HAVING BEEN absorbed throughout this book with questions of gender and sexuality, I want to take the opportunity provided by the epilogue to consider other ways in which Hawthorne thematized narcissism: first, in his aesthetic theory; second, in his idiosyncratic theorization of history. Considering the importance of narcissism to Hawthorne’s aesthetics takes my effort to rethink and revalue the question of narcissism to a new level while also further developing our understanding of Hawthorne’s writerly sensibility. Considering the question of history—as critics such as Sacvan Bercovitch, Lauren Berlant, Eric Cheyfitz, John Carlos Rowe, and others have demonstrated, a deeply vexed one for Hawthorne—in terms of Hawthorne’s narcissistic aesthetic, as evinced by his novel *The Marble Faun*, yields some fresh insights into what, precisely, was Hawthorne’s understanding of the historical.

TEXTUAL NARCISSISM
HAWTHORNE’S AESTHETICS

Though it has been frequently framed throughout the Western tradition and well into the present as pernicious—used as the model of the failure to love properly or of an egotism run monstrously amok—narcissism has also proved richly useful in several disciplines for the contemplation of the essentially paradoxical nature of subjectivity and its relationship to desire and
language. This book has chiefly considered the insights into male subjectivity offered by Hawthorne and Freud in their thematizations of the Narcissus myth; at the same time, this book has also attempted to establish the value of narcissism as a textual figure and a psychological experience. Toward this end, it is helpful to think through, once again, the various ways in which the concept of narcissism has been theorized, especially by those who have found the concept intellectually productive. Beginning with a consideration of the relationships among narcissism, language, and myth, I proceed to a discussion of an aspect of the narcissistic sensibility in Hawthorne’s work that I have not yet explicitly considered, what I call Hawthorne’s *textual narcissism*.

**Narcissism**, broadly understood, encompasses the varieties of desire and the most profound questions that pertain to self and other. Narcissus, as Lacan suggested in his influential theory of the mirror stage, is the child fixated on his own reflection, which he mistakes for an image of authentic wholeness that will continue to haunt him as the unattainable ideal of his own bodily cohesion, so radically distinct from the fragmentation of his non-imaged body.¹ We see through Narcissus’s eyes when we contemplate our own body, so much ours yet so intangible; when we contemplate the beauty of a person whom we desire yet can’t access, much less possess. Narcissus evokes our desire for perfect likeness, to see ourselves reflected in another’s eyes; the myth also speaks to the ways we project our will and our anxieties onto another, the ruthless potentiality of this need to see ourselves reflected back to us. Narcissism is longing and power, vulnerability and domination; it is man, woman, both, neither, other.

Narcissism is also nothing. The nothingness of narcissism speaks to the mystery—the void—at the heart of myth and language as well as desire. Eric Gould’s concept of “mythicity” importantly draws upon the Narcissus myth. Mythicity, a view of myth as “a metaphysics of absence implicit in every sign,” “is the condition of filling the gap with signs in such a way that Being continues to conceal Nothing as a predication of further knowledge.”² In his study *Narcissus Transformed*, Gray Kochhar-Lindgren writes in response to Gould that the “hidden presence of the nothing necessitates myth, metaphor, and endless interpretive play. But Narcissus refuses to see the insubstantial shadows, the shades of nothingness, that lie so close to his fixed and staring face.”³ As Kochhar-Lindgren theorizes,

The myth of Narcissus narrates a dialectic of reflection that is internally disturbed by an obsessive desire for immediacy. It is a poetic narrative that
depicts a way of being that wants to destroy the surface of things, the appearances, in order to plunge into the depths and shatter the reflecting mirror completely so that the other of love—which is only apparently other—might be possessed. But a terrible paradox binds any desire that enters into this symbolic topos: If the appearances are destroyed, then the apparent object of love, the image of Narcissus, will also be destroyed. If, on the other hand, the mirror is not shattered, Echo will remain but a desolate voice, and Narcissus himself will die from the grief of love unreturned. How shall we respond to the mirror with which we are so closely identified? How shall we think about myth and the fictions of representation?

The urgency of the questions the Narcissus myth raises about myth and language, and, I would add here, also about gender, sexuality, and identity, arises from the myth’s fundamental intimacy with death. “The mirror of fiction,” Kochhar-Lindgren argues, “does not naively and mimetically reflect its subject matter. Rather, fiction transforms the writer, the reader, and society by a critical unmasking of the forms of death.” This unmasking involves a challenge to orthodoxies of all kinds as well as the ways in which we relate to others and ourselves. “One must reflectively gaze at death before there is a possibility of becoming more free in the face of the glassy-eyed stare of Thanatos.” But whatever liberation we may derive from staging such a confrontation can only be partial: “reading, like psychoanalysis, is interminable.” Signs, like mirrors, give the illusion of depth, but they are themselves no more than a surface. The Narcissus myth thematizes not only the tormenting disparity between surface and depth—we recall Melville’s description of the image of Narcissus as “tormenting, mild”—but the tantalizing, seductive ways in which surface gives the appearance of depth, the ways in which signs signal meaning, a presence rather than an absence.

As Judith Butler glosses Lacan, both she and Lacan appear to be rewriting the Narcissus myth: “Linguistic reference fails in the same way that desire is structured by failure: if language were to reach the object it desires, it would undo itself as language.” As I discussed in the introduction, the fundamentally split subject is a creation of language. One of the major paradigms of Lacanian psychoanalysis is that language fundamentally alters a human being: in order to render us a speaking subject, language cuts us off from the pre-oedipal world of the mother and the state of primary pleasure in which our mother’s body and ours were one. Language thereby transforms us into a subject of the Symbolic order, the father’s world of language and law, a theory of the formation of the subject that has informed this study as well as its revised Freudian methodology.
A colonizing force, language bars access to whatever was part of that being before language transformed it. Desire proceeds from the split between need and demand that heralded the end of our pre-oedipal state of plenitude and pleasure, the moment when we demanded the breast even after our biological needs were satisfied. Desire can never be fulfilled, for if it could, we would simultaneously return to that original state of bliss and cancel out our own subjectivity, which proceeds from the basis of our loss of that original state. Subjectivity is a form of exile, desire a longing for the lost world of origins, and language the vexed means we have of negotiating the two. The myth of Narcissus metaphorizes the split nature of subjectivity—that it emerges from the split between an original self and a self remade through language—and the split between a human being and language: we can no more access authentic meaning or the primary pleasure of lost origins through language than Narcissus can grasp the image of the boy that beguiles him. The figure of Narcissus illuminates the disparity between the textual and whatever may be the “actual,” that term that so plagued Hawthorne as he defensively made a case for romance in opposition to the novel and its penchant for depicting “the actualities” of the “real” world. One of the central debates of psychoanalysis, in its Lacanian cast, is the disparity between a human being and language, the profoundly limited medium that is the only means whereby a human being can communicate.

In his writings, Hawthorne exudes an awareness of the Narcissus myth’s relevance to these philosophical concerns. The author playfully prefaced “Rappaccini’s Daughter” with a framing device—the other half of which is never provided, as the frame that precedes the story is not returned to at the end—that metatextually serves as autocritique (10: 91–93). Presenting the story as being “From the Writings of Aubépine,” Hawthorne both satirizes himself and the more acid among his contemporary critics by assuming the role of the “introducer” of the works of Aubépine, a writer so obscure that “his very name is unknown to many of his countrymen,” echoing Hawthorne’s own admission of feeling like the “obscurest man of letters” in his own land. French for “Hawthorne,” Aubépine fuses Hawthorne’s own sense of his authorial persona and how it was viewed by various critics. “As a writer,” the anonymous preface writer remarks of Aubépine, “he seems to occupy an unfortunate position between the Transcendentalists . . . and the great body of pen and ink men who address the intellect and the sympathies of the multitude.” Aubépine’s writings “are not altogether destitute of fancy and originality,” but fame has eluded them because of the author’s “inveterate love of allegory,” which has stolen “the human warmth out of his conceptions.”
Hawthorne chides Aubépine throughout, but he also cannot resist the opportunity for defensive self-flattery. On occasion, “a breath of nature, a rain-drop of pathos and tenderness, or a gleam of humor” manages to burst free from the stuffy confines of this inveterate allegorist’s oeuvre. His alter ego’s fictions are “voluminous,” his prolixity “praiseworthy and indefatigable.” The author has produced a “startling catalogue of volumes” which, however “wearisomely” perused, nevertheless leave behind a “certain personal affection and sympathy, though by no means admiration[.]” Hawthorne uses the Aubépine persona as an opportunity for self-inspection as well as for playing his usual sadistic, wounded, cunning verbal games with his readers. Hawthorne’s prefaces are stripteases in which we’re led to believe the author will lay himself bare before our eyes only to see him become more armored against our prying vision than ever before. Behind all the cunning play lies a sense of anxiety betrayed by the indecisive tone that vacillates between smug self-satisfaction and an awareness of faults, limitations, and an uncertain readership (this story was written in 1844, quite a few years before Hawthorne’s first major success, *The Scarlet Letter*). Aubépine’s persona gives Hawthorne an opportunity for self-estrangement, to view himself from a disassociated, yet intimate, position; the preface serves as a drama of self-inspection that will be extended into the story proper.

**Hawthorne** famously theorized the romance as “a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (1: 36). I argue that as Hawthorne lays out his aesthetic philosophy in “The Custom-House” chapter that prefaces *The Scarlet Letter*, he evokes the Narcissus myth; and in the manner that he evokes it, he intervenes in the dead end of signs, meaning, and interpretation embodied by the myth. Hawthorne makes an intervention by framing the romance as an attempt to find some means of bridging surface and depth, meaninglessness and meaning, desire and the unattainable, life and death: the romance is a neutral space between these polarities, a retrieval of the space from which they diverge. Narcissus is the chief metaphor of the beauty and terror of the mirror image, the desire it instigates and the despair it returns; about the power of reflections over the human mind, eye, and heart. The reflection seems more real, more “winning soft,” as Eve says of her reflected image in *Paradise Lost* (IX: 479), than reality.

For Hawthorne, it is the mirror of art where a compromise—the merger that is neutral territory—can take place. Moonlight metaphorizes the imagi-
native faculty; it casts an uncanny, defamiliarizing light on the objects of a nighttime sitting room, lending all of its contents a “quality of strangeness and remoteness.” But the “somewhat dim coal-fire” also plays an important role. Throwing its “unobtrusive tinge,” “faint ruddiness,” and a “reflected gleam” throughout the altered room, this “warmer light mingles itself with the cold spirituality of the moonbeams,” thereby communicating “a heart and sensibilities of human tenderness.” Hawthorne suggests that the transforming, uncanny power of art competes against the warm glow, the hopefulness, of human emotions (1: 36). But this competition produces a salutary effect on “the forms which fancy summons up.”

It converts them from snow-images into men and women. Glancing at the looking-glass, we behold—deep within its haunted verge—the smoldering glow of the half-extinguished anthracite, the white moonbeams on the floor, and a repetition of all the gleam and shadow of the picture, with one remove farther from the actual, and nearer to the imaginative. (1: 36)

Hawthorne privileges the imaginative over the actual—presumably, emotions over facts, art over reality—but the mirror emerges as the place where neutral territory awaits, where the imaginative and the actual can exist at once. Hawthorne transforms the dead, dread mirror of Narcissus into a place where disparities, divergences, splits, wounding if not mortal separations—chiefly Narcissus’s aching separation from himself, from his desire, his image, his other—and other gulfs can find some respite and perhaps even repair. Hawthorne’s “haunted verge” is the space where myth, language, self, otherness, and nothingness can find animating play, a play that, while no resolution, gives empty forms back their vitality, turns ghosts into flesh, allows us to stare Narcissus in the face. Yet if Hawthorne in his aesthetic philosophy positively rewrites the Narcissus myth so that the mirror enables connections and exchange, rather than merely and conventionally presenting itself as the limpid impenetrability of the sign, his fiction’s thematic concerns—about illusion, identity, masks, masquerades, and violation, the imposition of personal will that threatens to obliterate the other—much more consistently convey the deep anguish of subjectivity, informed by the implicit presence of the Narcissus myth.

Hawthorne’s textual narcissism is the basis from which his larger exploration of “identity themes” proceeds. The fullest account of Hawthorne’s work will be one that considers the relationship between his aesthetics and his political concerns—his gender as well as sexual politics. His belief that in art imagination and reality can meet and merge was manifested in his fiction,
in which fantasies and social realities confront one another but also have an equal legitimacy. Hawthorne’s belief in individual fantasies, in the unconscious urgency of human minds, passions, and lives, makes him a psychoanalytic author. At the same time, I believe that he was also very conscious, and increasingly more so, of the often brutal implications of fantasy’s encounter with the “actual.” In the end, Hawthorne was an empathetic author. His darkest fictional devisings were tempered always with an awareness of the fragility of human experience. His key insights into the relationship between the visual and gendered identity, and between anxiety and sexuality, make him one of the most significant and prescient theorists of gender and sexual identity in nineteenth-century American letters—maddening and at times limited in his views, but, on balance, bracingly astute and even more bracingly resistant.

HAWTHORNE, NARCISSISM, AND THE HISTORICAL

While often being accused of having actively skirted the issue, Hawthorne has a great deal to teach us about history; indeed, I would say that in his late works, especially, history emerges as a central preoccupation. What distinguishes Hawthorne’s version of history is the centrality of desire’s role in it. In my view, the question of desire, harder to chart, more difficult to track, is sometimes neglected in Americanist literary criticism, which places its emphasis on material history, cultural context, and the archive, as I discussed in chapter 3. (Several important Americanists certainly do consider desire—Lauren Berlant, Kathryn R. Kent, Valerie Rohy, Dana Luciano, Christopher Castiglia, and Peter Coviello come immediately to mind. I do not want to present a distorted view of the field, only to register that its predominant practice has a tendency to de-emphasize the role of desire as well as the concept of the unconscious, a substantial portion of the subject, and indeed of existence, that is unknowable except in dreams, slips of the tongue, and other eruptions of this kind. In my view, any historical inquiry is always already haunted by desire and the unconscious. This is not to suggest that historical inquiry is not necessary—of course it is—but that any such inquiry must proceed in the knowledge of its partial, fragile condition.) Hawthorne, as Freud will do later, insists on making the presumably antithetical fields of history and desire interchangeable, indeed, synonymous. Both Hawthorne and Freud theorize history as an endless battle between the individual and civilization in which desire is the battleground.
IN CHAPTER 45 of Hawthorne’s 1860 novel *The Marble Faun*, “The Flight of Hilda’s Doves,” Kenyon, an American sculptor living in Rome, discovers that Hilda, the young American woman he loves, has apparently disappeared, intelligence that leaves lovelorn Kenyon bereft. Hilda, a fellow artist who makes copies of the great works of Western visual art, had illuminated the “whole sphere” of Kenyon’s life, chased out the “evil spirits”; without her, he finds himself “in darkness and astray” (4: 409). Kenyon has already suffered the loss of the intimacy that once existed among himself, Hilda, and their friends Miriam, an artist with a dark, hazy past, and Donatello, initially a carefree handsome young Italian man now rendered morbid and distant by the central traumatic action of the novel. Ardently in love with Miriam, Donatello—at the behest of her eyes—killed the Model, an obscure, loathsome figure who stalked Miriam during the early portion of the novel. Hilda witnessed Donatello pushing the Model over the precipice of the Tarpeian Rock, from which the “political criminals” of ancient Rome were once flung to their deaths. It “was an admirable idea of those stern old fellows,” muses Kenyon, to fling such wrongdoers “down from the very summit on which stood the Senate-House and Jove’s Temple; emblems of the institutions which they sought to violate,” a fall symbolic of the suddenness with which one could plunge from “the utmost height of ambition to its profoundest ruin” (4: 168). But the sudden repetition of such retributive retaliation in the present has disastrous consequences. The hideous sight of not only the murder but also of the female gaze that impelled it drives the deeply pious Hilda into a despair so deep that she puts her adamantly maintained Protestantism aside to seek the solace of the Catholic confessional. An intricate series of later events results in her temporary disappearance from the city. Having spent time after the murder (of which Kenyon is not yet aware) with a transformed, newly somber Donatello, now revealed as a Count, in his Tuscany estate, and having met up again with Miriam, to whom he offers cautious advice when she speaks to him of Donatello’s apparent rejection of her, Kenyon needs Hilda’s reassuring plainness (as I would describe it) more than ever upon his return to Rome.

It is little surprise that this return inaugurates in Kenyon an awareness of “what a dreary city is Rome.” When the gloom cast over one’s heart, observes the narrator, corresponds to the city’s “spell of ruin,” “all the ponderous gloom of the Roman Past” will “crush you down with the heaped-up marble and granite, the earth-mounds, and multitudinous bricks, of its material decay” (4: 410). And so crushed, a melancholy man might supposedly “make acquaintance with a grim philosophy”: he “should learn to bear patiently with his individual griefs,” which he must endure only over the
course of his own brief life, for what are they in comparison to “tokens of such infinite misfortune on an imperial scale,” the knowledge that this vast history of ruin memorializes an eternal span of horror and misery. Moreover, these “landmarks of time” bring “the remoteness of a thousand years ago” to bear on the present, all of which might lead the melancholy man of current times to consider the puniness of his own travails, in the awesome light of this history of oppression and oppressing history, a kind of comfort. Yet even this “shrub of bitter-sweetness” cannot be found. For however long a view of history you take, however many “palaces and temples,” “old, triumphal arches,” or “obelisks, with their unintelligible inscriptions, hinting at a Past infinitely more remote than history can define,” you see before you; however aware you become that, “compared with that immeasurable distance,” your “own life is nothing,” still “you demand, none the less earnestly, a gleam of sunshine, instead of a speck of shadow, on the step or two that will bring you to your quiet rest.” You know how “exceedingly absurd” you are to do so.

But, even while you taunt yourself with this sad lesson, your heart cries out obstreperously for its small share of earthly happiness, and will not be appeased by the myriads of dead hopes that lie crushed into the soil of Rome. How wonderful, that this our narrow foothold of the Present should hold its own so constantly, and, while every moment changing, should still be like a rock betwixt the encountering tides of the long Past and the infinite To-come! (4: 410–11)

Numerous problems inhere in this passage: Hawthorne’s deft, troubling use of style indirect libre, the narrator’s voice blending into Kenyon’s inner thoughts so that we struggle to differentiate the two, wondering whose point of view we should accept, or, indeed, if any point of view is offered at all; more directly, Hawthorne’s interesting, for him, use of the second person, here an aggressive way of hailing the reader and interpolating him or her into the action.

Though the delicacy of such textual tensions should not be overlooked (who is speaking and for whom?), I wish to make a broad point. Here, the novel philosophically expresses a problem that Freud will also take up: the essential narcissism of the human disposition, not a narcissism that should be typed as pathological but one that should be understood as fundamental, intrinsic, a constitutive aspect of the human mind. This is the narcissism of the kind Rei Terada describes as “an extra you,” the kind needed for the “virtual self-difference” required for any emotional experience. Seeing the limitless scope of ruin, of history, makes the melancholy viewer see himself
seeing—see himself dwarfed by time, himself in time, only himself making time. We can rationally understand that events, structures, and experiences vastly more powerful and far more powerfully vast than our own loom before and beyond us, but we can only process history, life, reality, through the methods of our individual consciousness. We make sense from the self outward.

The view expressed here makes very clear the always already subjective nature of our grasp on reality, the way we focus on self rather than world; yet it also does something more. It emphasizes the individual experience of history, the predicament of aloneness—what Freud calls the “curse of solitude”—that is the irreducible essence of existence, however much love, empathy, hatred, and other forms of relation draw us to others. The obelisks of time loom above us, taunting us to decode their inscrutable messages, but the mystery of our own self-consciousness surpasses theirs. Even as we understand the infinitude of the past, we demand that our own present moment’s concerns take precedence. Hawthorne articulates here an understanding of human desire that anticipates one of the major precepts of psychoanalysis, as Octave Mannoni so succinctly summarized it: “I know very well, but even so...” We know that in the face of time we mean next to nothing, but even so we value our time as distinctly crucial.

An individual is history. I would argue for this idea as the major thrust of Hawthorne’s philosophical statement in these passages about Kenyon’s survey of the past, that we can only process our own experience with any measure of success, and even this success will only ever be partial, delimited, narrow. Yet despite its obvious limitations, an individual’s experience has a value equal to that of any other piece of evidence in the survey of human history; what one feels and thinks, what one desires, makes history; is, indeed, the historical. Those memories lying in ruins can only be memorialized in the mind of a person thinking and feeling in the present; nothing happens, in the past or in the future, except in the present; the past and the future only connote the boundaries of, the dark borders around, our present view.

Freud and Hawthorne share a view of the parity between individual and cultural history. One of the major and most familiar tenets of the work of Michel Foucault is that the concept of the individual subject has been deployed by “power” to control, conscript, and contain the minds and bodies of beings caught in the meshes of discursivity, and that psychoanalysis, far from a resistant position from which to critique these cultural workings, enables, facilitates, and precisely relies on this construction of the subject. Foucault’s own work and Foucauldian criticism have offered one of the most unified and influential challenges to psychoanalytic theory. Given that the
crucial contention within the Foucauldian view is its dispute with the construction of the subject and psychoanalysis’s investment in it, it is interesting indeed to consider that the radicalism of both psychoanalysis and Hawthorne’s psychological literature may lie precisely in their interest in the individual subject. Having attempted to demonstrate that historical and psychoanalytic questions and methodologies are, far from mutually exclusive, mutually illuminating; that Hawthorne’s work foregrounds these overlaps and their stirring potentialities; and that narcissism, far from a moribund and deadened fixation on the self, is the key to desire and social relations as well as literary production, I turn, in conclusion, to the very tendency we have, as critics, to insist, even at this point, on the old philosophical law of noncontradiction. It is precisely in their contradictions, their irresolvable conflicts, their sense of the equal legitimacy of antithetical realities, that the enduring value of Hawthorne’s and Freud’s accounts of human experience lies.