The Fragility of Manhood

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IN ADDITION TO reorienting the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissism and homosexuality, one of the chief goals of this book is to demonstrate why psychoanalytic theory, albeit significantly revised, remains useful for questions of gender and sexuality, male embodiments of both especially. Shaped both by the rise of New Historicism in the 1980s and by the backlash against theory that stems, arguably, from the mid-1990s, Americanist literary criticism has emphasized archival work and material history. While this approach continues to yield insights of lasting value, it also runs the danger of eschewing more intimate matters, such as sexual desire and emotional experience. In my view, some real losses are incurred when we primarily treat these topics from a historical, rather than an affectional, perspective. While developing more of an understanding of the ways in which the expression of sexuality and the lived experience of gender were shaped, curtailed, or determined by cultural and social contexts is crucial to our reconstruction of gender and sexual history, the issue of desire is a more challenging one because it cannot be solely illuminated by even the most scrupulous historical research. As I will elaborate below, psychoanalysis’s central premise of an unconscious—a part of ourselves that we cannot rationally know, understand, or access, and that reveals itself only fitfully or metaphorically—makes it a valuable means of considering the paradoxical and contradictory nature of desire. Current Americanist critical practice largely eschews the methodology of psychoanalysis (which is not to suggest that it is absent, only that it is de-emphasized), but it does so at the cost of over-
looking certain dimensions of literary experience, specifically those related to the emotional aspects of subjectivity, its gendered, racialized, and sexual components, and the relationship all of these aspects have to desire and the unconscious. Historical and psychoanalytic approaches can have a complementary relationship to one another that is simultaneously mutually reinforcing and productively destabilizing—the historical approach revises and challenges psychoanalysis’s reliance on mythic dream structures and generalities; the psychoanalytic revises and challenges history’s emphasis on material evidence, which at times borders on a mania for certainty. In any event, my effort here—one mirrored by my attempt to argue for a place for the narcissistic within the oedipal structures associated with Hawthorne’s work—is not to replace one critical methodology with another but to enlarge our critical purview to include both. To be as clear as possible, it is my contention that an approach that is both psychoanalytic and historically attentive will yield the richest insights into historical texts.

As I argued in chapter 2, there are very good reasons for regarding psychoanalysis with suspicion; it has had a tendency, in its American contexts especially, to pathologize individuals for failing to live up to the normative standards it has itself either devised or upheld. Psychoanalysis must often be read and used against itself, which queer theory inflections of psychoanalysis make possible because queer theory, at its best, refuses normative programs of identity and subjectivity and promotes productively resistant reading. (I do mean queer theory does this at its best; at its worst, it has a tendency toward the normalizing all its own, especially in terms of political attitudes.)

It is Freud’s very inconsistency as a thinker that makes his work valuable for my efforts to reimagine psychoanalytic theory for queer theory purposes and for the purposes of gaining greater understanding of Hawthorne’s work, especially in its capacity to critique the normative constructions of gender and sexuality in the United States. Freud’s tergiversations; his inconsistently held views; his footnotes that provide a radical counterargument, at times, to his own main text, all evince his habit of revising his opinions. This self-revisionary quality—when matched to the radicalism of Freud’s vision of sexuality as essentially a maddening, troublesome, even destructive force, the antithesis, in other words, of heterosexist culture’s ennoblement of sexuality as a normalizing, benign phenomenon when properly tied to regimes of reproducitivity and heterosexual marriage—gives his work an appealing, exciting looseness.¹

It is precisely this quality that Frederick Crews, a self-revisionary thinker himself, entirely misses out on in his revisionist work on Freud. Thinking
through Crews’s positions since the Freud backlash, of which Crews was instrumental, began in the 1980s allows us to gain insights into the ways in which critics have often missed out on what remains valuable in Freud, namely the variability and the resistant pessimism of his vision especially in relation to gender and sexuality, a political pessimism that Hawthorne shares. Interestingly, Crews has also played a significant role in the trends of Americanist literary criticism since the late 1980s, albeit as someone who has steadily critiqued them. (Americanists, for their part, have largely proceeded in comfortable defiance of his positions.) Making sense of Crews’s positions, then, will help us to situate this book within Americanist literary studies as well as psychoanalytic theory. This chapter moves from a re-examination of Crews’s views of both Freud and Hawthorne to close readings of two key Hawthorne stories, “Roger Malvin’s Burial” and “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” both of which, I argue, are more illuminatingly read through narcissism than the oedipal paradigms through which criticism, following Crews, has traditionally framed them.

THE SINS OF THE CRITICAL FATHERS
FREDERICK CREWS, FREUDIAN LITERARY THEORY, AND FREUD-BASHING

By now, everyone knows the story of the once passionately Freudian critic who became an even more passionate, self-described Freud-basher. We know the story well because Frederick Crews has been obsessively telling it since the 1980s. Crews’s 1966 *The Sins of the Fathers*, a Freudian study of Hawthorne, remains an important, sharply written and observed work, while also one very much in need of updating. Though quite influential, it has rarely been imitated, its closest equivalent being Gloria Erlich’s excellent *Family Themes and Hawthorne’s Fiction*. Also of significance, in her book *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, Lauren Berlant discusses Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* in the Lacanian terms of the “National Symbolic.” Though I do not concur with all of her readings, especially of Hawthorne’s depiction of Hester Prynne (which Berlant frames as a catalogue of biblical misogyny), her study of Hawthorne’s relationship to the national construction of subjectivity remains extremely relevant.2

Because *The Fragility of Manhood* is the first avowedly Freudian study since Crews’s *Sins*, it is important to take a moment both to acknowledge Crews’s significance to Hawthorne studies, my own included, and to establish the quite wide gulf between my own approach and his, beginning with
his 1966 treatment. One of the vexations of the later Freud-bashing phase of Crews's career is that it proceeds from the implication that his own earlier work was compromised only by its Freudianism, an orthodoxy which, as he claims in his 1989 afterword to a republished *Sins*, he finds himself relieved to discover managed to be tempered even in 1966 by his admirable skepticism: “my only goal was accurate knowledge about Hawthorne” (285). In other words, the Freudian methodology was hopelessly faulty, but the essential Crews probity somehow managed to save the work from its theoretical sensibility. Crews is probing, and *Sins* remains an expert and incisive treatment of Hawthorne's work. At the same time, it approaches Hawthorne from a Freudian perspective that is conventional in the extreme.

Crews is a critic whose tendency to scornfulness can overshadow his insights. He works most effectively when he can critique other critics, and part of what drives *Sins* is his disdain for the moralistic critics of Hawthorne’s work of the “Christian revival” of the 1950s and 60s. (One of the implications of re-examining Crews’s earlier work is that we also re-examine the theologically oriented Hawthorne criticism that he dismissed.) As Crews himself makes clear, *Sins* continues to be worth reading despite Crews’s much-publicized rejection of Freud. I believe that a more responsible, generous critic would have revaluated his early argument from a position of self-revision but also in an effort to enlarge, rather than entirely debunk, the earlier critical paradigms, to add new perspectives and current concerns to the dated but still useful methodology. But Crews sees nothing dated or limited in his application of Freud to Hawthorne’s art; he only sees the limitations of Freud, not of his own use of Freud. So determined is the later Crews to exculpate himself from any complicity with Freud that he ingeniously jettisons any investment in Freud, focusing only on the valiant bits of his earlier self that managed always to temper his youthful Freudian idolatry.

We can usefully compare Crews with another critic who revaluated his 1960s Freudianism, Robin Wood. Having written, in the 1960s, a famous Freudian study of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Wood began, in the 1970s, to revaluate his own work, sternly critiquing his insufficiently feminist earlier views and reliance on a faith in the redemptive power of therapy (although this last remains a stubbornly persistent facet of Wood’s work). Updating, critiquing, but also building upon his psychoanalytic principles, Wood was able to offer a powerful new feminist, proto-queer theory critique of Hitchcock. Whereas Wood’s self-revisionary work enlarges Freudian critique to make vital interventions in misogyny and homophobia, Crews’s revisionism elevates only Crews and, if anything, casts his work generally in an only more indelibly conservative light than his 1966 study did. Ultimately,
Crews's defensive scornfulness becomes the point, rather than a component, of his work.

Crews holds Freud responsible for the rise of poststructuralist theory, for the reign of the “apriorists” for whom a “theory is worth exercising if it yields results that gratify the critic’s moral or ideological passions” (285). This argument is incoherent. It is precisely poststructuralist theory, heavily influenced by Michel Foucault and his profoundly committed challenge to Freudian theories of culture, particularly what Foucault calls “the repressive hypothesis,” that began to deconstruct and dismantle the Freud legend in the 1970s. (Very briefly put, for Freud, society functions through repression, specifically repression of the sexual; for Foucault, the opposite is true: society, far from repressing sexuality, endlessly incites it and promulgates the idea of its centrality to human life through discourse.)

Crews in 1989, as he will do from then to the present, aligns himself with the noble “empiricists” rather than the dread poststructuralists. It is the empiricists for whom “justification for a theory must reside in its combination of logical coherence, epistemic scrupulousness, and capacity to explain relatively undisputed facts at once more parsimoniously and more comprehensively than its rivals do.” One might suggest that considerable biases can inform the empiricist view behind which Crews rallies here. Throughout this book, I attempt to demonstrate the considerable potential of literary Freudianism for “epistemic scrupulousness”; but I also approach Crews’s desire for “logical coherence” and “relatively undisputed facts” with suspicion. To my mind, those terms reveal an underlying, and, I hope, unwitting heterosexism. Crews appears to associate the empirical with properly masculine values, emphasizing as positive virtues the factual, the concrete, the tangible, the verifiable. Crews’s valorization of the empirical betrays a bias against the qualities that would appear to oppose it: the liquid, the amorphous, the intangible, the obscure, the opaque. In essentialist terms, these values connote femininity; if found in males, they connote effeminacy. Crews’s insistence on the supremacy of empiricist approaches proceeds from an attitude of revulsion toward the feminine and effeminacy. “Logic” in the later Crews emerges as the kind of ironclad vehement dogmatism that Hawthorne critiques in the Puritan elders that infiltrate his fictions. Logic is the masculine ethos that rigidly polices gendered decorum, that relies on the Cartesian model of a human being’s value lying exclusively in her rational nature, not in her bodily and affectional dimensions.

I actually share with Crews a profound dislike of theoretical orthodoxy. I write this study neither with a desire to conform to psychoanalytic principles nor to confirm the validity of psychoanalysis for its own sake. I, too, am
interested in a real Hawthorne, if only in the sense of discovering an authen-
tic and sound set of insights into his work. (The Hawthorne of Crews’s view
is a weak, faltering man energized by his disdain and scorn. Given that this is
not my own understanding of Hawthorne, I would say that the “real” Haw-
thorne remains unfound in Crews’s work.) But it remains my challenge to
make a case for a Freudian literary criticism—and, some would say, for psy-
choanalytic theory, generally—when many commentators other than Crews
have also repudiated the form.

Psychoanalysis is valuable precisely as a means of deriving insights into
the emotional and psychic experience of gendered, sexual, and racial iden-
tity. What is enduringly valuable about psychoanalysis is its rejection of a
faith in, to say nothing of an orthodoxy of, rationalist order at the exclusion
of the arbitrariness, perversity, and instability of subjectivity, of the limitless
and inscrutable range of our unconscious life. Its belief in an unconscious,
a part of ourselves we cannot determine or fully know, makes psychoanaly-
sis extremely useful for thinking about questions as vexed and enigmatic as
sexual desire, which cannot be “covered” by context and historical research
alone. As I attempted to show in chapter 2, the importance of perversity in
Freud’s thought is extremely important to any understanding of the value his
work retains for the study of gender and sexuality. The Freudian theory of
perversity allows us to recognize the enormous reserves of sexual potentiali-
ties that are necessarily squelched by the social order to ensure its normative
function. As Valerie Rohy puts it in her Anachronism and Its Others, “Freud’s
understanding that the normal is pathological and the pathological is normal
may be his greatest and most humane insight: everyone fails at development,
everyone is subject to sexual perversity, everyone falls back in time.”6 Theo-
ries of arrested development, Freud’s included, lose any coherence when such
a view is properly considered.

In a fairly unflinching critique of Freudian theory, Marcia Ian succinctly
and persuasively defines the value of psychoanalysis. This value lies in Freud’s
radical refusal of one of the central tenets of classical philosophy, the law of
noncontradiction:

If I were asked . . . to say what is to me the most useful gift of the many
psychoanalysis has offered us, I would answer that it is Freud’s definition of
the psyche as the realm where the law of noncontradiction does not apply.
In the psyche, both any idea \( p \) and its opposite not-\( p \) are true, and may
either together or separately cause or prevent, animate or agitate, signify or
deracinate, inspire or terrorize—or deaden.7
It is precisely in the way in which opposite but equally urgent, felt, meaningful ideas do not cohere in Freud that makes psychoanalytic theory so affectingly useful for the study of Hawthorne. It is precisely the ways in which Hawthorne’s work complicates, deepens, and challenges psychoanalysis’s own pathologizing tendencies toward its own compulsive desire for system and logic that makes Hawthorne’s work so relevant for psychoanalysis.

To return to Crews in 1966: in Crews’s index, under Oedipal, we find passim. The chief limitation of his study is one he shares with Freud, a persistent insistence on the explanatory function of the Oedipus complex, which Crews sees as the central problem of Hawthorne’s work. In Crews’s version of Hawthorne, the Oedipus complex manifests itself in a fearful apprehension of horrifying incestuous desire on the part of male characters toward sister and mother figures, hostility toward the father, whom the protagonist wishes to see degraded, like Major Molineux, and a desire ultimately to conform to the father’s law. Certainly, Hawthorne’s work is rife with oedipal tensions. But, as I argue throughout this study, his work is equally, if not more urgently, a conflictual engagement with the phenomenon of narcissism, which manifests itself in recurrent treatments throughout his career of divided selves, reflected selves, beautiful and unattainable selves, bifurcated or hollow or chimerical or fatally masked, veiled, and hidden selves; of paintings, portraits, miniatures, daguerreotypes, and other images of selves within a literary evocation of the visual the intensity of which prefigures the cinema; of the self split off from itself, of the self contemplating itself as another self, of the self cut off from and longing for itself, of the self self-mesmerized, of an essentially conflictual relationship between the self and the image of the self within a body of work whose chief concerns parallel Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage. Pace Crews, and in agreement with James K. Folsom, I argue that Hawthorne found oneness inscrutable and made its myriad perplexing fascinations his subject.

To demonstrate both the ways in which Hawthorne explores the significance of male beauty and its potentially conflictual experiential and social implications, I will now turn to two famous tales that, while subject to innumerable critical exegeses over the years, have rarely ever been viewed as exercises in narcissistic self-representation and exploration of the dynamics and effects of looking relations. My purpose in this analysis will be to demonstrate the importance of Hawthorne’s narcissistic themes even to works that ostensibly seem far removed from them. I will then turn to a discussion of the ways in which Hawthorne’s personal experiences may have shaped his attitudes toward the narcissistic visual desire foregrounded in his work.
Chapter 3

MURDEROUS NARCISSISM
“ROGER MALVIN’S BURIAL”

Hawthorne’s indelible 1832 tale commences in the year 1725, during the battle known as Lovewell’s Fight (which Hawthorne names Lovell’s Fight), a real event of the French and Indian Wars. A young man and an old man lie depleted and wounded in a forest on their arduous journey home from a battle with Indians. This matched/mismatched pair of young and old man, I argue, is the locus classicus of male anxiety in Hawthorne’s work. Though tormented as to which decision to make, the young Reuben Bourne agrees to let old Roger Malvin die alone in the forest after the old man has entreated him, despite Reuben’s protestations, to do so. But when Reuben returns home to his fiancée Dorcas, who is Roger Malvin’s daughter, he finds himself in a panic when Dorcas assumes that her father had already died and been properly buried, with funeral rites, by Reuben when he was rescued by a search party. Tormentedly accommodating himself to her inaccurate belief, Reuben turns into a secretive, inwardly tortured, hostile, and ungracious man as he lives out his life as husband to Dorcas and father to their son, Cyrus. One day, many years later, in the forest with Dorcas and the now teen-aged Cyrus—the same forest in which Roger Malvin’s body was left to rot—Reuben and Cyrus go out hunting, and Reuben accidentally—or anything but—shoots Cyrus instead of a deer. As he contemplates the bizarre coincidence that Cyrus’s dead body lies beneath the same oak where Roger Malvin died alone, Reuben tells Dorcas that “Your tears will fall at once on your father and your son” (10: 360). So many complex ideas circulate here that to assign the tale one thematic program is quite limiting; yet I wish to demonstrate that its oedipal surface hides a narcissistic depth.

Crews does not simply assert that the tale is a version of the Oedipus complex; his style is to reinforce by qualification. He considers several different reasons for his reading, systematically weighing these pieces of evidence: Roger relates to Reuben as a son, calling him “my boy”; Roger is depicted as a sexual rival to Reuben, who will profit from the older man’s death by getting to have his daughter all to himself; the incest themes in other Hawthorne works, as Crews reads them, deepen the incestuous suggestion that Dorcas is a sister to Reuben as well as his wife, being the daughter of Reuben’s figural father. “But let us return to less tenuous evidence,” writes Crews, now clinching his oedipal case. Hawthorne, Crews cites, writes that Reuben “could no longer love deeply except where he saw or imagined some reflection or likeness of his own mind. In Cyrus he recognized what he had himself been in other days . . .” Crews not only fails to consider the narcissistic
valences here (reflections, likeness) but also stops the quote from the story right there, or rather isolates one piece of it. The full passage problematizes Crews’s oedipal interpretation of the work.

The only child of Reuben and Dorcas was a son, now arrived at the age of fifteen years, beautiful in youth, and giving promise of a glorious manhood. He was peculiarly qualified for, and already began to excel in, the wild accomplishments of frontier life. His foot was fleet, his aim true, his apprehension quick, his heart glad and high; and all who anticipated the return of Indian war spoke of Cyrus Bourne as a future leader in the land. The boy was loved by his father with a deep and silent strength, as if whatever was good and happy in his own nature had been transferred to his child, carrying his affections with it. Even Dorcas, though loving and beloved, was far less dear to him; for Reuben’s secret thoughts and insulated emotions had gradually made him a selfish man, and he could no longer love deeply except where he saw or imagined some reflection or likeness of his own mind. In Cyrus he recognized what he had himself been in other days; and at intervals he seemed to partake of the boy’s spirit, and to be revived with a fresh and happy life. (10: 351)

Gray Kochhar-Lindgren writes, along Freudian lines, of narcissism as a wound: “unless we break out of the magic circle of the ego, unless the self-reflecting mirror of Narcissus is somehow shattered . . . there is no hope that the wound may be healed. And even if it is healed, the scar that marks the place of struggle will remain.” Hawthorne’s Reuben Bourne cannot break out of his ego’s magic circle; he can only love what reminds him of himself, “some reflection or likeness of his own mind.” No doubt Reuben loves himself for his mind, but it’s Cyrus’s body, not mind, that Reuben regards so rhapsodically. Hawthorne’s elaborate evocation of the beauty of Cyrus (beautiful youth, glorious manhood) exceeds the parameters of the tale’s themes at this point. We know that Reuben is closed off and can love only the son who memorializes his own lost youth, but Hawthorne deepens this memorialization by suffusing it with an ardent beauty, one made more palpable by the Hellenic details of Cyrus’s athletic qualities. Reuben’s love for him is deep, strong, and silent, expressed entirely through visual contemplation; it displaces almost entirely his love for his steadfast wife, Dorcas. What Reuben seems to love in the boy is his own lost youth, before war and the terrible compact he forged with Roger Malvin took it away; but Cyrus is also an idealized figure, endowed with attractive physical qualities that were not attributed to Reuben. (Hawthorne adds little detail to his description of the
young Reuben save his youth and anxiety.) Cyrus exemplifies visual identity, being knowable to us almost exclusively through his physical qualities, his visual design. So we have to ask, what is this beautiful youth who could be a sculpture from classical antiquity doing in the filial forest of Hawthorne’s oedipal themes?

To begin the work of challenging the stronghold of Oedipus, we must begin by defamiliarizing the Oedipus complex itself. While it is the process whereby normative sexual identity is, ostensibly, produced—the process that makes us properly heterosexual, no longer seeing the same-sex parent as sexual rival but as the figure with whom we identify; no longer seeing the opposite-sex parent as object of sexual desire but as model for a proper, exogamous sexual object outside the bloodline—it is not some kind of narrative of sexual origins but, rather, itself a late stage in the psychosexual development of the child; it occurs after numerous other stages in which desire and identification take place. Even in its most normative cast, the Oedipus complex is produced through a prohibition on an original homosexual desire (for our discussion, the boy desiring the father before the mother): it does not produce heterosexuality out of thin air so much as it produces it through a repudiation of a prior homoerotic disposition. Judith Butler, writing of the “melancholia of gender identification,” draws out the implicit Freudian point that “it would appear that the taboo against homosexuality must precede the heterosexual incest taboo; the taboo against homosexuality in effect creates the heterosexual ‘dispositions’ by which the oedipal conflict becomes possible.”

For Steven Bruhm, these queer theory reformulations of classical psychoanalysis illuminate Romantic sexual and textual politics. Bruhm, drawing on Butler’s rereading of Freud, argues that “Romantic male desire is structured by a same-sex narcissism that it must continually repudiate.” The successful resolution of the Oedipus complex for the male involves identification with the father who had been a rival for the oedipal sexual object, the mother—but it is important to remember that the father, before this rivalry, was the original erotic object. As Butler argues, identifications, which take place in phantasy, express a wish to recover “a primary object of a love lost—and produced—through prohibition.” A desire to identify with the father is a desire, we can argue, to preserve some portion of that lost, repudiated desire for the father. If, as Butler argues, we mourn for a lost object specifically produced by the prohibitions of the Oedipus complex, that lost object, suggests Steven Bruhm, “can only be seen in a Romantic male optic as a desiring and desired male other whom the . . . subject desires to possess and be possessed by,” a complex welter of identification, repudiation, and homoerotic desire.
If the Romantic author/figure cannot acknowledge the homoerotic object of his desiring gaze but must repudiate it, Reuben’s desire for Cyrus is met with two repudiations, the inability of Reuben to recognize Cyrus as autonomous, as anything more than a reflection of his father—which suggests that Reuben in his own phantasy imagines himself as a gloriously beautiful youth—and, more intensely, the murder of Cyrus in the forest. I agree with Crews entirely, but for different reasons, that the accident is no accident at all. Reuben kills his own reflection in killing Cyrus, his own memory of a lost object, his unruined, earlier self, killed by war and the “Father.” In other words, the lost object that Reuben mourns is not the repudiated, repressed father-as-object-of-homoerotic-desire, but, instead, an image of his own prior perfection, which may or may not have ever existed but was produced from the wartime trauma and oedipal betrayal. Reuben mourns his own lost narcissism.

Kochhar-Lindgren’s reading of Narcissus illuminates Hawthorne’s tale:

It is otherness as language, person, the unconscious, and death that Narcissus refuses to open himself to as he stares at himself, reflected and unattainable, in the pool. He longs to be both subject and object of his own desire and not to be riddled by the necessity of symbolization and the desire of an other.¹⁷

The actual living, breathing body of beautiful Cyrus both reflects Reuben’s own phantasy vision of himself and disrupts and thwarts it by remaining stubbornly autonomous, other. In other words, as poignantly and erotically as Cyrus reflects, realizes, and extends Reuben’s self-image, Cyrus will always remain Cyrus, not Reuben; Cyrus will always be himself, will always elude the totalizing grasp of Reuben’s narcissistic projection. Cyrus cannot be contained, subsumed, by Reuben’s desire; for each day he exceeds and eludes it, threatening to leave behind his most significant function, to be Reuben’s self-reflection. For these reasons, even the stirring promise of Cyrus’s future as a military leader is threatening: his increasingly accessible adulthood and mature manhood threatens to dissolve his resemblance to Reuben’s phantasy-image and to confirm the inescapable truth of his autonomy, his difference from Reuben, that he is other. Liberating, cathartic tears gush from Reuben’s eyes as he contemplates his son’s freshly dead body lying upon the ashy dead body of his wife’s father. Reuben experiences cathartic relief because he is now freed, from memory, from himself, from the binding logic of his own narcissism. The murder of narcissism is simultaneously the murder of homoerotic desire; perhaps this accounts for the orgasmic
nature of Reuben’s tears, which seem forced out of him, as if they were an involuntary orgasm: “Then Reuben’s heart was stricken, and the tears gushed out like water from a rock” (10: 360). The father’s orgasmic release is tied to death, to the destruction of the son. But this murdered narcissism is itself also a memorial to Reuben’s lost narcissism, captured in the perpetual frieze of death agonies; Cyrus can now always remain the beautiful youth of fantasy, and never grow into the older or old man of recrimination and physical decay. Reuben preserves his self-image in his son’s glorious manhood, now forever intact in memory.

I call what Hawthorne evokes here murderous narcissism—the killing projection of one’s own phantasies and desires onto another that refuses to recognize another person as an other, not part of the self. As noted in chapter 2, Freud describes even parental love for children as a manifestation of their own narcissism. Hawthorne takes this idea, if you will, to diabolical heights here. The particular kind of murderous narcissism at work in this tale may be subclassified as patriarchal narcissism, the father’s inability to recognize the son as anything other than a reflection of himself. Reuben would appear to view himself as a victim of this force as well, killed off in the prime of his manhood by the troubling ghost of his father-in-law. With chilling cyclical sureness, Reuben kills off his own son, both the older man’s future and his (imagined) memory of youth, in the prime of his manhood.

The schism between the young man and the old man that informs Hawthorne’s work—present in tales such as “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” “Young Goodman Brown,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” it becomes only an ever-more pronounced theme in all of the long romances, including the unfinished Septimius Felton—can be read as a perpetual acting-out of this narcissistic crisis. The old man threatens to destroy the younger, and the younger resists him. So far, so oedipal. Yet this conflict heavily involves both the logic of the visual and the threat of the homoerotic: who sees whom and how seeing occurs become thematic concerns. The young man is almost always described as rapturously beautiful, while the old man’s physical decrepitude and ugliness are emphasized and amplified. Robin Molineux is a surprisingly comely youth whose comeliness is in especially marked contrast to the tarred-and-feathered spectacle of his terrified older kinsman (I discuss this story at length in the next section); Young Goodman Brown is fixated on the old man-Devil’s writhing snakelike staff, a perversely funny reminder of the homoerotic dynamics of the father-son rivalry in the Oedipus complex; the beautiful Giovanni Guasconti is matched up against the cadaver-
ous, dark Rappaccini; beautiful, tremulously sensitive Dimmesdale against the grotesquely misshapen Chillingworth; Coverdale, said by Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* to be “quite the handsomest man,” against the ghastly, faded Old Moody; beautiful, lithe, primally sexy Donatello against the sinister Model; multiracial Septimius Felton, who possesses “a certain dark beauty,” against the ominous, spider-loving Dr. Portsoaken. These oedipal dynamics are disrupted by and suffused with an ardent, mystifying emphasis on the corruption of a beautiful male youth by an old and ugly one. I argue that this dynamic is at least as resonantly narcissistic as it is oedipal because of the recurring, increasingly incessant focus on both male beauty and the visual, the desire for self-reflection tied, so resolutely, to destruction, sometimes of self, more often of other. What the father seems to want to kill off is not the son but the father’s own reflection; in so doing, he both destroys and memorializes his own lost beauty or his fantasy of having possessed it. On the part of these beautiful young men, these older male figures are a distorting mirror image for their own bodily perfection, reflecting back a grotesque self. Given that almost all of these young men are revealed to be as morally shallow, dubious, and corrupt as they are comely, youthful, and desirable, Hawthorne appears to suggest that the old man functions as the corrective mirror to the younger. The author employs the cautionary nature of the Narcissus myth as a stern corrective to beautiful young males, forcing them to acknowledge the interior ugliness a beautiful surface camouflages, themes that Oscar Wilde will make famously his own in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. Yet why would this be so? Why does Hawthorne regard the young man so skeptically? Another key Hawthorne story raises these questions.

THE NARCISSISTIC GAZE
“MY KINSMAN, MAJOR MOLINEUX”

An awareness of the presence of narcissistic themes in Hawthorne’s work makes possible fresh readings of works rarely considered in such a context, such as the famous tale “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1832). “Molineux” provides the template for Hawthorne’s major narcissistic themes: fraught, painful, violating looking that maims the viewer’s vision; the simultaneous pleasure and terror of being looked at; shame and the threat of public exposure; the simultaneous attractiveness and moral dubiousness of the figure of the young man; the rejection of perceived ugliness and fastidious adherence to standards of beauty best exemplified by the youthful, morally callow male. As the discussions of the Lacanian mirror stage (the aggressivity
inherent in a fascination with one’s image), Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze (the desire and ability to subjugate another through the eye), and shame in “The Gentle Boy” (related in no small way to how Ilbrahim looks and is perceived by others) have suggested, for Hawthorne masculinity is inseparable as a psychic as well as social experience from the experience of vision and the harrowing possibilities it raises for violation—either of another person or of one’s self. Adding to the complexity of this welter of anxieties is the issue of homoerotic and narcissistic desire—the beauty of youthful male figures makes them simultaneously a gender and sexual threat that intensifies the inherent fears and dangers of images and of looking.

“My Kinsman” depends upon the ambiguous moral nature of its protagonist. But what is the relevance to “Molineux” that its protagonist, Robin, is exceedingly handsome? Moreover, why does Hawthorne reveal Robin’s beauty through the perspective of a ferryman’s appraising look: “the ferryman lifted a lantern, by the aid of which, and the newly risen moon, he took a very accurate survey of the stranger’s figure”? We are introduced to Robin not by name but by body. “He was a youth of barely eighteen years, evidently country-bred. . . . He was clad in a coarse grey coat, well worn, but in excellent repair; his under garments were durably constructed of leather, and sat tight to a pair of serviceable and well-shaped limbs. . . . Brown, curly hair, well-shaped features, and bright, cheerful eyes, were nature’s gifts, and worth all that art could have done for his adornment” (11: 209). The contours of Robin’s leather-clad body are suggestively eroticized; like those of an athlete in classical marble, his limbs and his features are both strong and “well-shaped.” Echoing the Narcissus myth, the ferryman transports this New England Narcissus to the underworld, the nighttime city of political revolt and oedipal confusion.

Robin is primarily characterized through what I call visual identity. His outward appearance is the basis from which everything we subsequently learn about him—including his morally dubious and climactically revealed disloyalty to his kinsman—proceeds. One could argue that Hawthorne, deeply familiar with the tradition of the romance, merely borrows the form’s techniques of idealized figures here. But the references to Robin’s beauty surpass the needs of convention. By depicting Robin from the start as a magnet for the eye, Hawthorne foregrounds themes of looking as they relate to the figure of the young man. While Robin would appear to be the chief subject of the gaze—looking constantly at multiple others, scrutinizing situations (however strained his powers of discernment)—he is in fact the chief object of the gaze. Robin’s own act of looking at his grievously humiliated “tar-and-feathery” kinsman, while the climactic, decisive moment in this famous
story, is merely one stage in a series of spectatorial encounters. The tale dramatically engineers and stages Robin’s climactic reunion with his kinsman as, essentially, a profound act of looking, his kinsman rendered a baroque visual object for the purpose. Yet at the same time, and perhaps even more emphatically, it is Robin who is the object of the crowd’s fearsome gaze: as he gapes at his uncle, the crowd—verging on assimilating him into their own ranks or submitting him to his uncle’s cruel, bitter fate—fixes its collective eye on him. Robin’s encounters with dubious and alarming figures, which reach their height in his confrontation with his tarred-and-feathered uncle, rendered an alien figure, occur within a structural field of vision that I refer to as the narcissistic gaze, in which Robin is as much watched as he is a watcher—and as much watched by his fictional creator as he is by his fellow fictional denizens.

As we established in the introduction, for Lacan the gaze is indifferent to the subject, for Foucault it is deeply invested in monitoring the subject, and for film theory it constitutes the subject. Finding an ameliorative middle ground in all of these views, I return, albeit from a queer theory perspective, to Laura Mulvey’s view of the gaze as active, individually directed, and capable of making an impact that is often quite injurious on a person or persons. Hawthorne’s narcissistic gaze is just such a personal, direct, but also overarching and socially structured field of vision in which individual desires intersect with those of a collective as well as those of other individual persons. I call this fictional gaze narcissistic for several reasons. In hisavid desire to look and in his frustrated ability to possess what he looks for, Robin enacts the most telling action of the Narcissus myth. Robin is always only one among several lookers competing for the power of the gaze. Hawthorne depicts the limited perspective afforded Robin’s look, but, as noted, he also makes Robin the figure around whom disparate acts of looking in the tale rotate. We can say that what Hawthorne literalizes, in the most paranoid but also the most satirical form imaginable, is the narcissistic subject’s belief that all eyes are no less fixated upon him than are his own. The most charged desiring perspective evoked through this schema is, I would argue, Hawthorne’s own. In looking at his handsome young protagonist, the handsome young author looks at a textual mirror image. Even more intriguingly, as the author, Hawthorne looks upon a mirrored image of his own looking self in the figure of the mysterious stranger, lately entering the narrative, who provides Robin with his only useful guidance.

Robin Molineux’s nightmarish nighttime encounters with various troubling figures have been repeatedly analyzed over the years, with the chief readings, as with all of Hawthorne’s work, classifiable under the general
headings of historicist or psychoanalytic-mythic. In the anti-psychoanalytic view of Michael J. Colacurcio, Hawthorne is a writer exclusively devoted to the study of American history. Though he notes the “strong hints of voyeurism” in “My Kinsman,” Colacurcio cautions that “some political motive is even more obvious.”¹⁸ For Colacurcio, any “psychologistic” reading of this “perfectly crafted” tale reduces “politics to passage.”¹⁹ I take Colacurcio’s point that we should challenge simplistic psychoanalytic readings that compress the story into a rite-of-passage narrative that reveals some immutable oedipal law of filial overthrow of the “Father.” Yet to discuss voyeurism in the story is to discuss politics: the gendered politics of vision. Hawthorne’s disorganization of gendered and perceptual hierarchies—his refusal to grant his protagonist mastery over the field of vision, his interest in making Robin and other male figures as much the object as the subject of the gaze—makes a radical break with conventional conflations of masculine and visual dominance. Moreover, I argue that Hawthorne’s sexual politics is narcissistic rather than oedipal—focused on the rigors of self-consciousness and self-desire and the image of the self rather than a perpetual conflict with the father, which is not to suggest that oedipal themes are in any way unimportant in Hawthorne, only that they are not necessarily preeminent. In his Freudian phase in The Sins of the Fathers, Frederick Crews wrote, “Even critics who denounce literary Freudianism have recognized that Robin’s real search is for an idealized father—a figure of benevolent power who will shield him from the world and lend him prestige.” For Crews, the story transforms “the crisis of late adolescence” into the achievement of “a healthy independence from the paternal image.”²⁰ In his incisive but also conservative readings of Hawthorne, Crews reduces most of the author’s work to filial struggles, male quests for independent identity, and heterosexual closure. A much broader range of desires and conflicts can be considered in Hawthorne’s work through psychoanalytic paradigms.

Scanned by the ferryman as if he were Narcissus on the River Styx, Robin proceeds, in his search for his kinsman, to scan others. Discerning an approaching figure as a periwigged old citizen, Robin asks for his help; the citizen then rebukes him (“Let go my garment, fellow! . . . I have authority, I have—hem, hem—authority”), Robin only discovers after the old man hurries away that he has been observed in his encounter by the “barber’s boys,” who emit an “ill-mannered roar of laughter” at Robin’s embarrassing and fruitless encounter (11: 211). Before being lured into a tavern by its “fragrance of good cheer,” the suddenly hungry Robin beholds the “broad countenance of a British hero,” whom he follows inside. In the tavern, Robin observes various homosocial groupings occupying the wooden benches, with
whom he feels a “sort of brotherhood” (11: 212). Just as Robin seizes upon one figure in particular, “striking almost to grotesqueness,” with a “forehead” bulging out into “double prominence,” to emerge as a still yet more grotesquely fiendish face later in the story, the innkeeper reveals that he has been observing Robin as the youth has been observing the grouped men and the grotesque figure. Coming up to Robin, the innkeeper presumes that Robin is from the country and asks what his supper plans are (11: 213). By this point, all “eyes were now turned on the country lad,” appraising him and his attire (11: 214). Looking at the male group transforms into being looked at by them. Intensifying the palpable embarrassment of the scene, the innkeeper, apparently contemptuous of frugal Robin’s declining of supper, proceeds to compare Robin with the description of a fugitive servant, which leads the innkeeper to make “occasional recurrences to the young man’s figure” (11: 214). It is not clear whether the innkeeper truly believes Robin to be the escaped thief in the “Wanted” poster, or is, on some level, taking the opportunity to make a kinsman of Molineux as uncomfortable as possible, having possibly, as Robin conjectures, discerned a family resemblance. In any event, the overall effect of the episode is to make Robin, a perpetual observer, himself the site of glares from countenances with a “strange hostility.” Repeatedly, Robin is shown to be as looked at as he is a looker, and, when looked at, rendered a vulnerable visual object.

Strangely, Robin’s avid desire to look decreases not at all even as he somatically registers the psychic effects of the scenes of shame he has endured. He walks “slowly and silently” up the street in his search for his kinsman, the gait I locate as Hawthorne’s marker of male shame, as I will elaborate in the next chapter. But he also “thrusts” his face “close to that of every elderly gentleman, in search of the Major’s lineaments.” The aggression of his looking results not in mastery over the objects of his look, but in the “dazzling of his optics,” as a riotous pageant of “gay and gallant figures” whoosh past and bedazzle him. Again, where Robin exerts visual mastery, others overpower him visually. Next, Robin encounters the pretty young woman with the “strip of scarlet petticoat” (11: 216), the Major’s housekeeper, who finds in him a “handsome country youth” in whose appearance “nothing [was] to be shunned.” Her “dainty little figure” deceptively obscures the heights of her visual power over Robin—her petticoat’s hoop lends her the appearance of “standing in a balloon,” and her bright eyes possess a “sly freedom, which triumphed over those of Robin” (11: 217). Interestingly, the power of her look transmutes into a seductive power “stronger than the athletic country youth” (11: 218), whom she nevertheless abandons to race into her own domicile when the opportunity arises. The scarlet-petticoated woman’s
visual mastery over Robin intensifies through displacement: “the sparkle of a saucy eye” catches Robin’s own, accompanied by “drowsy laughter,” “pleasant twitters,” and the beckoning of a “round” arm above him. Good clergyman’s son that he is, Robin flees the suddenly lascivious scene (11: 218–19).

The grotesquely double-faced man now reappears in even more grotesque form, his doubleness of visage redoubled in the “infernal” hues of red and black on each side of his face, a harbinger of the full climactic release of accumulating chaotic energies and the fullest intensification yet of the conjoined themes of strange faces and visual dread. By this point in the story, Robin’s powers of vision simply falter: just as he appears to “define the form of distant objects,” they start away with “ghostly indistinctness” (11: 221). Perhaps it is his inability clearly to see, and thereby achieve mastery over the scene, that leads Robin to present himself as a visual object, gaining power from being seen as an impressive figure: to the gentleman who is the first to treat him with “real kindness” (11: 224), Robin describes himself as “well grown, as you see,” proceeding then to raise “himself to full height” before the stranger; visual evidence reifies identity, truthfulness, the factual. The stranger reveals his own ambiguous desires to co-opt Robin into the story’s gaze, calmly informing Robin “I have a singular curiosity to witness your meeting” (11: 225). G. R. Thompson argues that the gentleman who appears near the end and waits with as he watches Robin waiting for his kinsman should be understood as Hawthorne’s authorial stand-in, an argument relevant for our present purposes. The narcissistic gaze of the story directly involves the author, whose own figure and desire to look insert themselves as they are incorporated into the workings of the tale. I argue that Hawthorne stages his own desire to look at his figural presence, a desire to look treated no less ambiguously than any other in the narrative.

Hawthorne depicts the gaze as all-sided as he describes the tumult that Molineux’s humiliating procession provokes: “many heads, in the attire of the pillow, and confused by sleep suddenly broken, were protruded to the gaze of whoever had leisure to observe them.” The double-faced man, now revealed as the processional leader on horseback, assumes the Mars-like guise of “war personified,” the red of one cheek flaming like an emblem of fire and sword, the black of the other signifying mourning. He leads a fiery crowd of both men and women, “a mass of people,” curiously inactive save for their power as “applauding spectators.” “The double-faced fellow has his eye upon me,” Robin mutters, apprehensively imagining that he “was himself to bear a part in the pageantry.” With a nightmarish theatrical flourish, what Robin fears is precisely what occurs, as the leader turns around in his saddle and
fixes “his glance full upon the country youth.” The leader’s “fiery eyes” exemplify the menacing aspects of vision (11: 228).

In what is perhaps the most widely analyzed moment in a Hawthorne tale, Robin does finally find his kinsman, Major Molineux. What is the significance of this meeting, and of Robin’s bizarre, maddening, frightening, and funny decision, if it can be called one, to join in with the cruelly laughing revelers who have tarred and feathered Robin’s unfortunate Loyalist kinsman, Robin’s laugh the “loudest there”? Pledging allegiance neither to the typical psychoanalytic nor to the historical traditions of readings of this moment, I do not see this climax as either hostile oedipal rejection of the father or as momentous historical allegory (the Revolutionary birth of the United States). Rather, I see it in the terms with which the story has consistently dealt, as the climactic confrontation of the looker and the gaze, and, more specifically, that between Narcissus and a mirror image that, like most in Hawthorne, reflects not a coherent, reassuring reflection of the idealized self, the longing for the reassurance of beauty, but, instead, the reflection as damning, distorted, frightening, ugly.

The tarred-and-feathered spectacle of Molineux reflects Robin, but reflects him inaccurately. For Leo Bersani, desire, homoerotic desire in particular, is desire for “inaccurate self-replication.” For Hawthorne, however, desire is desire for perfect likeness, resemblance, self-sameness, in Aristotelian terms, for mimesis. We can translate Robin’s shocking laughter into these words: This old, humiliated, profoundly ugly man does not resemble me. Hawthorne’s personal hatred of ugliness, a recurrent theme in his life as well as fiction, relates to his anguished narcissism: the beautiful young man chiefly seeks an affirmation of his own beauty, remaining perpetually frustrated in this quest.

Fulfilling the obsession with the visual with which every question of identity and every pursuit of mastery in it intertwines, the story makes its most decisive moment of narrative tension a question of complicity with visual spectacle. For Robin to admit that Molineux is really his kinsman is to admit to complicity in the gaze, to admit that he is as horrifyingly vulnerable to its most violent aspects as Molineux now is. Repudiating Molineux, Robin repudiates the entire question of visual mastery, of subject and object, look and gaze, of any complicity in the desire for visual power, as he avidly trades in ego for group psychology. If the gaze has threatened to consume Robin, and by consuming him acknowledge him as desirable object, Molineux’s predicament now collapses such questions into the useful pandemonium whereby any intricate questions of desire and identification get lost in the riotous, scapegoating crowd. In joining in with the crowd’s boisterous
calumniation of the figure who stands in, as site of visual fascination, for himself, Robin effectively cancels out knowledge of his own susceptibility to the gaze, of his own status as desirable visual object.

In this story, the young man successfully displaces his own anxieties about being a visual object onto an old man who, victimized, lends himself all too readily to such uses. But in several Hawthorne works such a strategy is met with far less certain success. His participation in a collective rite of taboo vision in the forest leaves Young Goodman Brown eternally bereft, withdrawn and spiteful; Aylmer's displacement of visual anxieties onto his beautiful wife Georgiana, whose titular “Birthmark” he unceasingly attempts to erase, results in her death. Hawthorne’s final story, “Feathertop,” provides the most persuasive rationale for Robin Molineux’s avoidance of complicity with the visual: once the self recognizes itself as a visual spectacle, it meets its own death. As Slavoj Žižek writes, “‘seeing oneself looking’ . . . unmistakably stands for death. . . . in the uncanny encounter of a double . . . what eludes our gaze are always his eyes: the double strangely seems always to look askew, never to return our gaze by looking straight into our eyes—the moment he were to do it, our life would be over . . . .” Robin Molineux and others like him in Hawthorne’s oeuvre extend Narcissus’s phobic campaign against self-knowledge—which carries death with it—yet Hawthorne, in his frequent attempts to grapple with the difficulties of the Narcissus myth and in his frequent creation of a narcissistic double through which he can conduct his own conflictual desires, seems as compelled by a need to look straight into the eyes of the self as he is to look and be looked at askew.

As Lacan argues in his theory of the mirror stage, we are always locked in a relationship with our own image, the “small other” or autre, that is our counterpart in the mirror. (Lacan uses the lowercase a for the term autre to contrast it with the Autre of the Big Other, the Symbolic order, which exceeds our understanding and ability to identify with it.) I call this beguiling and illusory mirror image the specular self; an embodiment of cohesion and bodily perfection that haunts the subject while also connoting an uncanny, magical power. Hawthorne devises a theory of the subject’s relationship to the visual sphere that is similar to Lacan’s theory of a self irreparably at odds with, even as it is constituted by, its own image.

In his famous study of the double in psychology, folklore, and literature, Otto Rank argued that the double is a transformation of one’s own narcissistic self-love into the doppelgänger, “the feared and loathed other of one’s own desires.” Steven Bruhm notes that Rank associated the narcissistic double with paranoia and homosexuality, which is certainly of relevance to Hawthorne’s work, and reads Rank through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, likening the
paranoid terror that the double provokes to cultural regimes of homophobia. Also drawing on Rank, Dennis Bingham, in a study of Hollywood masculinity, notes that Rank theorized the double as a “disastrous wish-fulfillment apparatus that acts out the darkest repressed desires of the subject”; in Rank’s words, the classic doppelgänger plot is resolved by “the slaying of the double, through which the hero seeks to protect himself permanently from the pursuits of his self.” The slaying, however, “is really a suicidal act.” To apply Bingham’s insights to our discussion of Hawthorne, we can say that the “difference between the classical double and” those in Hawthorne’s works “is that they are granted a recognition. In the other they recognize the dark instincts they themselves repress . . . [when the male protagonist] finally confronts himself in the mirror, [he illustrates] the Hegelian notion that the need to change is motivated by self-disgust.” As I will be considering at length in the next chapter, Hawthorne repeatedly stages a fateful, fatal moment of self-confrontation—the young man looking at his uncanny double, and grappling with feelings of shame and fear.

IN A CONSIDERATION of the philosophical implications of Hawthorne’s notorious shyness, Clark Davis asks what Hawthorne means “when he tells readers of ‘The Old Manse’ that he veils his face.” Hawthorne, Clark theorizes, “chooses an image of public or external identity to figure the private or internal self. He then offers to ‘veil’ that public/private self by presumably withholding one set of information and simultaneously offering another. In this way ‘veiling’ is not so much hiding one’s ‘face’ with a blank mask as it is refusing to show one face by showing another in its place. And what is this ‘face’ but the ‘veil’ itself . . . Thus, when Hawthorne ‘veils his face’ he is assuming the general characteristics of human personality; he is displaying his private self in order to receive and perceive the thoughts and feelings of others.”

Davis astutely observes the effects created through Hawthorne’s rhetoric of veils and masks. I would put the matter differently, however: Hawthorne’s constantly threatened unveiling and reveiling function as a kind of authorial striptease for an audience presumed to be hungering for a glimpse of the “real” Hawthorne. This real Hawthorne is not merely the teasingly unyielding private celebrity author but the actual person writing the fictions who can be perceived by others in real life. In other words, Hawthorne transmutes his own felt experience of the gaze—his position within it, its impact on him, his own gazing agency and concomitant powerlessness—into a fictional performance of seeing and being seen that, while it covers a range of
effects and feelings, places its chief emphasis on the dangers of vision, the pain of being seen, the violating tendencies of seeing. Hawthorne’s veil-dance circles around the concerns of an intensely self-fixated authorial self—no less legitimate a topic for fictive exploration than “the thoughts and feelings of others.” In the next chapter, we will explore this self-fixation and its affectational dimensions in depth.