The Fragility of Manhood

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Introduction

The Paradox of Desire

A young man stares into a pool and sees his own reflection. At first, his reflection appears to be another person, endowed with great beauty. Enflamed with desire, the young man reaches out to the image in the pool, which dissolves at his touch. Gradually, he comes to understand that this image is just that, an image, and moreover a reflection of himself. Recognition brings with it neither relief nor release; this self-encounter leads to frustration, sorrow, and, ultimately, death.

The myth of Narcissus has played a central role in understandings of the self, its predicaments and potential dangers, throughout the Western tradition. Despite the avid interest in classical myth exemplified by his two collections of Greek myths rewritten for children, Nathaniel Hawthorne never mentions Narcissus in print. Yet the figure of Narcissus and the thematic concerns of his myth suffuse Hawthorne’s writings. Belying the textual absence of his naming, the myth of Narcissus informs several Hawthorne works, sometimes fairly obviously, as in the tellingly titled “Monsieur du Miroir” (1837), but more often, and more subtly, in the stories that prominently feature a young man. What Hawthorne’s youthful male characters share with Narcissus is a male identity intricately, if not entirely, bound to the power and the demands of the eye. This relationship to vision is deeply conflictual, acts of seeing and responses to being seen fraught with anxiety, aggressivity, and even terror. The young man’s conflict over his own image is one of the most consistently developed themes in Hawthorne’s oeuvre. Young Goodman Brown, Minister Hooper, Robin Molineux, Giovanni
Guasconti, Arthur Dimmesdale, Holgrave, Coverdale, Donatello: all of these immediately recognizable male characters are, as I will show, depicted in ways that emphasize their relationship to vision, a relationship always rendered in highly ambivalent terms. Moreover, Hawthorne’s male characters are particularly provocative extensions of the symbolic meanings of the figure of Narcissus because, in addition to their conflict with their own image, they are at once physically beautiful and morally dubious.

A brief tour of the beautiful young men that recur in Hawthorne’s pages conveys his wide-ranging interests in this figure: following the trope of “handsome,” we find descriptions such as Coverdale’s of Westervelt in The Blithedale Romance: “He was still young, seemingly a little under thirty, of a tall and well-developed figure, and as handsome a man as ever I beheld” (3: 92); of Fanshawe, the protagonist of Hawthorne’s first novel, whose identity as a scholar is apparently augmented by his personal attractiveness: “The stranger could scarcely have attained his twentieth year, and was possessed of a face and form, such as Nature bestows on none but her favorites” (3: 346); of Donatello in The Marble Faun as being so “full of animal life as he was, so joyous in his deportment, so handsome, so physically well developed, he made no impression of incompleteness, of maimed or stinted nature” (4: 14); of the English soldier in Hawthorne’s late, unfinished masterpiece Septimius Felton as “A young officer, a petulant boy, extremely handsome, and of gay and buoyant deportment” (13: 21). What is especially noteworthy is the license this ostentatious male attractiveness gives women to wield the sexually appraising gaze. In the early story “David Swan,” a pretty young woman sees the titular young man, sleeping, like Narcissus’s double, Endymion, beneath her eyes: blushingly,

she stole a glance at the youthful stranger, for whom she had been battling with a dragon in the air [a bee].

“He is handsome!” thought she, and blushed redder yet. (9: 187)

Many of Hawthorne’s men are “striking,” such as the guilt-wracked Dimmesdale, “a person of very striking aspect, with a white, lofty, and impending brow, large, brown, melancholy eyes”; that Dimmesdale’s mouth, “unless when he forcibly compressed it, was apt to be tremulous, expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint,” tellingly reveals the emotional tensions that simmer beneath a striking aspect, and the authorial disposition toward these attributes (1: 66). Beneath Dimmesdale’s beauty, tormenting feelings of self-doubt and self-disdain seethe; his hypocrisy renders his outward beauty especially problematic, for it defies the Victorian
assumption that outer beauty reveals inner goodness. Most often in Hawthorne, the beauty of men masks an inner depravity, to the extent that this beauty seems the hallmark of this depravity rather than a contrast to it. Or male beauty causes great discomfort. Coverdale’s apprehension of Westervelt’s attractiveness seems only to deepen Coverdale’s distaste toward the mesmerist: “The style of his beauty, however, though a masculine style, did not at all commend itself to my taste. . . . he had no fineness of nature; there was in his eyes (although they might have artifice enough of another sort) the naked exposure of something that ought not to be left prominent” (3: 86). Though his face and form reveal him to be a favorite of Nature, Fanshawe is besieged by “a blight, of which his thin, pale cheek and the brightness of his eye were alike proofs, [and that] seemed to have come over him ere his maturity” (3: 346).

Hawthorne appears to have needed to put a beautiful man on the page. The question to which we will repeatedly return is why he took such a consistently skeptical view of this attractive figure. Beatrice Rappaccini, the victim of her scientist-father’s genetic experiments on her body, poses a question to the handsome and callow man who has voyeuristically spied on her as she tends to the poison plants whose DNA she shares. Her question to this young man, Giovanni Guasconti—“O, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?” (10: 91)—can be restated this way: Having had a father who interfused my blood with that of his poisonous plants, I have a literal reason for the poison in my system. What accounts for the poison coursing through yours? His most consistent themes indicate that Hawthorne asks this question along with Beatrice.

Yet Hawthorne also views beautiful young men with empathy: he shares with them an empathetic fearfulness at the power of the gaze—not an avaricious desire to wield it but rather a desire to avoid falling under it. The theme of painful, violent, and violating looking informs Hawthorne’s work. The dubious desire to look and possess by looking in works such as “Wakefield,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and The Blithedale Romance and the encounter with a troubling and even terrifying mirror image in stories such as “Feathertop” and longer works such as The Scarlet Letter together provide an apposite model for what Sándor Ferenczi diagnosed as “spectrophobia,” “the dread of catching sight of one’s own face in a mirror.”2 Hawthorne’s work plumbs spectrophobia for all of its ethical, aesthetic, and emotional depth, consistently thematizing traumatic seeing and being seen. It is little wonder that by his last complete novel, The Marble Faun, Hawthorne depicts a look that kills, Miriam’s blinding glare that impels Donatello to kill the Model.
HAWTHORNE, FREUD, AND LACAN

Freudian theory is the theoretical foundation of this study. Through Freud and his extraordinarily and enduringly provocative insights into the difficulties of gender and sexual identity, I make the case that Hawthorne’s representation of male subjectivity defies and even at times transcends the normative demands of hegemonic masculinity. As a methodology, however, Freudian theory must undergo stringent revision, given that many of Freud’s positions and conclusions are often in deep need of updating. Jacques Lacan’s reformulation of Freud’s theory of narcissism is especially helpful to one of our central themes, the relationship between gender and vision. Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage is very familiar by now, but it retains a revelatory power for Hawthorne’s work.³

Lacan theorized that there are three “orders” of existence (the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real).⁴ The mirror stage is the key component of the Imaginary order, in which the ego is formed through a narcissistic fascination with one’s own image. Before the mirror stage, the very young child is a body in pieces (le corps morcelé). One sense, the visual, is more advanced than any other. When the child stares at his image in the mirror, he mistakes the image of wholeness in the mirror for an actual, authentic wholeness. This profound misrecognition (méconnaissance) is the basis from which a self is formed. Our mesmerizing and seductive counterpart in the mirror, what Lacan calls the “small other,” seizes us (captation), holding us its captive always.

Lacan, intertextually competing with Freud, transforms the Narcissus myth into the narrative of subjectivity. He associates narcissism with the aggressivity, rivalry, strife, and even suicidal despair that all stem from this primary encounter with one’s own image. In that it is formed through identification with an image, the ego’s foundations are fragile and tenuous. That the ego emerges from the mirror stage and the Imaginary order is a crucial aspect of Lacanian theory, which opposes ego-psychology and its constitutive belief in the reconstruction of the “healthy” ego. In completely destabilizing the concept of the ego, Lacan renders any psychoanalytic effort to restore it inherently suspect.

Also of importance, the mirror stage incorporates the social and the gaze. The child, apprehending its own seemingly complete and mesmerizing image, turns around to look at its mother looking at the child as it looks at and “recognizes” itself. The formation of our own subjectivity depends on the mother’s approving, knowing nod of recognition. An awareness of and dependence on visual affirmation of one’s own existence—existence as a visual subject—is a fundamental aspect of the formation of subjectivity. As
I will be arguing, Hawthorne’s work elaborates endlessly on these dynamics, especially the implications of visuality’s centrality both for the subject and for all social relations, (relations between the mother and child, as I will show in chapter 2, being the template for these).

For Lacan, narcissism is pathological because it is a subjectivity based on a mirage. Yet, as Lacan lays out his theories, all subjectivity and libidinal attachments would appear to derive from the same evanescent sources. The Lacanian theorist Joan Copjec discusses Lacan’s understanding of narcissism within a larger discussion of Lacan’s theory. For Copjec, Lacan’s theory of the gaze differs both from Foucault’s theory of the panoptical gaze and from film theory’s uses of Lacan. For Foucault, power is invested in monitoring the subject, hence its deployment of a panoptical gaze and hence the feeling subjects unceasingly have that they are being watched, whether or not they are, indeed, being watched. For film theory, the gaze defines the spectator, which is presented as a stable heterosexual male subject. In Copjec’s view, Lacan’s theory of the gaze is distinct from these other theories because, for Lacan, the gaze does not define, and certainly does not monitor, the subject, but is, rather, quite indifferent to it. I will return to film theory’s treatment of Lacan in chapter 1. For now, I want to draw on Copjec’s reading of Lacan, in which she offers a particularly insightful summary of the Lacanian revision of Freud’s theories of narcissism, which will be considered at greater length in chapters 1 and 2. As Copjec puts it,

Narcissism, too, takes on a different meaning in Lacan, one more in accord with Freud’s own. Since something always appears to be missing from any representation, narcissism cannot consist in finding satisfaction in one’s own visual image. It must, rather, consist in the belief that one’s own being exceeds the imperfections of the image. Narcissism, then, seeks the self beyond the self-image, with which the subject constantly finds fault and in which it constantly fails to recognize itself. What one loves in one’s image is something more than the image (“in you more than you”). Thus is narcissism the source of the malevolence with which the subject regards its image, the aggressivity it unleashes on all its own representations. And thus does the subject come into being as a transgression of, rather than in conformity to, the law. It is not the law, but the fault in the law—the desire that the law cannot ultimately conceal—that is assumed by the subject as its own. The subject, in taking up the burden of the law’s guilt, goes beyond the law.5

In Copjec’s reading of Lacan, narcissism emerges as a kind of malevolent defensiveness against a simultaneously held and urgent set of disappoint-
ments and desires. One of the sources of the aggression within narcissism is a dissatisfaction with one’s visual image and the insistent corollary belief that one is more than this image, more resplendently beautiful and complete.

Hawthorne offers an analogous treatment of these themes. He is a Freudian-Lacanian theorist of the visual and its relationship to gender who sees gender as unintelligible without the visual, and both gender and the visual as fundamentally imbricated. The visual is also what constricts, wounds, and unceasingly antagonizes the gendered subject in his work. At the same time, Hawthorne, so obsessively an explorer of the guilty subject’s agonized relationship to the law, presages Foucault’s understanding of the panoptical gaze, as exemplified by Rappaccini’s invasive, controlling, and totalizing surveillance of the young lovers in one of Hawthorne’s greatest tales. Hawthorne, however, does not view, as Foucault does, the law as positive and nonrepressive, as inciting desire, but as the force that represses desire, and with dire consequences. Hawthorne’s psychoanalytic sensibility, therefore, emerges from his acute sense of profound discrepancies between a subject’s desires and the law’s dictates.

One of the means of registering these discrepancies is narcissism, which memorializes a subject’s state of oneness, however illusory and evanescent, before the inevitable process of socialization. It is within what Lacan describes as the Symbolic order, the domain of the father’s language and law, that this socialization occurs. Which is to say, we acquire and achieve subjectivity through a rebirth into language and the inscriptions of the law and the name of the father. Narcissism, imbued with plangent urgency and fueled by malevolent anger, memorializes the Imaginary and the mirror stage.

Narcissism can be understood as the subject’s experience of being unceasingly haunted by its own mesmerizing image before the onset of subjectivity. Narcissism memorializes what “belonged” to the subject before it became a Symbolic entity: its ties to nature and the Real, and the heady state of oneness and connection that Freud theorized as the “oceanic feeling,” a profound feeling of unity in which the infant’s and the mother’s bodies were indistinguishable. (The infant has no idea, for example, that the breast is the mother’s breast, a bodily zone separate from his own body.) A violent disruption of mother–child bonds links Freudian oedipal theory and Lacan’s theory of the passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic order, both of which are narratives of identification with the “Father.” Narcissism memorializes not just the subject’s indescribable feeling of a prior oneness—for the subject is irreducibly a split subject after its formation through language—but also the connection to the mother, which must be forsaken for Symbolic social-
Narcissism retains a power to resist and stall this socialization, even as it is incorporated into a “properly oedipalized,” male-dominated social order.

Little wonder, then, that the properly functioning subject—properly functioning because it believes itself to be a subject—is always already a haunted, wandering subject, forever estranged from itself. What I call Hawthorne’s “traumatic narcissism” relates to this haunted disposition: a sense of being fundamentally bereft while imagining a prior state of fulfillment and connection to which the subject can never return but that haunts and on some fundamental level continues to shape the present. Narcissism marks the points of disparity between one’s fantasies and experiential realities; it is precisely its ability to link and even to embody these gulfs that makes narcissism a useful, indeed provocatively vivid, index of anxieties, hostilities, and wishes.

Narcissism has profound implications for sexual as well as gendered identity. In his difficult, exasperating, and undeniably compelling No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Lee Edelman argues against the societal valuation of the Child, which he views as the linchpin of a heterosexist emphasis on reproductive futurity that queer sexuality not only nobly resists but must, self-consciously embodying the death drive, actively oppose. Edelman cites some of this same penetratingly insightful passage from his fellow Lacanian Copjec.6 I do not share Edelman’s philosophical positions, especially about queer sexuality’s proper value (as the apparently resistant embodiment of the death drive), and I therefore do not follow him in his subsequent conclusion that what Lacan and Copjec are theorizing is narcissism’s chief significance as a “life-denying economy.”7 But, as I will show in the first two chapters especially, the fates of narcissism and homosexuality have been intimately, if not inextricably, intertwined in psychoanalytic theory and also in popular receptions of it. Certainly, within this gay male imaginary, homosexuality is seen as life-denying, a quality linked to the perceived nullity of narcissism. As I will be attempting to show in my Janus-faced book—which has one eye on traditional close readings of a canonical author, the other on revising literary studies, psychoanalytic theory, and the related topic of Freud studies through queer theory—narcissism is a potentially resistant mode of affectional attachment and response. What Hawthorne, Freud, and Lacan evoke so movingly is the anguish within narcissism, its contested nature and the struggles it suggests over identity and self-knowledge, qualities that in their irreducibility to any one stagnant view pointedly deny life-denial.
Apart from an excellent 1983 essay by Shernaz Mollinger and an expansive and thoughtful dissertation by MaryHelen Cleverley Harmon, the importance of narcissistic themes in Hawthorne has been largely overlooked. In an important essay, Joseph Adamson does discuss the subject, but places narcissism within the larger context of shame in Hawthorne's work, arguing that narcissism functions as a defense against shame. Christopher Castiglia also discusses the central role of shame in the “queer sociality” of Hawthorne's work, especially in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and makes quite bracingly novel uses of shame as a force that can trigger and undergird progressive new social arrangements. Shame is, as I will have frequent occasion to discuss, undoubtedly one of the chief affects in Hawthorne. But, following Andrew Morrison's theory of shame as the “underside” of narcissism, I argue that in Hawthorne's work shame proceeds from a larger framework of narcissism. In order to understand the full importance of Hawthorne's uses of the Narcissus myth, it will be helpful to this analysis to chart some of the trends in the myth's reception, which has been historically prohibitive and phobic.

In her feminist study *The American Narcissus*, Joyce W. Warren takes canonical American literature before the Civil War to the severest task, arguing that, in its focus on male individualism, it is narcissistic in the most pathological sense of the word. Emerson and Cooper come under particularly critical scrutiny. Interestingly enough, however, Hawthorne is spared the most stringent of Warren's analyses, emerging as an exception to the general narcissistic male rule. He escapes Warren's judgment precisely because, unlike his contemporaries, and “despite personal and cultural inhibitions,” Hawthorne “was acutely aware of the personhood of the female other and was able to create female characters who stand out in American literature as women of substance and individuality.” Though writing in 1984, Warren articulates a view with a sturdy provenance, the term “narcissistic” still able to cast its pejorative light on any subject. While I agree with Warren about the salutary qualities of Hawthorne's still controversial representation of women, I argue that Hawthorne's depictions of male sexuality are also a crucial aspect of the ways in which his work resists normative structures of gendered and sexual identities. Hawthorne's modulations of the myth of Narcissus throughout his work allowed him to develop a resistant attitude toward patriarchal constructions of masculinity, which in turn was an important dimension of his overall critique of gendered power in the United
States, a project that culminates in his extraordinary late, unfinished Septimius Felton/Norton manuscripts.

In order to make a case for the political value of the Narcissus theme in Hawthorne, it is necessary to establish the legitimacy of narcissism as an erotic and social economy. In most contexts, narcissism connotes a self-regard unseemly in its excessiveness, an egotism run amok; transatlantic Romanticism seems especially rife with such monstrous egotism. For Lillian R. Furst, the crux of the Romantic hero’s tragedy is that “his egotism is such as to pervert all his feelings inwards on to himself till everything and everyone is evaluated only in relationship to that precious self, the focus of his entire energy,” the result being that “no genuine, let alone altruistic love is possible.” Furst’s view of the “blatant egotism” of the Romantic writer emblematizes the general view of Romantic male authorship. The “egotism” of which some critics accuse Hawthorne stems from this larger accusation of solipsism in transatlantic Romanticism. In addition to being framed as the bastion of white male privilege (Mulvey, Warren), narcissism has also been a pathological medical condition in several areas of psychoanalytic thought, including Freud’s, a problematic history which this study reexamines.

Perhaps a good place to start in our challenge to broad understandings of narcissism as pathological egotism is with the Romantics, whose work deeply influenced Hawthorne and other American writers of the nineteenth century. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s description of the titular phenomenon of his essay On Love goes directly to the heart of narcissistic self-representation:

Thou demandest what is Love. It is that powerful attraction towards all we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves. . . . If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another’s; if we feel, we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own; that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart’s best blood. This is Love.

For Shelley, desire for another person is desire for self-likeness. While a long-standing tradition in the West has taken a similar view, it has done so in terms of the misogynistic construction of “woman” as the reflection of man, who sees in woman’s eyes the mirror image of his own beauty, physical and intellectual at once. Shelley, who was very much like the young Hawthorne a cynosure of the eye, was perhaps personally guilty of taking this view of
women in life. But in any event, in this essay his evocation of a desire for someone whose “nerves should vibrate to our own” resonantly evokes the intimacy of narcissism, or, more properly, the desire for intimacy of a particularly intense kind within narcissism. Moreover, it exposes the narcissistic core of desire, which, as Freud put it, has neither aim nor object, but, on the other hand, proceeds from the basis of a desire to replicate and rediscover the self. There is, too, an inherent vulnerability in narcissistic desire, a need for some kind of affirmation of one’s own worth on emotional and physical levels that is given through complementary resemblance. Male subjectivity is always figured as border-patrolled, as locked-down. Writers such as Shelley and Hawthorne suggest the porousness and fluidity of the male subject as well as the fragility of its constitution, the intense effort needed to maintain its surface logic of coherence and stability.

If psychoanalysis, as I will show, has no less consistently than the Western tradition put forth the view of narcissism as pathological, it can also be used provocatively to explore the centrality rather than the retrogressive role narcissism plays in desire. As psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel wrote:

Virtually every auto-erotic act is a manifestation of narcissism. For the pleasure is derived from one’s own body. Moreover, close psychologic scrutiny of human love relations discloses that every human being seeks his self, or his self-reflecting image, in others, and that every love, in a certain sense, is love of self. We but love ourselves in others and hate ourselves through our hatred of others.

Stekel provides a psychoanalytic version of Shelley’s desire for reassuring likeness. By adding the factor of autoeroticism, Stekel also reminds us of the sexual dimensions of self-fascination. I will discuss the distinctions between autoeroticism and narcissism in the first chapter, but let me establish here that, in Hawthorne’s own time, autoeroticism was a very troubling concept to many people. Broadly understood, it was, if anything, a more publicly denounced form of sexual expressiveness than homoeroticism. Autoeroticism was embodied negatively in the figure of the onanist, or masturbator. (From a psychoanalytic perspective, just as autoeroticism and narcissism are distinct from one another, autoeroticism cannot simply be reduced to onanistic practice; each has its own psychic characteristics.) The voluminous antebellum literature on the dangers of onanism, linked with same-sex sexual practices by such high-profile health reformers as John Todd, Sylvester Graham, and Mary Gove Nichols, classified autoerotic desire as no less pernicious than
same-sex desire, a bane to the emotional, spiritual, and physical integrity of the normative body. As Stephen Nissenbaum observed in his penetrating study of the Jacksonian era’s reformers, *Sex, Diet, and Debility*, Hawthorne’s work has much in common with themes in Graham’s tracts, especially.

Yet Hawthorne’s work also challenges the reformers’ uniformly phobic disdain for the autoerotic. He floods the concept of solitary pleasure with the free-floating urgency of phantasy. A prime example of his sensibility is the almost nakedly autobiographical story “The Haunted Mind” (1835), about the nighttime reveries of a young man on the verge of sleep (9: 304–9). As a phalanx of phantasms invade his drowsy mind, Hawthorne’s young man fitfully responds to each oneiric visitation, ranging from the intimidating, stern, masculine figure of “Fatality,” a demon that “touches” the “sore place” of the young man’s heart and embodies “Shame,” to a female presence whose “tenderer bosom” and softer breathing would be, the narrator “whispers,” such a pleasant addition to these “night solitudes.” By the last paragraph, the drowsy young man seems to achieve some form of climax: “the knell of a temporary death.” This work implies that the self is an ample and suitable site of erotic contemplation. Adding to this idea is Hawthorne’s rare use of the second person in the narrator’s description of these nighttime reveries. Addressing both his sleepy and contemplative protagonist and, implicitly, the reader as “You,” Hawthorne’s narrator maintains an emotional distance from both that is also redolent of spectatorial fascination. Mirror images, or more properly a chain of mirror images, narrator, protagonist, and reader reflect and double one another, simultaneously inciting desire, delaying climactic release, and then collectively experiencing this little death and its dreamlike, floating bodilessness.

Hawthorne’s work generally both supports and troubles the idea of solitary pleasure—supports by suggesting its possibility repeatedly, troubles by rendering the idea ominous. Giovanni Guasconti’s onanistic reveries in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” seem fueled as much by his own self-fixation as they do by the disturbing beauty of the story’s titular figure, but these reveries are harbingers of his own doom. Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance* onanistically forereckons “the abundance of my vintage” high up in his inviolate bower, but he uses this vantage point to facilitate his obsessive voyeurism, as if to repudiate knowledge of his own onanistic desires. There is in Hawthorne a constant struggle between conflicted modes—empathy and scorn, desire and revulsion, respectful distance and invasive intrusion, and so on. Narcissism emerges as the chief site of these affectional and social struggles, their conductor and psychic source.
JACKSONIAN AMERICA AND
HAوTHORNE’S VIEW OF MASCULINITY

Before proceeding to a further clarification of my psychoanalytic method here, I want to establish my understanding of what makes Hawthorne, on balance, a radical writer—however many conservative tendencies inform his work at times—of the antebellum period. Critical treatments of Hawthorne, especially those written by prominent critics such as Sacvan Bercovitch, Jonathan Arac, and John Carlos Rowe, from the early 1990s to the present have framed him as a racist and a misogynistic writer, or, at best, a writer who failed to make his politics sufficiently active, decisive, visible, or resistant. Or, Hawthorne has been framed as a writer who couched his own quite adamant conservative politics in a coy rhetorical pose of political indifference. In my view, these critiques have at times misrepresented Hawthorne’s politics and art; more troublingly, they have stemmed from a larger critique of Hawthorne’s suspect “inaction” or passivity. While matters remain unsettled in terms of making sense of Hawthorne’s admittedly conflicted and often frustrating politics, Larry Reynolds in Devils and Rebels has done a salutary job of providing new cultural contexts for them. The themes of inaction and passivity, whatever they may have meant for Hawthorne as a member of his northern abolitionist community, emerge as central to his fiction. It is precisely in the strange passivity of Hawthorne’s men that the radicalism of his treatment of masculinity lies. Hawthorne evinces a career-long willingness to acknowledge the unspeakable and culturally silenced vulnerability in American manhood; moreover, he insists on viewing hegemonic masculinity from a skeptical perspective that emerges as a critique. Unsilencing the strictures of what T. Walter Herbert identifies as code masculinity, which demands a stoic reserve that kills off the range of human feeling in males, and offering a valuable, anguished, sometimes even angry critique of it, Hawthorne managed to resist the normative gendered standards of his era while also illuminating their pressures and effects. This book attempts to show just how illuminating Hawthorne’s work remains.

Building on the work of historians such as David G. Pugh, Michael Kimmel, E. Anthony Rotundo, and Andrew Burstein, I argued in my 2005 study Men Beyond Desire: Manhood, Sex, and Violation in American Literature that Jacksonian America produced a recognizably modern version of American manhood that privileged male competitiveness and physical strength and targeted nonnormative masculine behaviors—effeminacy, especially—as threats to the gendered stability of the nation. The diverse discursive forces at work in antebellum America, sometimes with wildly competing interests
and agendas—ideologies of self-made manhood and Jacksonian man-on-the-make market competitiveness; religious reformers and temperance advocates; medical, health, and sexual reformers—united in the focus of their reconstructive programs: the young white male and his often errant, volatile body as well as spirit. Male sexuality—controlling, regulating, harnessing, and properly directing it—emerged as the chief battleground of these ideological battles. The particular form of male sexuality that emerged in antebellum literature—the figure that I call the inviolate male—was a reaction not only to the intensity of programs that sought to control male sexuality but also to the sheer incommensurability of their competing demands.

Hawthorne’s work teems with emotionally, physically, and sexually inviolate male figures who reject both female and male companionship, who are in flight from marriage and other men. The formation of homosocial bonds, or what I call compulsory fraternity, was (and, I would argue, remains) no less a normative demand for the subject than marriage. At the same time, if broadly speaking the gendered protocols of Jacksonian America demanded phallic aggression and relentless ambition from its competitive, enterprising male subjects (and, from its female subjects, conformity to a new model of female passionlessness and domesticity embodied by the emergent Cult of True Womanhood), Hawthorne’s work abounds with men, particularly young men, who eschew these market-driven models and attitudes. Hawthorne’s male characters retreat when they might be expected to drive ahead, hide when others unceasingly seek. The passivity of Hawthorne’s males, reflected in key patterns of his own life, especially in his politics, may reflect an unwillingness to pursue proper (and prescribed) political values. But their secretive, sensual slinking to the sidelines also refuses the gendered dictates of Hawthorne’s own era, which, on so many levels, demanded maximal visibility from its male subjects.

Hawthorne, born in 1804, came of age in an America being shaped by the masculinist and anti-European cult of Andrew Jackson. Though elected in 1828 and re-elected four years later, Jackson had, in many ways, a three-term presidency. Although John Quincy Adams, in what Richard Hofstadter, in his classic study Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, describes as “a freakish four-way election,” defeated Jackson the first time he ran for office in 1824, “Jackson was by far the more popular candidate.”22 The Battle of New Orleans in 1815 was a decisive moment for both Jackson and the nation’s self-definition. The famous battle—in which Jackson was celebrated for having defeated the British, as if single-handedly—established him as a military hero throughout the nation and solidified the American distrust of and distaste for its own substantive European heritage. As an embodi-
ment of European values and valences, John Quincy Adams only managed to maintain a tenuous, unsteady hold on his own presidency. As Hofstadter describes,

Adams’s administration was the test case for the unsuitability of the intellectual temperament for political leadership in early nineteenth-century America. . . . Adams became the symbol of the old order and the chief victim of the reaction against the learned man. . . . As Adams embodied the old style, Andrew Jackson embodied the new. . . . In headlong rebellion against the European past, Americans thought of “decadent” Europe as more barbarous than “natural” America; they feared their own advancing civilization was “artificial” and might estrange them from Nature . . . [In Jackson] was a man of action, “educated in Nature’s schools,” who was “artificial in nothing” . . . Against a primitivist hero [like Jackson] . . . who brought wisdom straight out of the forest, Adams . . . seemed artificial . . . [When Jackson challenged Adams again in 1828], Adams was outdone in every section of the country but New England.23

As Hofstadter put it, the terms of the election that resulted in Andrew Jackson’s 1828 presidency could be viewed as a battle between, in the words of a popular couplet of the time, “John Quincy Adams who can write / And Andrew Jackson who can fight” (159).24

Rather than put up a fight, Hawthorne’s men forfeit their roles as social and sexual contenders and instead focus intensely on the self. This focus on the self was, in Hawthorne’s treatment, a parody of the cult of self-made manhood that ran the gamut from Jacksonian market-values to the loftier principles of Emerson-Thoreauvian Transcendentalism, with its focus on self-reliance and self-culture. Self-focus in Hawthorne promises subversively pleasurable possibilities while threatening to immure the subject in the narrow confines of solipsism. Passivity emerges as a strategy for allowing for these potential pleasures while staving off an impending obsolescence.

A great deal more work needs to be done on the schism between Hawthorne’s publicly avowed love not only for Jackson but for the very aggressive purposefulness he embodied, not just generally but in Hawthorne’s own view, and the thoroughgoing critique of masculinist power in Hawthorne’s work. Hawthorne offers scabrous critiques of men such as Judge Pynchon in The House of the Seven Gables and Westervelt, Hollingsworth, Old Moodie, and even the narrator, Coverdale, in The Blithedale Romance, men who principally wield their power against those whose disadvantages leave them ill-equipped for a fight (the fragile elderly brother and sister Clifford
and Hepzibah in *Gables*; wan and withdrawn Priscilla as the Veiled Lady in *Blithedale*; that novel’s general populace subjected to Coverdale’s rapaciously voyeuristic gaze). While there are certainly masculinist attitudes in Hawthorne’s life and work, Hawthorne consistently strives to undermine the stability from which hegemonic masculinity proceeds to wield its various forms of power. As I will attempt to show in this book, Hawthorne was a resistant critic of the increasing masculinism of his culture in ways that have not always been apparent to his critics.

**THE PURPOSE OF PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM**

To return to the question of method: in speaking of psychoanalytic theory and of myth in relation to Hawthorne, I am both recalling earlier, no longer favored approaches to literary art and making a new, updated case for these approaches. While providing valuable insights distinctively its own, the historical approach to literature currently favored by Americanists cannot tell the full story of literature’s effects on readers nor of readers’ investments in literature. Though I believe that literary criticism must be sensitive to matters of history, I also believe that psychoanalytic theory is acutely adept at treating the affectional aspects of literary experience. One of my goals in this book is to make a case for the relevance, usefulness, and complementarity of psychoanalytic theory to historical studies of literature. I return to the question of the relationship between Americanist literary studies and psychoanalysis in chapter 3.

While I will have several occasions to establish, anew, why I feel that psychoanalytic theory is a useful means of studying Hawthorne’s work, I want to take a moment both to situate myself within a psychoanalytic literary studies framework and to explain why my approach also stands apart from this framework as well as from historical approaches to nineteenth-century literature. In his 1968 *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, once a well-known work, Norman N. Holland summarizes the elements of psychoanalytic literary criticism in chapters on fantasy, “form as defense,” displacement, character, affect, and related topics. Some of his comments in the 1975 edition seem to me enduringly apt:

[As] readers, you and I bring certain characteristic expectations to a literary work and defend against or adapt the text to suit them. As I accept the text through my characteristic defenses, I project my preferred fantasies into it and transform those fantasies, using the text as absorbed, into a meaning
and coherence that matters to me. You do the same for you. The literary experience is the transformation described in *Dynamics*, but it takes place within each of us differently, because we each transform the resources the work offers us so as to express our different identity themes.\textsuperscript{26}

Writing before identity politics, Holland presciently includes the idea of “identity themes.” While I am not writing from a standard identity-politics position, which focuses on positive images and an affirming group identity, my personal identity certainly shapes my politics and therefore my work. Writing as a multiracial gay man about a white and presumably heterosexual author, and writing very much from a presentist position while also striving to be historically scrupulous, I am quite self-consciously creating my own versions of Hawthorne and his work here which, while they may bear resemblances to the authentic manifestations of these, are very much shaped by my own sensibility. Certainly, I will concur with Holland that I am projecting my preferred fantasies into Hawthorne’s work and transforming those fantasies, using the text as absorbed, into a meaning and coherence that matters to me. (For Holland, “the reader introjects a process of psychological transformation [from unconscious fantasy toward conscious significance] that is embodied in the literary work.”) In so doing, I genuinely hope to speak to something that is authentically and independently alive and vital in Hawthorne’s work. But it is no more “explained” by psychoanalytic theory than it is by a scrupulous historical study—no more, that is, *explained away* by either. Because of Hawthorne’s genius as a thinker as well as prose stylist, his work not only withstands but also exceeds critical analysis. Yet critical analysis also has a life—a consecration, if you will—of its own, and its own meanings and reasons for existence. What I hope happens throughout this study is that my own identity themes and Hawthorne’s work as well as Freud’s can converge in ways that produce new meanings and readings of value.

As Stanley J. Coen writes in his fine study *Between Author and Reader*, psychoanalytic criticism is ill-advised to attempt to reconstruct the biographical author, as it did in the past (and as, it should be noted, many contemporary and decidedly nonpsychoanalytic approaches continue to do). “Beginning with a careful literary analysis, we must then demonstrate that a psychoanalytic perspective does indeed add something further to clarifying and enhancing multiple meanings and perspectives for enriching our reading experience of the text. Often the value in psychoanalytic literary criticism is not the psychoanalytic perspective or language but simply that it is good criticism.”\textsuperscript{27} I agree with Coen, and certainly hope to have produced good
criticism. But at the same time, psychoanalytic theory is not indistinguishable from other critical approaches. My commitment to it, which involves extensive revision of it from within, has a great deal to do with my political stances but also my own sensibility.

Psychoanalytic theory, to my mind, takes the best aspects of New Criticism—which, as has been amply shown, had many inherent flaws and ideological blindnesses—to a new level of theoretical sophistication, specifically in the belief in the importance and efficacy of close reading that both approaches share. But beyond this, psychoanalytic theory is particularly responsive, or at least can be made to be, to the emotional and other kinds of experiential aspects of gender and sexuality and also, though this area needs much more development within the discipline, racial identity. When informed by feminism, queer theory, and race theory, psychoanalysis can be a profoundly empathetic and suggestive means of developing enhanced, broad, and intimate understandings of identity and its implications.

For Hawthorne, writing in a literary era that placed severe restrictions on content, especially in matters of sexuality, and that, from the presidency of Andrew Jackson forward, set severe limits on gendered behavior for both men and women, literature was a means of expressing often taboo subjects in life as well as art. In my view, Hawthorne problematizes and even undermines normative gender and sexual roles (which is not to suggest that he does so with entire consistency or that a real conservatism in this and other regards is not also present in Hawthorne, only that it is not preponderant). But because Hawthorne does so, as he did just about everything, enigmatically, psychoanalytic theory, with its avowed interest in the unconscious and with parapraxis, slips of the tongue and other unintended revelations of unconscious thoughts and dynamics, becomes particularly useful for decoding his messages.

Hawthorne’s work remains deliberately, constitutionally enigmatic in ways that simultaneously resist and beckon interpretation. Psychoanalytic theory should be more than a figural attempt to pry open locked boxes with beguiling patterns on their surfaces. Instead, its own difficulties and its own biases as well as capacity for insight dynamically interact and intersect with the textual object to which the theoretical methodology is applied. My effort is not to apply psychoanalytic theory to Hawthorne’s work, but rather to compare both as modes of inquiry while letting each discover the other. What motivates me to study Hawthorne at length—beyond my belief that he is the greatest American writer of the nineteenth century—is that, in my view, Hawthorne is a radical theorist of gender, sexuality, and American masculinity. However many inherent and varied critical and literary dangers lurk
within such a treatment of an author, the allure of engagement and insight surpasses the fears they produce. In the end, any critical project is a work in progress to be, if not completed, at least extended and enlarged by the reader.

As Meredith Anne Skura writes in *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process*,

Using the psychoanalytic process as a model for literary texts does not imply that all conventions, all literal meanings, or all ordinary functions in a text are there only to be questioned. But it does provide a reminder that the questions are always there and that the uncertainty they produce is part of what the text conveys, even if this uncertainty is slight and finally resolved. Texts are more unstable than we might think; they are less fixed than simpler models that merely look for “hidden material” might indicate.  

Psychoanalytic theory is a complex model for the study of literature—complex both because it produces problems of its own that must be dealt with and because of the density and range of its invaluable insights. To use a Skura term, what psychoanalytic theory illuminates for us is “discrepancy”: the tension between what a work ostensibly strives to achieve and what it does achieve, the indications it gives that, on the way to its idiosyncratic achievement, the work has encountered numerous forks in the road, that numerous fissures have developed.

There are tantalizing discrepancies in Hawthorne’s work, ways in which he undermines the surface agendas of his narratives. Yet, at the same time, Hawthorne takes the very idea of narrative as an opportunity to subvert, to stage malevolent and upsetting fun and games. Moreover, as I have been suggesting, a genuine anguish courses through his witty menace. Psychoanalytic theory holds as a central premise that all is not what it seems, that all has not been made clear, in other words, that the unconscious has a powerful place in our lives that we struggle to understand. As I attempt to make use of it in this book, psychoanalytic theory can help us more fully and empathetically to understand the sources of Hawthorne’s anguish—in life, to a certain extent, but more importantly and expansively within the realms of his art. While my specific subject is the startling discrepancy between the nineteenth-century American model of hegemonic or code masculinity and Hawthorne’s representation of it, this focus leads to a broader set of reflections on the nature, or perhaps we should say the cultures, of gendered identity.
CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The book takes the following trajectory. In chapter 1, I discuss, in relation to Hawthorne’s work, both the Narcissus myth and the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissism as an early stage in human development that provokes a sense of “paradise lost” in the nostalgic adult subject. This nostalgia relates to the concept I develop of “traumatic narcissism.” I use this concept to interpret emotional patterns that recur in Hawthorne’s fiction—its deep senses of loss, anger, betrayal, cruelty, and sorrow. The discussion turns to the valences among narcissism and male homosexuality in Freud’s thought, the Ovidian version of the Narcissus myth, and Hawthorne’s particular uses of it. I then establish the terms whereby one of the most important areas of inquiry in the study—visuality and the sense of vision, related to shame and sadistic forms of looking such as voyeurism—will be discussed. Looking at Jacques Lacan’s and Laura Mulvey’s revisions of Freudian visual theory (the mirror stage and the gaze, and the male gaze, respectively), I discuss how their work helps us to understand the potential uses that can be made of Freud as well as certain pervasive themes in Hawthorne, in particular the confrontation with his own image on the part of the figure of the young man.

In chapter 2, I take these propositions further. I re-examine Freud’s often disputed if not altogether debunked theory of male homosexual psychosexual development, in which narcissism plays a central role, arguing that this theory, while not without some considerable difficulties, retains a value as an analysis of mother-identified male identity and the implications such an identity has for social relations. I reread Freud’s essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction” as an understanding of human subjectivity that provides a provocative alternative to the theory of the Oedipal complex. From the basis of this reading, I argue that Hawthorne explores same-sex love in his story “The Gentle Boy,” which I read as a complementary narrative to Freud’s theory of the male homosexual child’s psychosexual development, particularly in the centrality of the mother–son bond in both the tale and Freud’s theory. In this chapter, I begin to address the relationship between shame and narcissism in Hawthorne’s fiction as well as the relationship both thematics have to the equally substantial one in Hawthorne of vision and the gaze.

Chapter 3 discusses Frederick Crews’s Freudian interpretation of Hawthorne in his 1966 book The Sins of the Fathers and Crews’s later anti-Freudianism. From the 1980s to the present, Crews has emerged as one of Freud’s chief critics. In this chapter, I discuss Crews’s revisionist project, arguing that Crews’s early Freudian critique of Hawthorne was itself a misrepresentation of both Freud and Hawthorne. Challenging the emphasis that Crews
placed on the Oedipus complex in Hawthorne’s work, I explore the narcissistic themes at play within it, through close readings of the tales “Roger Malvin’s Burial” and “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” In the reading of “Burial,” I develop the concept I call “murderous narcissism” as an alternative to the oedipal schema Crews sees at work in the story. In addition, I discuss the homoerotic significance of the classical allusions in the tale. With “Molineux,” I develop, from my readings of Freud, Lacan, and Mulvey, the concept of the “narcissistic gaze” in Hawthorne. The goal of this chapter is not to replace one powerful critical term with another—narcissism for the Oedipus complex—but, instead, to establish that a consideration of Hawthorne’s narcissistic themes allows us to shed new light on his interests in male sexuality, vision, and the gaze.

Chapter 4 refines the theoretical and thematic terms of the study as a whole. Here, I develop, through engagements with psychoanalytic and film theory, the ideas that Hawthorne’s narcissistic themes are informed by a career-long preoccupation with vision, especially in sadistic forms such as voyeurism, and with shame. I argue that, while an important theme in and of itself, shame proceeds from narcissism in Hawthorne’s work. Shame plays a key role in the “narcissistic crisis” that Hawthorne repeatedly stages. This chapter argues that Hawthorne’s critique of normative masculinity proceeds from his awareness of the potentialities of shame in narcissism and the relation both have to vision and masculinity. The particular, consistent ways in which Hawthorne conveys the affect of shame in his male characters are explored, as are the related experiences of gender alienation and heterosexual ambivalence. In this chapter, I introduce the concept of “self-overseeing.” Hawthorne foregrounds a heightened sense of panic within the male self’s encounter with the visual evidence of its existence. The moments in which male characters glimpse themselves, as if for the first time, are fraught with anxiety and even terror. Extending the themes of the Narcissus myth, with its ban on self-knowledge, these instances of self-overseeing reveal some core truth of the self, but this revelation fills the subject with dread and self-revulsion.

Chapter 5 builds on the previous chapter in its examination of the ethics of looking and the gaze. Through a close reading of The Blithedale Romance that draws on film theory as well as Freud and Lacan, I explore Hawthorne’s construction of a voyeuristic male subjectivity, unpacking psychoanalytic interpretations of voyeurism as a form of sadism, and the ways in which it is informed by both homoerotic desire and homophobic defenses. I treat voyeurism as an alternative form of narcissism while also considering the ways in which the novel thematizes the “pornographic gaze.”
ravenous desire to look at the other characters is read not as male mastery expressed through vision but, rather, as indicative of the essential fragility, as well as potential for cruelty and prejudice, in his persona. His own confrontation with images of normative, nonnormative, and even nonhuman masculinity provides some of the most dramatic moments in the novel. I examine these moments in terms of Hawthorne’s deconstruction of both the male gaze and the conventional male subject’s relationship to masculinity as a gendered standard. One of the main themes of the chapter is the propensity that the objects of Coverdale’s gaze have for returning the gaze and subjecting him to its own paralyzing effects. The chapter concludes with a comparison of the returned gaze in Hawthorne and Hitchcock.

In chapter 6, I switch gender lenses and focus instead on Hawthorne’s representation of femininity, arguing that, on balance, Hawthorne’s work is feminist in its identification with female figures and critical hostility toward masculinist power. This chapter compares Hawthorne’s tale “Rappaccini’s Daughter” to Freud’s essay “Medusa’s Head.” I discuss the myth figures of Medusa and Narcissus as complementary metaphors for the difficulties in gendered subjectivity. Male narcissism emerges here as a defense against female sexuality and homoerotic desire. I also insert the tale within the contexts of literary tradition and intertextuality that are, I feel, crucial to any understanding of Hawthorne. Among other intertexts, the Bible, Christianity, particularly the myth of the fortunate fall, and Ovid’s Metamorphoses are discussed as source materials revised through Hawthorne’s particular interests in questions of gender, sexuality, and their psychological dimensions. Freud’s theory of male fetishism is discussed at length and used as a critical lens through which to analyze the deep structures of misogyny that Hawthorne, in my view, critiques in this work.

In chapter 7, I turn to a comparative discussion of Hawthorne and Melville that focuses on each writer’s reception of classical works of art, and classical male beauty in particular. Beginning with each writer’s impressions in his journals of the classical figure of Antinous, a legendary homoerotic icon, I explore the implications of Melville’s greater comfort with registering and recording homoerotic appreciation than that which Hawthorne exhibited. Considering his reconstructed late 1850s essay “Statues in Rome” and his Billy Budd, left in manuscript form and unpublished in his lifetime, I consider the ways in which Melville thematizes what I call visual identity and its relationship to male sexuality. Hawthorne’s equally vivid and intensive thematization of the concept occurs through means that are less explicit than Melville’s, but equally relevant to Hawthorne’s work. Between them, Melville and Hawthorne should be viewed as crucial contributors to what I term
transatlantic homoerotic visual culture. Considering each writer’s familiarity with the eighteenth-century German art historian Winckelmann’s theories of art, I argue that Melville and Hawthorne both take Winckelmann’s complex nonsensual homoeroticism to suggestive and provocative levels of engagement. Turning to Hawthorne’s 1860 novel *The Marble Faun*, I consider the significance of the titular figure to the narcissistic and homoerotic crisis Hawthorne thematizes in his work, and the ways in which the faun represents a kind of closure to this crisis.

In chapter 8, I turn my attention to matters of race, and the ways in which homoerotic narcissism intersects with race and gender. I argue for the aesthetic and political value of Hawthorne’s unfinished *Septimius Felton* and *Septimius Norton* manuscripts. First, I propose that Hawthorne’s late period deserves much more critical scrutiny and acknowledgment than it has been traditionally accorded. The “unfinished” nature of both of these texts may, I argue, be a strategic aspect of their political aims, or at least reflective of them on some level. Second, I discuss Hawthorne’s exploration of racial identity and the ways in which his narcissistic themes and interests in the gaze inform this exploration of race. I discuss the implications of Hawthorne’s “black” sensibility, as Melville put it, for his depiction of the multiracial Septimius Felton. Given the controversies that currently attend Hawthorne’s representation of race in the slavery era, my analysis makes the case that Hawthorne, in his late phase, much more thoughtfully engaged with matters of race and racism than he had in previous phases of his career. This argument seeks not to exculpate Hawthorne for his racism, but to provide a better context for it and also to enlarge the discussion of it. One way I do this here is to insert Hawthorne’s work within the growing field of “whiteness” studies. In psychoanalytic terms, I discuss the concepts of “ego ideal” and “ideal ego” in order to theorize the nature of Septimius’s desire, both for the Revolutionary War English soldier he kills and the mysterious woman (actually the soldier’s sister) with whom he develops a relationship.

In the epilogue, I discuss some fresh aspects of Hawthorne’s work that further illuminate its narcissistic thematic: his aesthetics and his representation of history as crisis for the individual subject. Revisiting Hawthorne’s elaboration of his aesthetic theory in “The Custom-House,” what I call his *textual narcissism*, I explore the ways in which Hawthorne represents art as a mirror in which the unconscious and matters of social reality have equal weight and can be brought into mutual dialogue. I insert Hawthorne’s aesthetics within philosophical treatments of narcissism’s relationship to language, considering the ways in which, first, the predicaments of the mythic Narcissus have been interpreted as indicative of the difficulties inherent in
writing and art generally, and, second, Hawthorne’s work illuminates and interacts with these philosophical questions. I then turn to Hawthorne’s idiosyncratic representation of history and its relationship to the individual subject in *The Marble Faun*. This discussion allows me to revisit the controversial issue of Hawthorne’s supposed ahistoricism. While critics such as Sacvan Bercovitch, Lauren Berlant, Eric Cheyfitz, and John Carlos Rowe have critiqued Hawthorne for his political conservatism and hypocritical poses of political naiveté, I argue here that Hawthorne offers a radical account of history as contingent upon individual experience and the question of desire. Hawthorne’s emphasis on the narcissistic dimensions of historical experience makes his interpretation of the historical no less challenging but also considerably more interesting than contemporary critical treatments have maintained.