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"THOUGHTS PAINFULLY INTENSE"
Hawthorne and the Invalid Author

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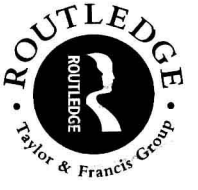
"Thoughts Painfully Intense"

Hawthorne and the Invalid Author

James N. Mancall



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Preface

Late one afternoon, as I was putting on my coat, and folding a stack of student essays into my bag, I asked my colleague Tony Brown a strange question: had he ever fantasized about meeting Henry James, the subject of his dissertation? Though I knew Tony well, and we had been working together for some time, the question still felt risky to me, as if I was asking too much, or perhaps, revealing too much. I had never asked anyone that question before, and I'm not sure what led me to ask it then. Perhaps with dusk falling, the walk home did not seem particularly inviting. Or perhaps I was hoping to delay, for a few minutes more, the weary necessity of reading the essays in my bag. Tony and I had been talking about dissertation work; not our topics or respective fields, but the actual labor involved, the physical and emotional work of writing a dissertation. Such work was not, we agreed, just a matter of reading and writing, and reading and writing some more. Nor was it even a matter of warding off the anxieties of originality, organization, or even sheer length, anxieties that hang with Damoclean weight over every graduate student's head. The dissertation is something more, something deeply personal, even autobiographical. No matter the focus, or the theoretical stance, dissertations are really extended allegories, dramas in which we typify our own existential struggles and dilemmas. At some level, our readings of James, our critical interventions into eighteenth-century satire, our revisions of Faulkner's influence on Morrison, are all actually monographs, extended studies of our own characters. It's easy to overlook this aspect of dissertation work; the questions a dissertation raises aren't always evident, even to the author. The deepest readings, the readings of ourselves, often

remain veiled, half-articulated and half-answered. This, I think, adds to the difficulty of finishing the dissertation: it is never easy to formulate things that, as Robert Frost once wrote, "don't quite formulate" (quoted in Poirier xxii).

We don't often acknowledge this autobiographical impulse. To do so might threaten our scholarly persona, our sense of ourselves as intellectually rigorous, highly specialized, scientific seekers of truth. It's an image we carefully cultivate, and one that graduate students must work especially hard to achieve and maintain. Hawthorne, of course, knew better. He knew that those who seek "truth in books," often discover "frightful shapes," shapes which they may not understand but somehow recognize. Thus, his scientists are sadists, frauds, egomaniacs; his scholars lost in their own revelations. The second scaffold scene of *The Scarlet Letter* suggests how much Hawthorne understood of the writer's psyche: Exhausted, "nerveless," Arthur Dimmesdale all but collapses into a state of "morbid" self-contemplation. He is discovered "half frozen to death" upon the scaffold, first by Hester and Pearl, and then by his nemesis, Roger Chillingworth. Chillingworth, the physician, the man of skill, advises Dimmesdale to "study less," lest the "night-whimseys grow upon you." As readers, we understand Chillingworth's cruelty, his desire to mock and torment Dimmsedale. But even so, Chillingworth is a scholar, and as he guides Dimmesdale home, his speaks a truth that many of us might recognize: "See now, how they trouble the brain!–these books!–these books!"

What troubled my brain as I worked on this dissertation? What was I trying to formulate? On one level the story of my dissertation is not an uncommon one: the seeds of the project were planted in a doctoral seminar taught at New York University by Ernest Gilman in the early nineties. The seminar topic, "Disease and Literature," was a new one in our department, and the syllabus was largely collaborative. We read Plato, *The Decamaron,* Milton, Dostoyevsky and Don Dellilo. My contribution to the syllabus was to suggest we read Bram Stoker's *Dracula.* In the era of AIDS, vampirism enjoyed something of a renaissance, re-emerging in popular culture as a metaphor for social and sexually transmitted disease. The choice intrigued enough people that we decided to give Stoker space on the syllabus, somewhere toward the latter end of the semester. In the meantime, the seminar worked just as we hope seminars will. For many of us, it was our first attempt at juxtaposing the poetics of literature and science, and we found ourselves increasingly excited by the challenge, turned on by new ways of reading some familiar texts. For my part, I presented a paper on *Dracula* and Victorian syphillophobia. I had always been intrigued by tales of the supernatural, but this project took me in an entirely new direction: the nexus of supernatural fiction and social history. "New Historicism" was only a dim concept to me then, but as I cross-referenced Victorian medical tracts, Stoker's letters and the novel, I began to make connections; I began

to see Dracula as something more than a fantasy figure. In his aristocratic yet foreign manners, his threatening sexuality, he embodies *fin de siècle* concerns about racial purity and gender confusion. At the time, the body of Stoker criticism was relatively small, and as I combed through archives and dog-eared pages of the novel, I was sustained by a sense of discovery. No one else seemed to be writing something like this; I began to think that I might have stumbled upon a dissertation topic.

But there was one problem: I was an Americanist. I had read some Dickens, Eliot and Hardy, but there was a great deal of Victorian literature and scholarship that I didn't know very well. There would be much to catch up on. And there was a second obstacle: the Victorian era just didn't seem like "home" to me. I had spent my undergraduate years studying American literature, and I lacked the reference points, the larger contexts, of British literature. In the end, I decided that there must be a way to carry my new-found interests and research skills into American literature. After some initial fumbling, I set out with the idea of writing a study of disease metaphors in the work of Charles Brockden Brown, Poe and Hawthorne. Friends had advised me that multi-author studies were "hot;" they played well with publishers and on the job market. I already written on Brown's representation of the yellow fever in *Arthur Mervyn,* and Poe was an obvious choice. But as I devoted a good part of the spring semester to reading all I could of Hawthorne's fiction, I began to see that perhaps even more than so Poe's tales, Hawthorne's work was suffused with illness–veiled symptoms, poisoned touches, "bosom serpents." Setting down *Mosses from an Old Manse,* a new vision of the dissertation came to me. It was an epiphanic, if callow, moment of inspiration: multi-author studies be damned, I boldly vowed; I can do the whole thing on Hawthorne! I ran excitedly to my advisor's office, and enthusiastically announced the new plan. My advisor, Kenneth Silverman, smiled kindly and agreed that yes, there was much to be done with Hawthorne.

It wasn't until I started paging through Marion Kesselring's catalogue of Hawthorne's reading that I again arrived at the intersection of literature and medicine. Hawthorne had read, or at least checked out of the Salem Athenaeum, Dr. Chandler Robbins' *Remarks on the Disorders of Literary Men* (1825), and Dr. Amariah Brigham's *Remarks on the Influence of Mental Cultivation and Mental Excitement Upon Health* (1833). Both works, it turned out, were curious choices for a young author: they argued that the literary vocation was a potentially debilitating one; the too avid scholar, or the too indulgent reader of romances, was apt to suffer neurological and emotional damage. Robbins and Brigham were not alone in their beliefs. I discovered more popular writers and lecturers, such as the health reformer, Sylvester Graham, and the Reverend John Todd, who were even more radical in their

suspicion of literature. In their view, the imagination was a breeding ground of disease; Graham presented numerous case studies of unfortunate young men and women, all broken down, paralyzed, even prematurely deceased, because of their exposure and subsequent addiction to "bad books." In this context, I could see that Dimmesdale's heart-sickness and Coverdale's fever were more than metaphors, more than figurative emblems of guilt or solipsism. They were also symptoms of a diseased imagination, symptoms that would have been familiar to Todd's readers or Graham's lecture audiences. With the help of scholars like Anthony Rotundo, Charles Sellers and Walter Herbert, I began to place these concerns in the larger context of Jacksonian philosophies of gender. Diane Price Herndl had recently published her *Invalid Women,* and I began to think of Hawthorne's many diseased male characters as "invalid men," daydreaming, diseased, feminized failures. And the more I read, the more I saw Hawthorne's fiction responding to this rhetoric in complex and ambiguous ways. On the one hand, his work seemed to satirize Graham and Todd, but, at times, in both his private correspondence and his fiction, Hawthorne seemed to validate, if not endorse, the bibliophobia of the reformers.

Of course, the process of writing the dissertation wasn't quite so simple as that. There were numerous false starts and detours along the way. Too much note taking, not enough note taking. Weeks mired in reams of criticism, vainglorious, and foolhardy, declarations against the critics. Chapters, sections, great quotations, all of them just right!–or, all of them out of place entirely. In the meantime, the central argument seemed to shift and grow of its own accord. At first, nothing held the dissertation together. Then, each chapter seemed too similar, each essentially making the same argument over and over again. It was only when I finished a rough draft of the dissertation, that I began to see the arc I was trying to describe–the evolution in Hawthorne's thinking, the turns in his career. And even then, even as I was revising the final version, I'm not sure the argument even truly crystallized. In fact, it may be only now, some time after receiving my degree, that I've gained a clear sense of the project, a clear sense of what I was trying to do. I'm grateful, therefore, to Damian Treffs, my patient editor, and Routledge Books, for the opportunity to return to these ideas. Now, with degree in hand, freed from so many last minute anxieties–did I say the right thing at my defense? Are the page numbers no more than 1/4 of an inch from the margin? Did I remember to submit that last abstract to DAI?–I've enjoyed thinking about Hawthorne and his fiction again. I've been able to re-appreciate the genius and power of his work.

With that same time and distance, I've also come to understand that there is a second story to this dissertation, a second way of reading it. I've begun to formulate what else was at work in this dissertation, slipped in somehow

between stacks of index cards or saved in abandoned sectors of forgotten computer files. Explicitly, of course, the dissertation tells the story of Hawthorne's engagement with the bibliophobia of writers like Alcott, Brigham and Graham, but there is something else here, as well: my own bibliophobia, my own anxieties about a career devoted to works of the imagination. Like Hawthorne, I was uneasy about my vocation: what did it mean to study American and English literature, especially in a period, as has been well documented, of crisis in the academic job market? As I was working on my dissertation, graduate students at Yale and Wisconsin went out on strike, and there was talk of unionizing at NYU as well. Elaine Showalter would soon advise new PhDs that they needed to look for other lines of work, and in response, the Graduate Caucus of the MLA would denounce Showalter and her generation of scholars. Soon, Robert Scholes, in his *The Rise and Fall of English,* would predict the end of English studies. It was an odd time to be writing a dissertation. I loved books and reading; I loved writing, even when it was difficult and frustrating. But every so often, particularly when the dissertation wasn't going well, it was difficult to keep the doubts at bay. As my student loans piled up, and another bowl of ramen noodles simmered on the stove, I wondered if I had made the right choice. Was this truly the life Matthew Arnold envisioned?

I wasn't the only one troubled by this question; it was ever present in conversations with my friends, a constant undercurrent in the libraries, the teaching cubicles, the office hours. We would meet college classmates who had gone on to jobs in banking and finance, or who had become lawyers and doctors. They had homes, cars, families. We had our books, and perhaps a 286 Mhz computer. Sometimes we embraced graduate-student life as an impoverished but noble calling; as we honed our "critical thinking," we congratulated ourselves on our superiority to Wall Street and mainstream, especially suburban, culture. We joked about the rigidity of a nine-to-five schedule and those poor saps who had to wear ties to work. But we were never quite comfortable in this pose; in our more honest moments, we were nervous about what we had sacrificed, nervous about conference papers and teaching fellowships, nervous about the wisdom of continuing on when there didn't seem much to continue on to. The floor of my studio apartment on Bedford Avenue sloped at a 10-degree angle and the building itself seemed to be slowly, inexorably, collapsing in on itself. A cold draft whistled through the softball-sized hole in the bathroom wall. How much consolation was there in reading Boethius, how much hope in scanning Emily Dickinson?

These are questions this dissertation returns to again and again: what does it mean to be a scholar, a writer, someone who reads and daydreams about books? Is the scholar a heroic figure like Fanshawe, bravely renouncing the

marketplace and easy sentimentality for "a ladder that reached to infinity?" Or is he a Miles Coverdale, the author of half-finished works, a "minor poet" whose life comes to "nothing, nothing, nothing?" In "The Custom House" chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne imagines his Puritan ancestors' accosting him, barely able to express their disbelief in his choice of occupation. "A writer of story-books!," Hawthorne envisions them asking, in bewildered tones, "What kind of business in life... may that be?" So, too, the anxious graduate student hears a similar accusation, or imagines it, from parents, friends, relatives, department chairs. But most of all we hear it from ourselves.

For Hawthorne, this anxiety was also a gender anxiety. When he was fired from his post at the Salem Custom House, Charles Upham, a prominent Salem Whig and one-time friend of Hawthorne's, mocked Hawthorne for complaining. Removal from office, Upham wrote, is "a liability which all political officer holders are subject, and to which men of Mr. Hawthorne's true manliness of character have learned to submit with dignity and in silence" (quoted in Nevins 119). The sarcasm was not lost on Hawthorne; he himself wondered if, as a politician, he possessed the power "to act as a man among men," something he lacked as a romancer. Some form of that question troubled me, as well. Publicly, I never wished to be mistaken for that "man of main strength," Robert Danforth, the blacksmith of "The Artist of the Beautiful," or even the burly Hollingsworth, who "hammered thought out of iron." I was a graduate student, and well-versed, of course, in gender as a social construction. And while I would not have called myself a post-structuralist, certainly I was too sophisticated to fall victim to the ruinous effects fostered by such simple binary oppositions as male/female. And yet, the evidence on these pages suggests otherwise: the essential dynamic I attribute to Hawthorne's fiction is one of masculine competition and rivalry; I theorize that the exchange between Hawthorne and the health reformers is driven by the newly emerged marketplace model of masculinity, one that emphasizes, in Anthony Rotundo's words, "ambition, rivalry and aggression" (3). As a reader of my own text, especially a reader interested in gender issues, it's hard for me not to wonder how much of my own masculinity is at stake here. I am not suggesting that my reading of Hawthorne is simply the projection of my own neuroses; I believe that this masculine rivalry *is* central to Hawthorne's fiction. But there is, I suspect, a reason I was drawn to this particular reading: perhaps I worried that studying books, writing about books, wasn't quite manly enough. Or perhaps I worried that I couldn't cut it, that I couldn't compete in the academic arena. If there were fewer and fewer academic positions, and more and more PhDs, was I strong enough, smart enough, ambitious and aggressive enough to get a job? And if my peers outside of graduate school were becoming Captains of Industry, Titans of Finance, what was I becoming?

In the pages that follow, I argue that Hawthorne never resolved the questions that nagged at him throughout his career. During the winter of 1854, Hawthorne had already published *The Scarlet Letter* and *the Blithedale Romance,* he was living comfortably as the U.S. consul at Liverpool. But in his notebooks, he records a dream, a dream which he claims has recurred over a period of twenty years. In the dream, he is "still at college," and there is the sense that he has been there "unconscionably long." His classmates have long ago graduated and gone on; he, meanwhile, has failed to make any progress in life. According to the notebook entry, Hawthorne found the dream so disturbing that the "shame and depression" of it lingered long after he was awake. It's a strange dream for Hawthorne to have at this point in his career, arguably the height of his success. Yet, what graduate student hasn't known such lingering "shame and depression?" Hasn't felt she has stayed in school "unconscionably long?" My dissertation is safely handed in, my degree framed on the wall, but I still wrestle with what it means to be doctor of literature: a student–not even a writer–of "story-books!" What kind of business indeed? I still love literature, I still love reading and writing, but recently I decided to take a job in academic administration, partially because of the security it offers, and partially, perhaps, because it brings me one step closer to the world outside of books and libraries and index cards.

But all is not lost. I have not, as Hawthorne himself is said to have done, succumbed to the temptation to burn all my early manuscripts. It's true that, returning to the dissertation now, I wince at the patches of bad writing, hyperbolic argument, missed opportunities. I've attempted to correct the most flagrant of my misdeeds, but some, I'm sure, remain: the structure of Chapter 4, on *The Blithedale Romance,* will always bedevil me, and I can't honestly justify the glaring absence of *The House of Seven Gables* in the dissertation. I suspect I chose to ignore *HSG* because I've always regarded it as the least interesting of Hawthorne's novels, or it may simply have been that, having finished six chapters, I couldn't muster the energy to write one more. I look back at this manuscript now with something of the feeling Hawthorne describes while attempting to compose the initial draft of *The Scarlet Letter.* Distracted by his duties as Surveyor of the Salem Custom House, he lamented that he could not catch the "deeper import" of the pages spread before him. "A better book than I shall ever write was there; leaf after leaf presenting itself to me," he writes. But this better book vanishes before him, "only because my brain wanted the insight and my hand the cunning to transcribe it." I, too, can see the "better book" to be written here, and hope someday to be able to catch glimpses of it. But in the meantime, there are moments in the manuscript that I do read with real pleasure, perhaps even some pride, moments, as Hawthorne writes, when "the letters turn to gold upon the page."

Towards the end of *The Scarlet Letter,* the narrator tells us that if we listen closely to the Reverend Dimmesdale's sermons, we might detect a "a profound and continual undertone." With a meaning entirely distinct from Dimmesdale's spoken words, this undertone reveals his secret for all to hear; it is the cry of Dimmesdale's heart to "the great heart of mankind." Despite Dimmesdale's eloquence, his richly endowed voice, it is this undertone, this "deep strain of pathos," that, according to the narrator, gives Dimmesdale his "most appropriate power." This is a typically slippery and provocative passage from our narrator, one which I address later in the dissertation. But for now let me offer it as a guide to the pages that follow. Make no mistake: I promise neither eloquence nor the revelation of a great secret. I hardly possess the majestic grandeur of Dimmesdale's voice, his Tongue of Flame. But there is, as I've tried to show here, a continual "undertone" to the dissertation, an indistinct murmur of uncertainty, even, sometimes, anguish. It may not be profound, but if there is any power to this dissertation, then perhaps it lies in the rise and fall of this undertone, the tension, the play, between the questions I asked of Hawthorne's work and my own.

"Thoughts Painfully Intense"

Contents

Introduction

Our notions of disease are informed by fictions; an illness is always something beyond the physical reality of a virus, a blood test, a sore, a metastasizing cell. As Sander Gilman and others remind us, "the infected individual is never value-neutral. . . . like any complex text, the signs of illness are read within the conventions of an interpretative community" (Gilman 7). This project is an attempt to decipher just such a complex text. As I began to study Hawthorne's representation of disease, I became increasingly aware that Arthur Dimmesdale's heart problems and Miles Coverdale's fever were not just allegories of psychological states, somatic emblems of guilt or isolation. They were culturally coded as well, informed by the interpretative conventions of nineteenth-century medical thought. This led me to look more closely at how and why contemporary physicians and reformers constructed a figure I call the "invalid author." Men of letters, as described in the medical texts and health manuals, were vulnerable to nervous irritability, breakdown and paralysis. Strained by intense study or lost in imaginative fantasies, these writers and readers became infected, polluted and, what was worse, contagious.

I began to see in Hawthorne's work an extended and complex engagement with this medical discourse. Hawthorne's "sensitive artists," as they are often described by readers, are not just sensitive; Coverdale and Dimmesdale exhibit symptoms described in such works as Chandler Robbins' *Disorders of Literary Men* (1825) or William Sweetser's *Mental Hygiene* (1848). Hawthorne's fiction both validated and challenged the physicians' claims; throughout his career, he struggled with the idea that the author was an invalid, a paradoxical figure characterized by both effeminate debility and virulent power.