwhile […] return to [his] narrative” (157). Prolonging the act of storytelling is indeed the narrator’s most vital desire.

Belonging as Unterhaltung

If narration is so clearly geared toward prolonging its own activity in this novel it comes as no surprise that one of its most striking features is the internal drive toward ‘narrative mobilization.’ In fact, and at first thought somewhat paradoxically, it is through this feature that belonging is most rigorously pursued. To the extent that the possibility (or desire) of restoring the protagonist’s unsettled senses of place and self by way of actual moments of arrival or return are dismissed as narrative trajectories of belonging, the promise of recovery is shifted to the realm of imaginative self-assertion. Here, it is most effectively realized by means of staging and exploring the act of storytelling itself. Assuming narrative agency and testing its capacity to craft a compelling narrative thus becomes the rite de passage for the unsettled sense of belonging from which the novel speaks. But since this agency is impaired, the pursuit of belonging as creative consolidation cannot

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19 The term is drawn from Brooks, Reading.
aspire formal mastery in any conventional sense. Rather, exposing and exploring the limits of the narratable becomes the primary end of narrative form-giving. And if belonging as imaginative self-assertion is sought at these limits, in that semantic grey-zone where the imagination fades and falters, mobilizing rather than stabilizing the narrative offers itself as a viable course of action.

Diegetically, the most powerful mobilizing force is physical movement. Sentimental mobilization is often described in physical terms (recollections “plunge” the narrator “into anguish and perplexity” and he is “hurried” into “the insanity of vengeance and grief” [8]), and intellectual quest is habitually performed across space: In fact, all main characters are constantly on the move, with the effect of delivering, spreading and merging their stories whenever they meet. The story of Edgar’s adventures begins programmatically in this regard: the protagonist is on the road, walking home from a rendezvous with his correspondent. And since his nocturnal journey makes him melancholic, he abandons his route to revisit the site of his friend’s murder, not minding that “[his] journey would, by these means, be considerably prolonged” (9). In the account that follows, Edgar barely rests. Driven by his quest to find his friend’s murderer, he walks back and forth between his uncle’s house and the site of the crime, pursues his sleepwalking suspect all over the countryside for several nights in a row, and takes more long walks as he waits for the much desired interview. Even in those rare moments in which his movements are arrested, Edgar paces. But with this narrator, physical movement is a narrative motor that is frequently dissociated from consciousness, either through falling into states of ‘reverie’ or when sleepwalking. At once propelling and impairing the agency assumed by the narrator, these dissociated physical movements turn out to be the most effective vehicle to delineate and push against contemporary confines of belonging. I will return to them in the concluding section.

The novel’s use of sentimental mobilization has been widely discussed in the scholarship on Brown. Announced by the author himself in the preliminary note “To the Public,” this strategy plays out in the frequent remarks about the narrator’s present state of turmoil and disorientation and in his highly emotionalized way of storytelling. Unlike in sentimental novels narrated by an external narrator, however, sentiment is not retrospectively projected into the events recounted by an uninvolved, morally unsuspicious observer to legitimize the telling of the tale. Rather, it propels the diegesis from within the fictional world. Only to the extent that the narrating self feels can it begin to connect with the experiencing self again; only if this connection holds can the protagonist tell his story and narrate himself back into having a place in the world. His feelings thus function as the throbbing pulse of the narrative. They determine the direction and intensity of every action performed or accounted for and the coercive force that holds the dispersed elements of the narrative together. Edgar reports, for example, to have left the road home to revisit the site of the murder when his “recollections once more plunged [him] into anguish and perplexity” (7); when arriving there,
the “mighty anguish” and “heart-bursting grief” of the half-naked stranger whom he finds suspiciously digging at this site moves him so profoundly that “[e]very sentiment, at length, yielded into sympathy” (11).

Sympathy is indeed the feeling that guides Edgar’s actions in the first half of the novel (i.e. his nocturnal trailing of this stranger through the province’s western wilderness, his quest for an interview, his explorations of the cave into which the other has disappeared and the provision of food for him). In amplifying the mediating capacities of feelings as the narrator’s primary form of attachment to the world, the narrative taps (not without warning of the ‘dangers’ involved) into contemporary beliefs about the pedagogical merits of sentimental fiction. In doing so, it acts out and stages Hume’s idea that ‘passions’ are an indispensible ingredient of any mental activity: they stimulate the imagination and thus make it possible to integrate new thoughts and impressions into the realm of the already familiar. Just as in Hume’s model, sense is made – or rather, in this novel, attempted to be made – when feelings intermingle with the ideas that the narrator relentlessly generates in his intellectual search for meaning.

Lists of questions, adding up to entire paragraphs, can be found throughout the text. When contemplating whether or not to revisit the site of Waldegrave’s murder, for example, Edgar asks himself: “What could I expect to find? Had it [the site] not been a hundred

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20 Based on their reception of sensationalist models of the human mind, specifically those of Locke and Hume, progressive writers such as William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Holcroft, Robert Bage, Helen Maria Williams, Thomas Paine, and Brown had come to believe that emotions can encourage moral behavior and that imaginative literature could be used to the end of fostering a more democratic society. For further discussion see Clemit and Kelly.

21 For Hume, the imagination conditions all mental activity, be it directed toward external objects or toward introspection, just as it is impossible to know with certainty whether impressions or memories derive from a supposedly external object or are produced by the creative power of the mind (84-85). In one of the many passages in the Treatise of Human Nature (1734) dedicated to this matter, he writes: “Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chace [sic] our imagination to the heavens, or the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear’d in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc’d. The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when supposed specifically different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. Generally speaking we do not suppose them specifically different; but only attribute them different relations, connections and durations” (67-68). In this at once enabling and veiling conception, the imagination could become a counterforce to Hume’s skepticism: if all relations made by the imagination are incomprehensible, the laws of causality and principles of cognition (especially those still taken for granted by Locke) turned out to be “fictions of the mind.” Hume uses the expression frequently, cf. Treatise 216, 220ff., 254, 259, 493. As Iser points out, Hume didn’t mean this in any derogative kind of way. As an incomprehensible premise of cognition, “fictions of the mind” became an essential concept in what Hume critiqued as misguided epistemological postulates (The Fictive 175). For concise discussions of Hume’s model of the human mind and his notion of the imagination see Engell; Iser, The Fictive.
times examined? Had I not extended my search to the neighboring groves and precipices? Had I not pored upon the brooks, and prayed into the pits and hollows, that were adjacent to the scene of blood?” (8)

These accumulative questions create a sense of constant speculation, and since they address their object of reasoning from various angles and perspectives they have the effect of enlarging it in the perception of its beholder. Just as in the narrator’s ‘emotional economy’ one sentiment leads to and enforces another, in his ‘intellectual economy’ a question does not lead to an answer but to another question, gradually building up to a crescendo of uncertainty. In one of these passages, Edgar explicitly ponders over the nature of his quest, realizing that he is not interested in revenge or any other direct action to be based on the knowledge gained, but in knowing itself.22 Armin Paul Frank has interpreted these lists as an echo of Hume’s skeptical epistemology: since there is no way for the narrator to gain certainty about the external world, he’s in constant need to make hypotheses about it.23 This also means, however, that curiosity is not at all an end in itself, as Edgar proposes. Rather, it is a vital strategy of bridging the virulent gap between inner and outer world by way of constant speculation – which, in turn, becomes Edgar’s only means of restoring his impaired sense of belonging.

While the directedness of this intellectual quest in the service of ‘therapeutic’ restoration is mainly retrospective, its larger objective clearly lies in the future: Edgar seeks to restore his senses of place and self so that his life can continue. Yet the (erotic) desire of self-extension driving this intellectual quest is destined to continuously transgress what has already become familiar. It is precisely in this vein that Edgar cultivates his habit of venturing ever deeper into the province’s western wilderness (those parts into which his pursuit of Clithero and later on his own sleepwalking will lead him). In fact, his excursions connect the epistemological and geographical uncertainties of his state of being – and respectively, intellectual and physical dynamics of narrative mobilization – in consequential ways. Earlier trips into the wilderness, undertaken with Sarsefield, “chiefly consisted in moralizing narratives and synthetical reasoning” and had “familiarized [him] with [the

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22 “For what purpose shall I prosecute this search? What benefit am I to reap from this discovery? […] Curiosity, like virtue, is its own reward. Knowledge is of value for its own sake, and pleasure is annexed to the acquisition, without regard to anything beyond” (15-16).

23 For Frank, the open-ended, reality-testing mode of narration results from this epistemological uncertainty that qualifies Edgar Huntly as a prototypical romance. He locates the emergence of the genre in Hume’s speculative epistemology and argues that it can be directly related to basic patterns of sense making that are paradigmatic to the ‘American’ experience: “Die aus Europa in die Neue Welt gekommenen mehr oder weniger intelligenten Wesen mussten erkennen, dass sich viele der mitgebrachten Erfahrungssätze (verites) hart mit amerikanischen Fakten stießen. Auf die alten Automatisierungen konnte man sich nicht verlassen. Neue Deutungsmuster mussten erst aufgebaut werden. Einstweilen war der Kolonist von Fall zu Fall auf eigene interpretierenden Anstrengungen angewiesen” (63). From here it is only a small step to the means and ends oriented epistemology of pragmatism that is often regarded as the only genuinely ‘American’ philosophy.
The Need for Narrative and the Limits of Narratability

province’s] outlines and the more accessible parts” (92). But after his mentor had left, Edgar kept exploring for the sole reason of expanding the realm of the known and the familiar: “Every new excursion indeed added something to my knowledge. New tracks were pursued, new prospects detected, new summits were gained. My rambles were productive of incessant novelty, though they always terminated in the prospect of limits that could not be overleaped” (93). The last sentence is especially telling with regard to the true nature of his quest: more than any certainty of knowledge about the region gained by his excursions, Edgar’s explorations incessantly assure him of – and thus familiarize him with – the very limits of the known and familiar world. Novalis’s saying that “[a]ll philosophy is really homesickness, an urge to be at home anywhere” addresses precisely this impossible double bind of ‘post-enlightened’ modes of belonging. Edgar’s quest to recover his sense of place and self can be read as an early American version of this quintessentially modern sense of homelessness, not just in the transcendental sense of falling out of the security of religious but also in the pragmatic, geographical sense of exposure to radical unfamiliarity of the North American ‘frontier.’ In fact, Edgar’s account of his awaking in the cave dramatically maps both senses of existential uncertainty onto one another.

The despair that he feels in this situation is all the more dramatic since there is no God for him to reason with. His atheism already played out in his first reported instance of sleepwalking: he hides the letters that Waldegrave wrote to him during his short phase as an atheist, from which the latter soon reconverted, but Edgar never did. In this second incident of rude awakening, Edgar’s atheism prevents him from making sense of his incomprehensible ‘captivity’ and the life-threatening dangers caused by it (to die of hunger, thirst, in an attack by a wild beast or hostile Indians) in terms of a transitory stage in a longer journey home: “I had none but capricious and unseen fate to condemn. The author of my distress and the means he had taken to decoy my hither, were incomprehensible. Surely my senses were fettered or deprived by some spell. I was still asleep, and this was merely a tormenting vision, or madness had seized me, and the darkness that environed me and the hunger that afflicted me, existed only in my own imagination” (164).

Edgar’s response to this threat was to kill with one strike and then eat a ferocious panther that suddenly emerged from the darkness of the cave, a deed that redirects his self-devouring urge “to bite the flesh of [his] arm” (164) to an object of his environment. It has often been noted that this moment marks

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24 “Die Philosophie ist eigentlich Heimweh, ein Trieb überall zu Hause zu sein” (Novalis 179).
25 Many critics have pointed out the resemblances between this novel and the colonial accounts of Indian captivity that were still popular at Brown’s time. See for example Slotkin, Hamelman, Smith-Rosenberg, and Rowe. Luciano takes the argument even further when suggesting that “Edgar Huntly is itself a captivity narrative, though of a different sort: although Edgar is at no point in the novel imprisoned by Indians, he is captivated by the carnal body, as much as he hopes the reader will be by his narrative” (11). For reasons that will become clear as I further unfold my own reading of the text I would modify this argument by stressing that Edgar is captivated by his “sorely wounded” (13) mind as much as by his carnal desires.
a fundamental transformation in the novel’s protagonist: his rebirth as a savage-killing American performed, in Turner-like fashion, by the wilderness setting of the western frontier. However, just as striking as this transformation of his character is the shift in talking about his fate: in his efforts to make sense of what has happened, the “tyrant” who mysteriously took him captive becomes an incomprehensible “author” of distress – a position that Edgar, in assuming narrative agency to mediate this experience, then seizes for himself just as instinctively as he kills and eats the panther to sustain his threatened life.

Calling the novel Edgar’s “memoirs” is a testimony to this second rebirth: that as an author who needs to narrate himself back into having a place in the world. In fact, what the author of this memoir yearns for more than anything else is to be sustained by his capacity of storytelling. The German term unterhalten (entertain) has two meanings that converge in this longing: to be ‘pleasantly diverted’ and ‘comfortably supported.’ In Brown’s novel, the desire to retreat into a self-absorbed and self-sustaining state of Unterhaltung – the narrator’s longing to inhabit his story – turns out to be stronger than any longing for a place in the world. The final lines of his epic letter to Mary read like a concession in this matter: “I am surprised at the length to which my story has run. I thought that a few days would suffice to complete it, but one page has insensibly been added to another till I have consumed weeks and filled volumes. Here I will draw to a close” (282), he announces in an abortive verbal gesture before ending with the promise to visit her, a destination that has long been dismissed for matters of belonging.

The Power of Narrative and the Limits of the Narratable

Read along these lines, Edgar Huntly is a story about narrative’s restless drive to recover a lost or impaired sense of belonging. It is a story about a young man who sets out to narrate himself back into having a place in the world, emotionally exploits his listeners, and ends up inhabiting the word of his story rather than the world beyond it. In due process, he integrates, in minute detail and sympathetic elaboration, narratives of others into his own with the effect of expanding the boundaries of his textual and imaginary ‘habitation.’ And while these other narratives enlarge and pluralize the body of the written text and produce idiosyncrasies that can be read as early experimentations with modernist techniques (such as multiple focalization and heteroglossia), they also give significant impulses for the evolution of the story and the pursuit of belonging thus performed. In fact, throughout the

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26 To quote one of the most famous passages of Turner’s seminal essay: “The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin” (2). For discussions of Edgar’s transformation/rebirth upon awaking in the cave see especially Luciano 13-15, and Garner 444-46.
novel, narrative is portrayed as an immensely powerful agent in regulating social relations and the highly mobile space that evolves from them. Time and again, it immediately and substantially affects states of belonging: by moving characters to unforeseeable places, transforming them, and thrusting them out of seemingly stable social relations. More often than not, the effects of such narrative actions are disruptive, working against the pursuit of a viable sense of belonging in the world, and in the service of shifting the existential task of dwelling to imaginary places.

Clithero is the most extreme figure in this regard. That he serves as Edgar’s doppelgänger heightens his symbolic importance, because as Edgar takes on more and more of the other’s behavior one cannot help but wonder if he could eventually become an equally dangerous psychopath. But back to Clithero. After his crime has exiled him from the comfortable home provided by Mrs. Lorimer on her estate in Ireland, his sense of belonging hinges on his possession of her memoir. He takes it with him – steals it – not only for its value as a life-enhancing souvenir (when he thought it lost he was determined to take his life; when it reappeared he was willing to live on), but also because, once abroad, this manuscript bears the only proof that he ever had a place where he belonged. The document – through its material presence, the tactile imprint of its author, and the power of the story it contains – oscillates between being a (mobile) agent of (provisional) emplacement and the fetish of a home forever lost. Cast against its owner’s fleeting state of belonging, his final outbreak of madness must be read as the outcome of the unbearable interference with an already precarious condition. When he finally establishes a somewhat bearable mode of dwelling as an outcast on the verge of a frontier community, and apparently even stops wallowing in the tragedy of his murderous act of self-expulsion, Edgar retells it to him – only to remind him how exclusively his sense of self and place anchors in what he calls his “evil destiny” (289).

In fact, Clithero’s stubborn belief in the metaphysical burden imposed on him (and the tale that he crafted around it) gives him a sense of identity, purpose, and place in his tragic state of belonging as non-belonging: he is the one with this extraordinary fate of having killed his beloved patroness, and will have to endure it until God relieves him. Meanwhile, he lives in an abandoned hut whose location is close enough to other people so that he will always be reminded of his lonesome destiny. His interlocking senses of place and self are defined precisely through the ways in which he does not belong anywhere, to anyone or anything except his story. Crafting his life-narrative in this tragic form grants him a sense of agency – of affirmation and of choice – that is essential for his survival. For the life of him he cannot give it away; if it turns out that Mrs. Lorimer is alive he is “reserved for the performance of a new crime. [His] evil destiny will have it so” (289), if just to set the fateful

27 Clithero’s obsession with this object highlights a fundamental contradiction in the relation between property and belonging. The most treasured and forcefully claimed piece of his few possessions (and thus the kind of object that one would expect to give emotional stability), it is not so much an object of ownership but an object to which he belongs in the sense of “being possessed” by it.
story straight again. Edgar’s – not unsimilar – inclination to pursue belonging solely though narrative self-assertion is severely questioned by the other’s manic precedence. If he loses touch with the external world and slips into “the universe of the imagination” (Hume 67), his story could become an equally hazardous dwelling place.

But Edgar Huntly is as much a novel about the power of narrative as it is a novel about the limits of the narratable – and about the ways in which these limits regulate the possibilities and modalities of belonging that its narrative operations map out. Installing a sleepwalking narrator with a tortured psyche is a consequential choice in this regard. “The incapacity of sleep denotes a mind sorely wounded” (13), Edgar sympathetically comments after finding out that the main suspect in the murder of his friend is a sleepwalker who displays a great deal of anguish when being in that state. And while Edgar waits almost until the end of the ‘Mary-letter’ until he addresses his own sleepwalking, he must have known about it all along, and thus also refers to himself when writing about the other. The formulation used here strongly resonates with Erasmus Darwin’s then contemporary notion of sleepwalking as a mental disease: a state in which “general sensation” is disconnected from a person’s bodily actions that can, in turn, engage freely in an “exertion to relieve pain” (202); and it resonates with sensational psychology’s core idea that perceptions can forever form – and possibly harm and distort – a person’s mind.28 In the absence of psychoanalytical models of the unconscious, sleepwalking – conceived as a mode of action both purpose-driven and separated from rational conduct – offers itself as a potent imaginary to explore the limits of the narratable.

28 Darwin’s ideas about sleepwalking were widely circulating as part of his influential study *Zoonomia*, to which Brown was exposed at the Friendly Club, the literary club he was a member of. Darwin himself was heavily influenced by Lockean notions of sensational psychology, particularly their challenging of Cartesian notions of enlightened rationality by proposing that the human mind does not process innate ideas but begins its life as a *tabula rasa* on which sensory perceptions leave immediate and lasting imprints. Thus conceived, the psyche emerges from an initial incident of wounding; “from its first experience after birth, [it] becomes marked, scored, impressed, and indented” (Engell 18). The shift in thinking about the human mind in terms of a safely enclosed, self-contained entity imagined by Descartes to a genuinely vulnerable target of random impressions corresponds with an uncertain, irritated sense of belonging. It is important to add, however, that Locke pairs this vulnerability with a strong instinct of survival: Not only can the mind ‘repeat’ the simple ideas derived from sense perception, but it has the capacity “to rearrange, to alter, and to fuse the separate elements it receives in ‘an almost infinite variety’” (18). Among the most immediate effects of this rethinking was a declining belief in the virtues of authoritarian childrearing and its replacement by the pedagogical ideal of fostering an “affective individualism” (Fliegelman 12-29). Locke writes: “If the mind was not formed at birth and from this moment on safely installed with rationality, the little, and almost insensible Impressions on our tender Infancies have very important and lasting Consequences” (Axtell, *Educational Writings* 12). It might be added that Descartes’s self-contained model of human rationality can be read as a prior reaction to an irritated sense of belonging, sheltering human rationality in a quasi-hermetic capsule to keep the world in order after the coercive epistemologies of the pre-enlightenment era had lost their power.
There are at least two incidents from which we can assume that Edgar’s mind has indeed been sorely wounded: His closest friend died of violent murder in his arms not long before the narrative sets in, and as a child he found half of his family killed by Indians upon returning home with his two younger sisters. These events have been used as touchstones for reading the novel as a tale of traumatization, thus giving occasion to trace the narrative mechanisms of a compulsive desire to repeat striving against an unconscious need to forget and repress (see Bellis), or as trauma-typical inscriptions of a guilt-tortured psyche from which this imaginary effort of storytelling springs (see Cassuto). Yet while traumatic experience and unconscious repression constitute very real limits of the narratable, and readings which are sensitive to psychic operations stirred by them perform important work in delineating the resulting silences, strategies of narrative deferral and delayed re-semantization, their a-historical assumptions about the human psyche are of limited use for the task at hand. The project of making audible contemporary concerns about belonging articulated by the novel demands to approach its struggle with the limits of the narratable from within the enunciative structure of the text.

Sleepwalking offers itself as the most promising venue in this regard, not least because it functions as a powerful device of producing and intensifying all those gaps and uncertainties in the narrative that the narrator’s efforts of emplotment relentlessly seek to smoothen out. Not unlike the walk home in a state of ‘reverie,’ in which the protagonist moves through his environment with his perceptions so completely absorbed by his mental activities that he suddenly ‘discovers’ his uncle’s house in front of him, sleepwalking provides a way of staging a striking perceptual disjunction of his inner and his outer world. But different from the earlier incident, it imagines a state of disjunction that amplifies his split consciousness by casting his awareness of the inner world into the (semi)darkness of sleep. As a narrative device, sleepwalking thus pulls the psychic world inside out and maps it onto the external world, which then unwillingly becomes a stage for experiences that are painfully entrapped in a person’s troubled mind and have no other outlet than this physical, absent-minded and ultimately ‘mad’ kind of ‘exertion.’

The narrative can only be so obsessively entangled with physical and affective mobility because the narrator’s efforts to remember are not only split along the ‘usual’ lines of object/subject, past/present, experiencing/narrating self but are, within that split, further punctured by movements and feelings from which – despite performing them – he will remain forever separated. The novel’s excessive investment in the body has frequently been noted. See for example Luciano, Burgett, and Dillon. From a perspective of belonging this investment dramatizes the fact that the body naturally emplaces each individual. In Edgar Huntly somatic emplacement is particularly charged and uneasy because the narrator’s body is forced to inhabit the irreconcilable, ostensibly ‘pathologic’ gap between the narrator’s inner and outer world that the novel idiosyncratically stages. In the tortured psyche of the novel’s narrator this gap is dramatically widened under the impact of his sleepwalking. In the process of gaining awareness of this habit that his letter seeks to put into words, Edgar’s body not only functions as the primary site and mobile vessel of his ‘pain-exerting’ activities but is also assigned with the role of the mute and secret witness of all those movements performed.
More than a mere backdrop for a psychological drama, however, Edgar’s actions in this eclipsed state of consciousness have real effects on the external world – a world imagined as a haunted frontier space trenched with violence and dispossession.

As this self-disclosing force of mobilization, Edgar’s troubled psychic state simultaneously propels, dislocates, and punctures the narrative desire to belong. The erring, deviant movement thus generated enables the telling of the story by thrusting life into a state of crisis, conditioning the very grounds of imaginative recovery and, like all retrospective narrative, by demanding a repeated traversing of already covered grounds. But a retrospective narrative under the spell of sleepwalking demands repetition of an unusual kind. While it technically sets out to cover the same, disturbed ground again with the desire of making it meaningful, familiar, and ideally inhabitable, it actually covers (some of) this ground for the first time (since it was initially traversed with the narrator performing his actions in other spheres). One passage gives insight into the narrator’s dreaming psyche: the account of Edgar’s first incident of sleepwalking, in which he tells Mary how “the image of Waldegrave was flitting before [him]” during his sleep, and how the appearance was in a state of “inquietude and anger.” It reminds him of having neglected to perform “[s]ome service or duty” (130) which Edgar, upon awaking, remembers to be the destruction of a correspondence between the two that he had promised to send his friend. But as we learn from his further account, not only had he not destroyed the letters, he also promised Mary to copy them for her as a souvenir of the deceased, knowing that she would be the last person Waldegrave would have wanted to read them. When wanting to get the letters out of their theft-proof hiding place to see if he could solve at least part of his problem by omitting certain passages from the transcript, he finds the entire correspondence missing, and he learns from his uncle that someone was just walking around in the attic.

The plotline is lost out of sight when Weymouth visits the Huntly farm the next day and delivers his story, triggering Edgar’s much more spectacular incident of sleepwalking that takes him to the pitch-dark cave in the remotest part of the province, the challenging starting point of his adventurous journey home. One-hundred-and-twenty pages later, the first sleepwalking incident is revisited: Sarsefield tells Edgar about having seen him heading in disjunction with the supposedly ‘sane’ facets of his consciousness. By far the most dramatic scene in this regard is Edgar’s awaking in the cave after his sleepwalking into the wilderness. His reported consciousness of “nothing but existence” (159) is a state in which his sense of embodiment has been radically detached from any further sense of place. Yet even in this crude state, it provides the only grounds from which he can reconnect himself with the external world: by stretching out his sore limbs, feeling that he is lying on his back, noticing the rugged texture of the ground underneath him and the striking freshness of the air in his lungs. This tactile mode of reconnection then gradually expands, first into assessing the immediate space around him (walking along the wall of the cave, yelling out at the top of his lungs to estimate its size), then by providing food and drink and protecting himself against threats from the wilderness, and finally by desperately, almost mindlessly, trying to get home.
out into the wilderness barely dressed, with no shoes on his feet, and not responding to being called by his name. He also tells him about finding the missing letters hidden in the roof of the uncle’s house, thus ‘proving’ the earlier incident of sleepwalking. The dream, the erring narrator can gather now, not only reminded him of his duty to destroy the letters, it must also have triggered his guilty conscience. The following deeds thus acted out the ‘pain’ this caused him by ‘saving’ the letters from his duty of copying them for Mary, and hiding them at a place where their gradual destruction would have eventually resulted in the fulfillment of his promise to Waldegrave. Yet how he felt when performing these actions (was he swift or reluctant? was he grieving?), or how he chose his hiding place is non-recoverable since no one was consciously present when these grounds were traversed for the first time.

This fragmented itinerary of narrative recovery demonstrates that meaningful, familiar, potentially inhabitable grounds cannot be ‘achieved’ by the narrator’s hermeneutical detective work alone. The narrator’s longing for other stories responds to the structural limitations of the narrative agency imagined by the novel. It gravitates toward other narratives to fill the blanks in the narrator’s impaired consciousness and compensate for the instability immanent to his performance. Sarsefield’s account of witnessing Edgar sleepwalking is the most interesting example in this regard. For a hopeful moment, the longing for an interlocutor turns into the longing for, and performance of a conjoint form of storytelling. Both Edgar’s story and Sarsefield’s story would have remained incomplete without the account of the other. Yet as it turns out, such complementing narratives may be just as erring as one’s own. Sarsefield, the figure with the greatest credentials for exact observation and rational meditation, was certain to have seen Edgar drown after his fall into the river, just as he wants to have seen Clithero drown after jumping off the ship that was supposed to take him to detention. In the first case, his flawed narrative is corrected through Edgar’s account; in the second case, there might not even be an error: maybe Clithero did die after going overboard. But the previous misinterpretation lingers and destabilizes – in not securely concluding Clithero’s dangerously erring state – any viable grounds for future dwelling.

The longing to create such grounds is severely constrained by this eclipsed mode of repetition, which is put to nothing less than the task of reconciling a narrating consciousness with the hazardous fact that it has been oblivious of its external world and absorbed in interior pains and obsessions that stem from its past, not from its present. And if the only incident of sleepwalking that allows for a rather complete reconstruction of its performer’s inner and outer world clearly connects it to an unacknowledged feeling of guilt, the sleepwalking that Edgar witnesses before performing his own underscores this connection. When he first sees Clithero in this state he is powerfully moved by the other’s grief and despair; his story, delivered in response to Edgar’s suspicions, leaves no doubt that he, too, sleepwalks out of guilt. The obsessive burial of the stolen manuscript is his ‘pain-exerting’ action: he breaks into his own secret hiding place, hides and nearly destroys
his most valued treasure just like Edgar breaks into his treasure chest, hides, and nearly destroys Waldegrave’s letters. In both cases, sleepwalking generates actions that are potentially harmful to the one performing them with the effect of turning the perpetrator into a prospective victim and blurring the distinction between the two. This effect of leveling is of great importance for the narrative design of the novel and its implied vision of belonging. In crafting a story in which sleepwalking springs from an ailing, inarticulable sense of guilt that is potentially hazardous for its bearer, the novel does not exploit the topic of guilt for the task of moralizing. To the contrary, it exploits guilt for the sake of suspending moral judgment. Trapped between a rejected future and a haunted past, dwelling in this narratively created state of suspension is the yearning to belong that drives the telling of this story.

Sleepwalking, which is not exploited as a stabilizing metaphor but as a metonymic trajectory, “the figure of contiguity and combination, the figure of syntagmatic relations” (Brooks, “Masterplot” 281), is the most effective enabler of this task. Through its conjoint forces of driving, deferring, and punctuating the projected story, the narrator’s longing to dwell in his narrative coincides with and is continually reinforced by the longing to dwell in a state of narratively suspended guilt. While this logic of suspension is most powerfully enforced through sleepwalking, it pervades the narrator’s actions throughout his storytelling. The initiative impulse to reconnect with his fiancée is entangled with feelings of guilt. Edgar knows that he has kept her waiting, maybe for an irresponsibly long time, and is most likely already convinced that he has to cancel their engagement when he starts writing. Because he feels guilty about these matters, he longs to create a favorable frame for her inevitable judgment. It also plays out in Edgar’s final letter to Sarsefield, which he closes with the words: “I shall not escape your censure, but I shall likewise, gain your compassion. I have erred, not through sinister or malignant intentions, but from the impulse of misguided, indeed, but powerful benevolence” (290).

This desire for a suspension of guilt brackets and undergirds the entire narrative. Upon learning that Clithero has impulsively killed Mrs. Lorimer’s evil brother and, out of manic regret, nearly killed her, Edgar reasons that another example would be the break-up passage: Edgar urges Mary to return the money, confronts her with the resulting consequence while doing everything to make the end of their engagement seem inevitable, portraying himself as a victim. And although this passage achieves the most conclusive density and thus creates the strongest sense of an ending in the middle of the book, the final sentences counter the conclusiveness that has just been reached with the resurging longing for suspension: “These considerations, however, will be weighted when we meet” (157), he announces before steering straight into that part of his adventure that will turn him into the greatest victim of his sleepwalking: the moment of awaking in the cave. In the same passage it also plays out on a very different register of speech – omission – in Edgar’s massive silence when Weymouth mentions the rumors about Mary’s pregnancy (Is she really pregnant? Is it Edgar’s child? Is this silence based on a mutual agreement or is it imposed by him? Is he about to abandon his responsibility?). As if responding to this massive silence, the opening paragraph of the following chapter features the word “pregnant” that has been so thoroughly avoided when recounting Weymouth’s story.
he has “acted in obedience to an impulse which he could not control, nor resist. Shall we impute guilt where there is no evil design?” (91). This early judgment is crucial, for it turns the other from being the bearer of Edgar’s unbound sympathy into a personification of suspended guilt – and into a powerful figure of imaginary kinship. As a result of identifying with (and thus internalizing) this imaginary placeholder of suspension, Edgar moves away from his efforts to save the other which constitutes the narrative thrust of the novel’s first part, and toward the repetitive reenactment or doubling of his behavior that constitutes the narrative thrust of the second part (with his own transformation into a sleepwalker as its most evocative token).

For the reader anticipating this event, Edgar’s earlier instance of crude reasoning turns him into a major suspect in the case of his best friend’s murder with the effect of mobilizing an immense longing for suspension. This suspicion is ‘officially’ proven wrong at the end of the ‘Mary-letter.’ On its final pages, Edgar reports that Waldegrave has been the random victim of a revenge-seeking Indian who was determined to kill “the first human being whom he should meet” (281), and credits himself for most likely being the killer of that Indian. And yet, Edgar stays closely associated with his friend’s violent death. Does the desire to destroy Waldegrave’s letters acted out in his first instance of sleepwalking not hint at an even deeper desire to destroy the person who wrote them? Could this have to do with the latter’s return to faith while Edgar stayed an atheist, a topic that is passionately discussed in the letters? Had Edgar secretly wished for his friend’s death because he previously knew about the latter’s safekeeping of Weymouth’s money, started his relation with Mary out of sheer calculation to participate in the inheritance, and now feels so guilty about both that he sleepwalks into the wilderness? Does his strange friendship with the old Delaware woman known to the region’s settlers as “Old Deb” or “Queen Mab” who turns out to be the mastermind behind the outburst of revenge violence that killed both Waldegrave and Edgar’s uncle, not strongly suggest a secret complicacy with destruction?

Again, sleepwalking offers itself as the most productive figure of contiguity and combination to make sense of this looming suspicion. In this case, it connects with the second name of the old Delaware woman, Queen Mab, a famous fairy character in English folklore, in highly suggestive ways. The name stems from a Celtic legend in which Queen Mab is the warrior queen. Frequently evoked by poets such as Herrick, Spencer and Shelly, the

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31 Having the sleepwalker turn out as the murderer was presumably the idea of an earlier work, “Somnambulism,” that Brown never finished. 

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best-known version of the character goes back to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where Mab brings the dreams to sleepers and presides over childbirth.\(^32\) Edgar is indeed closely connected to this name: inspired by her “pretentions to royalty” (209) and the strangeness of her appearance in which he saw a resemblance with this folklore fairy queen, he gave it to her. Within the evolution of the narrative, this act of name-giving provides the impulse to tell her story, thus integrating an uncanny reminder of the native population’s fate of dispossession into the imaginative texture of the novel that might even be read as the token of an emerging sense of discomfort (or possibly even guilt) on the side of the European settlers from which Edgar speaks. Her tribe, he reports, once inhabited a village on the grounds now owned by his uncle. When repeated harassments drove her people from their village she refused to accompany them, burnt the wigwams, and, accompanied by her three wild dogs, moved into a hut deep in the woods where she “conceived that by remaining behind her countrymen she succeeded in government, and retained the possession of all this region” (208). In the other’s narrative pursuit of belonging that becomes tangible here, “[t]he English were aliens and sojourners, who occupied the land only by her connivance and permission, and who she allows to remain on no other terms but those of supplying her wants” (208-9).

When re-telling her story Edgar spends an entire paragraph describing how she is in constant conversation with her dogs, granting her (as only woman and the only indigenous character of the novel) a voice of her own; however, she does not speak directly, for she refuses the language of the colonizer, and her long isolation has rendered her unintelligible even in her native language. Only Edgar has studied a little of her jargon, and, as a result, she is favorably inclined to him. For Myra Jehlen, her incessant, unintelligible speech addressing wild beasts, her control over these beasts and their strange loyalty to her “parody the rituals of domestication” make her “a creature of romance and of Romanticism, conceivably a heroine, if a perverse one” (165). Edgar directly participates in creating this possible heroine: by associating her with the power of fomenting weird dreams that turns her – at least in Edgar’s fancy – into a possible midwife in the dream material of his own (and by extension also his community’s) worst nightmares, some of which he might have already acted out while sleepwalking. But “midway through the paragraph in which this possibility suggests itself, Brown pulls back” (165), having his protagonist concede that he has gone too far in seeing “some rude analogy between this personage and her whom the poets of old-time have delighted to celebrate: thou wilt perhaps discover nothing but incongruities between them, but, be that is it may, Old Deb and Queen Mab soon came indiscriminate to general use” (*Edgar Huntly* 209).

Edgar’s lack of insistence in the rightness of this name strips it of the magic powers it had barely seized. Does this mean, as Jehlen argues, that the novel’s only potentially transgressive character falters, that history wins over

\(^{32}\) In *Romeo and Juliet* the character is evoked in Mercutio’s speech, Act I, scene 4. A comprehensive genealogy of this reference is given in Barnard and Shapiro’s annotated edition of Brown’s novel (138-39).
romance? That it was doomed to falter since its subversive potential was too weak to be fully realized by the narrative? Not necessarily. Following Paul Witherington, one can also read romance and history as two different voices, both speaking from the text in poetically sound ways. Oscillating between these two voices, the narrative would then not be an expression of the narrator’s personal guilt (and no product of a tension between conscious and unconscious levels of his storytelling). Rather, it would express a tension between romantic aspiration and realistic qualification that the text articulates in idiosyncratic, yet exemplary ways (Witherington 166-69). I am rehearsing these arguments here, because the double-voicedness of the narrative that they address exposes yet another limit of the narratable – and with it, another trajectory of suspending guilt. For since the romantic imagination that is emerging at this time is not yet fully hatched, it cannot assume the role of a transformative force in its own right. Historical guilt can thus only be expressed when narrative agency and narrating consciousness are formally separated. In the absence of an artistic vision that would allow for the suturing of the gap between the experiencing and narrating self that ails this consciousness, guilt is exploited to the end of not only creating in a state of suspension but dwelling in it. And as the novel clearly shows, this mode of dwelling corrodes the foundations of the community that is imagined here. Its story of ‘attempted homecoming’ is thus indeed a perverted one. Insisting on an imperative need to tell as its driving force, it impairs the narrative agency that is construed to pursue this need in ways that entangle the yearning to belong with a hazardous desire for suspension – of past guilt and future anxiety.

Dwelling in Narrative

In *Edgar Huntly*, belonging is sought at the post-revolutionary frontier, imagined as a hazardous amalgam of a western frontier of indigenous violence and an eastern frontier of immigrant contagion that is thoroughly interlocked with an emerging, yet equally uninhabitable space of liberal capitalism. The novel pairs this troubled space with an inner world of anxiety and distortion, which is then turned back onto the outer world by the narrator’s habit of sleepwalking. This mode of action, conceived as both purposeful and separated from rational conduct, is employed to stage a narrative act of recovering a troubled ground previously traversed without a proper sense of it while uncovering a state of impossible belonging along the way. In the intricate situation thus produced, the incoherent and excessively sprawling narrative that the protagonist tells to his fiancée in the form of a letter offers itself as the only viable dwelling place. And if the result is a novel that is equally concerned with the power of narrative and the limits of the narratable, one of its most striking features is testing narrative’s displacing and emplacing capacities. In fact, the novel stages its characters (trouble at) fitting into the larger scheme of their respective time-space in ways that expose
the contemporary limitations of belonging as limits of the narratable. In the world of this novel, dwelling thus always and inevitably entails an active dwelling in narrative. Which also means that narrativity is explored as a life-sustaining practice that springs from an insurmountable need to interpret one’s surroundings and express one’s being in relation to them. In the form-giving act thus performed, the need for narrative assumes a particular kind of agency: The letter-writing protagonist ruthlessly exploits his capacities to make choices about the telling of his story and impose them on the world to the self-serving end of dwelling in a state of suspension. He manages to draw his interlocutors into this state, and thus artfully prolong it, by tapping into an inarticulable guilt about past conquest and dispossession on the one hand, and an equally inarticulable anxiety about the rise of liberal capitalism on the other.

Looking back on the reading performed here, it is remarkable how utterly troubled Edgar Huntly’s spatial and psychic imaginaries are, both in themselves and in their relation to one another. As the narrative unfolds, it engenders and explores its abusive narrative agency – all of the interlocutors experience serious harm – to the end of suturing and cohering the haunted world of its own making. In is indeed striking how unstable and ambiguous the novel’s articulations of these worlds are. Instead of offering closure, they tend to involve their reader in a process of recovery whose outcome is quintessentially provisional and uncertain. It is to this end that the novel foregrounds the psychological dimension of narrative production (i.e. by creating a narrator who excessively puts his troubled psyche on display) and employs forceful, engaging modes of narration. I read this instability as a poetic response to the moment of uneasy transition from which the novel speaks, a response to the faltering faith in the adequacy of reason or religion to settle the fundamental uncertainties of human existence. But while the novel turns, in tune with the emerging romantic spirit, to the imagination and the senses in its attempts to cope with these doubts, it remains skeptical about their ‘healing’ capacities and embraces moral ambiguity and a plot design of narrative suspension instead. In doing so, it exploits fictional instability to the end of exposing the existing limits of the narratable, pushing beyond them with the effect of engendering the ‘frontier gothic’ as a new ‘life-form’ for the narrative pursuit of belonging.

But is this new ‘life-from’ suited for the task at hand? Is Edgar Huntly not rather a novel of disastrous, or possibly joyful failure, of belonging rejected rather than restored? And if narrative is indeed explored as a quintessential component of dwelling in the world, does this novel not show exactly the problems and dangers involved with making a home in it? It certainly does. In fact, I think that it is a seminal in precisely this regard. It expresses and explores, for the first time in American literature, a quintessentially modern sense of belonging – the sense that to the tenuous degree that one can be at home at all, it is in and through narrative; that there is no other way. How comfortable such a home is depends on its narrative construction, much of which is ruthlessly imposed on us through external forces and conventions.
And yet dwelling is a practical task with an inherent need to be enacted and performed that draws us, like the sleepwalking protagonist in Brown’s novel, out into the world where it leaves us with at least some agency of how this task is to be met, how it engages us with the world and those inhabiting it. Limited and possibly hazardous as this agency may be, it can only be assumed and acted out through narrative, which may, in turn, be changed in its conventions. Expressing one’s discomfort about this task and its limited means along with the need for a place in the world may be the only way to build a home. Boldly acquiescing such feelings in narrative neither solves the problem of belonging nor does it create interesting literature.

Works Cited


