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Masculinist Theory and Romantic Authorship, Or Hawthorne, Politics, Desire

David Greven

IN THE POWERFUL HANDS OF CRITICS such as Sacvan Bercovitch, Jonathan Arac, and John Carlos Rowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne as artist and person assumes the shape of an unattractively conservative writer whose works alternately achieve political consensus through the reconciliation of opposing points of view, all ostensibly given their platform yet fused into one, reactionary position of social inaction (Bercovitch); reveal a writer whose politics facilitated the slave trade even as it pulled the curtain over the oncoming onslaught of the Civil War (Arac); ingeniously innovate the literary means of American global colonization (Rowe). To read such bold and authoritative critics on Hawthorne is to believe that a reactionary and racist writer continues to occupy a stable position in American high school and college curriculums. In this essay, taking these critics' positions as metonymic of an entire approach to literature in academic writing—a cross-fertilized version of Foucauldian and Marxian theories,¹ which in its most common application in literary criticism and theory we can, crudely, call the “Bad Politics” school of leftist criticism²—I will demonstrate that, however valid and illuminating their positions prove to be, these critics' views of Hawthorne not only mutilate Hawthorne's work but also rely on surprisingly heterosexist and masculinist approaches to the study of imaginative literature. Considering the work of these critics on Hawthorne allows us to examine a particular, influential trend in academic writing from the 1980s to the present.

What is most distressing about this political critique of Hawthorne's work is the way in which it frames what is and is not “political.” Gender gets mentioned, dutifully, but there is little sustained engagement with gendered themes. Perhaps this problem stems from biases and blind spots inherent in Marxism: as Joan Wallach Scott observes, “within Marxism, the concept of gender has long been treated as the by-product of changing economic structures; gender has had no independent analytic status of its own.”³ The relegation of gendered issues to the sidelines confuses as much as it disturbs; as critics such as Helene Moglen remind us, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction reacted primarily to the

social and psychological strains of the modern sex-gender system, so the failure to include a sustained analysis of the gendered dynamics of politics is a considerable blind spot.⁴ Yet, from another perspective, questions of gender may be said to preoccupy leftist literary criticism. In a remarkably obvious manner, politics here connotes the public sphere of male ideas, ideas put into publicly visible place and the effects of men of *action*, or, more pertinently in Hawthorne's case, the effects created by a *failure to act*.

The leftist treatment of a Romantic author like Hawthorne evokes longstanding debates in criticism over American literature itself, the asseveration of the superiority of realism over romance that has been with us at least since Henry James in *his* critical study of Hawthorne. A "prominent function of claiming to be a realist or a naturalist," argues Michael Davitt Bell, "was to provide assurance to one's society and oneself that one was a 'real' man rather than an effeminate 'artist.'"⁵ Lionel Trilling's essay "Reality in America" remains relevant for our current critical predicament.⁶ As Americanists, we have not yet budged from our position at what Trilling described as "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet." "One does not go there gladly," remarks Trilling, "but nowadays it is not exactly a matter of free choice whether one does or does not go" (9). Trilling continues to pose many political problems as a critic, as evinced by his vexing denigration of Steinbeck and Dreiser. (Jonathan Schaub's study of Cold War literary criticism offers several useful insights into the postwar criticism in which Trilling played so vital a part, particularly in what Schaub calls the "liberal narrative" guiding postwar thought.⁷) But Trilling's nowadays are our nowadays. We continue to be vexed by this "deadly sin," the "turning away from reality" (5), as Trilling put it. Despite the manner in which he himself questioned the "reality," or lack thereof, in Hawthorne's fiction, Henry James, wrote Trilling, is traditionally put, "by liberal critics," "to the ultimate question: of what use, of what political use, are his gifts and their intention?" (9), the same kinds of questions raised over Hawthorne today (and James, still, and many others). Leftist critiques to the contrary, however, Trilling, in Hawthorne's defense, wrote that "Hawthorne was dealing beautifully with realities, with substantial things . . . dealing exactly with reality" (7). Whose reality is it, and what, exactly, constitutes reality?

"In the study of American literature," wrote William C. Spengemann, "where nationality, as [René] Wellek noted, is not linguistically definite, nonliterary history has been seen as especially crucial to literary history."⁸ Responding to this "deep suspicion regarding literary values," conducted by historians and historicist literary critics, Spengemann concluded, "Granted its premises, the historical method is virtually guaranteed to produce a literary history that is not a history of literature."⁹ Our cur-

rent (leftist) critical practice, conducted by the current generation of historicist literary critics, devotes itself entirely to the enumeration and elucidation of what Philip Fisher called the “hard facts” of American history. The importance of these facts—especially racial oppression embodied most prominently in the conjoined horrors of slavery and Indian removal—indubitably endures. But the preponderance of hard facts criticism begs the question: is there a place for *soft* facts—for beauty, desire, eros, the aesthetic, for love, for what Hélène Cixous calls, in the context of Edgar Allan Poe’s fiction, “the soft and mysterious violence of writing”?¹⁰ Roughly speaking, the hard facts, Bad Politics school of American literary theory and criticism focuses on historical “reality” at the expense of other concerns.

The underlying anxiety would appear to be that talking about soft facts makes *critics* soft; the accumulation of hard facts and commensurately hard approaches to them pleasingly hardens the critic’s work, makes it more solid and substantial. Political criticism emerges as a curious means of reestablishing a coherent masculinism always already threatened by the feminizing enterprise of literature. In a provocative essay, James J. Sosnoski writes that, “It is remarkable still that the main opponents to New Criticism in the 1960s did not question the view that literary criticism, even though it could not muster exacting objectivity, should be modeled on the sciences.” As a result, for “the most part, modern criticism is based on the notion that readings can be objective, impersonal and detached, that there is a discipline of literary criticism.”¹¹ The objectivist, empirical standards that control a great deal of leftist thought preclude the messy, “feminine” qualities, to wax Cixousian, of emotional engagement, personal meaning, and responses to beauty that are also and just as deeply integral to literary experience.

In his study *Criticism and Social Change*, Frank Lentricchia categorizes three kinds of intellectual: *the radical intellectual*, who fights for the working class; *the traditional intellectual*, a cosmopolitan connoisseur of ideas who claims to maintain a position outside power and politics and champions disinterested critical values and universal truths; and the kind of intellectual he wants leftist critics to be, *the specific intellectual*, who struggles to transform his or her immediate institutional and intellectual domain.¹² The specific intellectual, focusing (rather monastically, like Hawthorne’s ill-fated scholar Fanshawe) intently on his own specific areas of study, should not distract himself or step out of his place through connections with local and public forms of activism but, instead, should do what he was trained to do—critique prevailing ideological structures and their discursive articulations. Lentricchia’s association of the traditional intellectual with qualities such as cosmopolitanism and connoisseurship illuminates many of the attitudes and,

frankly, the biases of leftist critique. Though Lentricchia's model of the traditional critic might suggest considerable possibilities for pleasure as well as insight in its evocation of figures such as the debonair, decadent bachelor, for leftist criticism fictionists or critics who exude such inactive, useless qualities are far too *louche*, far too decadent—they are not only indolent outsiders, but also threatening, perhaps even pernicious. It is a negative model of the feminized nonproductive mind, the insufficiently politicized critic as fop. "The root idea" of effeminacy, writes Alan Sinfield, "is a male falling away from the purposeful reasonableness that is supposed to constitute manliness, into the laxity and weakness conventionally attributed to women. . . . The function of effeminacy, as a concept, is to police sexual categories, keeping them pure." Crucially for our discussion, "the effects of such policing extend vastly beyond lesbians and gay men . . . the whole order of sexuality and gender is pinioned by the fears and excitements that gather around the allegedly inappropriate distribution of gender categories."¹³ Hawthorne and the insufficiently politicized (and implicitly male) critic both fall into the dread category of effeminacy in their precarious loss of the purposeful reasonableness of conscientiously "political" goals and aims.

Leftist criticism reveals that a deep-seated anxiety over which role literature should play in our culture endures; despite the validity of the ideological concerns brought to bear on literature, being forced to bear the burden of accounting for and negotiating the ideological problems of not only its own historical milieu but also our own is an undue burden to place on most texts and most authors, especially when, as in Hawthorne's case, their ideological profile is so blurry, such a cross between conservative and radical qualities. A good deal of the anxious strong-arming of literary works in leftist criticism can be read as an attempt to quell anxieties over the eternal discomfort produced by literature, with its goads to sensual lassitude, in a hard, materialist culture still dominated by Puritan standards of utility. More directly relevant, the enormous difficulty at the heart of leftist criticism is its assumption that all readers share its values, all writers must share its values, and any readers and writers who do not share these values run the risk of being called immoral. This is not an exaggeration: Eric Cheyfitz, going far beyond Bercovitch and Arac (though not Rowe), accuses Hawthorne of an "immoral passivity."¹⁴

To make my specific concerns clearer, I will closely engage with the arguments of Rowe and Arac in the following sections. The goal of this engagement will be to demonstrate the ways in which an occluded yet palpable *gendered politics* undergirds the stated political agendas of even the most sophisticated post-Trilling leftist critique.

Rowe's Globalizing Hawthorne

The title of the recent collection of essays edited by Millicent Bell, *Hawthorne and the Real*, signals the current preoccupations of Hawthorne scholarship. Almost all of the essays in the collection, Bell writes, exhibit “a common intent to explore, in one way or another, in one or another of Hawthorne works, the relation of his imagination to ‘the real’—that is, to the social reality he sometimes claimed to find uninteresting or unrepresentable. They make an argument for the interpretation of Hawthorne’s writings as more expressive of the objective common conditions and public issues of his day than has been conceded until quite recently.”¹⁵ It is difficult to know in which manner Bell means “recently,” since the volume appears to be in keeping with the trend to interrogate Hawthorne’s association with real-world concerns undertaken since the 1980s. In any event, the title overinscribes a particular understanding of “real” issues in Hawthorne—not the domain of the unrepresentable that the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan famously described as the “real,” but precisely that which presumably exists always to be represented, the real of social reality. Lacan’s brilliantly counterintuitive terming of the mysterious and indescribable as that which is the real conjures up far too many tangled issues to go into here, but, for now, what I wish to suggest is that the associations of the Lacanian real can stand in for what has been consciously eschewed in Hawthorne criticism, in this regard metonymic of current academic practice: any concerns that are unquantifiable and unclassifiable, that do not lend themselves easily to critical discussion, research, and argument, in short, the imaginative project of literature. (That Bell is the editor of this volume itself makes a political point as a microcosmic narrative of critical history; the author of a famous 1960s book on Hawthorne and aesthetics, *Hawthorne’s View of the Artist*, is now the editor of a volume that places Hawthorne’s social reality, not his aesthetics, at the forefront.)

The attempt to blast away at the wall of presumed indifference to social realities that Hawthorne put up throughout his career is most likely a salutary one, and this collection boasts a number of penetrating, insightful, necessary essays that, if any doubts existed before, confirms the reality that Hawthorne was a political figure of great importance in his own era, and that the very issues to which Hawthorne always claimed to be indifferent—abolition, race, women’s rights, national politics—are central to his oeuvre. In no manner do I dispute the urgency of these concerns. My concern here is the manner in which a particular approach to Hawthorne says far less about this writer’s work than it does about academic criticism and shared agendas for the study of American literature.

In his essay in *Hawthorne and the Real*, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and Transnationality," John Carlos Rowe baldly states his agenda in his first paragraph. Rowe, disputing Henry James's negative assessment of Hawthorne's provincialism, writes, "Today we are interested in the history of our current global situation and the transnational forces that challenge the nation state and other traditional sociopolitical organizations. In order to understand these phenomena, we would do well to study Hawthorne's fiction, which represents an older world transformed by the new forces of modernization, first announced by the industrial revolution in England and made more urgent and dangerous in the expansionist frenzy of Jacksonian America."¹⁶ Rowe explicitly sees his work as an updating of Bercovitch's influential 1991 study *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*; his argument fuses Bercovitch and postcolonial theory. Bercovitch wrote about Hawthorne's desire to create consensus through the reconciliation of opposing points of view, all of which bolster an ultimate affirmation of liberal individualism; Rowe, extending the Bercovitchian position, goes further, arguing that "the abstraction of liberal individualism from its historical and geopolitical possibility in nineteenth-century America is Hawthorne's way of contributing to what today we recognize as cultural colonialism"; indeed, Hawthorne's "romantic regionalism is a trick that serves expansionist political and cultural purposes" (91). The Salem custom house, where Hawthorne worked and from which he was fired before the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* and which he made the focus of the ambiguous essay that precedes the novel, "where the identification of products according to their national origins" leads to the determination of what is "permissible and forbidden within the republic," is the kind of "aesthetic, transnational space" that for Rowe "marks precisely the national border as the model for other boundaries" (91). Rowe seizes upon the implications of the term "citizen" in Hawthorne's famous phrase in "The Custom-House" essay, "I am a citizen of somewhere else," linking Hawthorne's use of citizen with "that of the *citoyen* declared by the French Revolution" (92). For Rowe, such a linkage could only be "ironic," since Hawthorne "links citizenship with the Terror and thus follows the conservative interpretation of how the French revolt against monarchy was a democratic failure" (93). Resisting any claim of literature as a "utopian" space, Rowe's major concern here is with what he calls Hawthorne's self-endowed "transmigratory" ability to inhabit a whirling array of different spaces, and thereby defy not only social and national, but also temporal borders—indeed, constraints of any kind. Hawthorne, with his references to classical antiquity and the witch-hunting Puritan American past, can roam the centuries as well as nations, and as such an unmoored—yet always squarely, firmly fixed American—citizen, Hawthorne can travel anywhere, at least inasmuch as his authorial self

and created worlds give him license to do so. One might argue that the onanistic rapture thus suggested by this endlessly mobile imaginative agency sounds rather appealing, yet Rowe has neither time nor truck with pleasure here: transmigratory fiction as a “literary contribution to social practice tends to be conservative, insofar as it attempts to regulate a trauma that threatens social order” (95). This conservative maneuver is the “aesthetic sleight-of-hand by which the literary author (Hawthorne), the marginalized and abused woman (Hester), and the bastard child (Pearl) are transformed into leaders of a spiritual and moral revival of an otherwise corrupt U.S. democracy.” Echoing Bercovitch, Rowe asserts that Hawthorne uses “his imaginative play with political dissent within the perfectly recognizable conventions of American self-reliant individualism,” all in the covert attempt to win the “ruling-class authority” to which he aspires (97–98).

The chief ideological perniciousness of *The Scarlet Letter* for Rowe appears to be that its heroine, Hester Prynne, trades in “her potential for overt social revolution” for “the subtler, psychological transformation she helps Dimmesdale [the minister with whom she committed the sin of adultery and the father of her illegitimate child] achieve on his own,” which mirrors Hawthorne’s own transmogrification of a personal desire for political revolution into what Rowe, citing himself in an earlier essay, calls “aesthetic dissent,” “the romantic idealist assumption that rigorous reflection on the processes of thought and representation constitutes in itself a critique of social reality and effects a transformation of the naive realism that confuses truth with social convention” (97). Hawthorne’s failed political activism is not just conservative but also hopelessly “naive,” self-deluded.

Many, probably most of us, in academia would agree more or less with the outlying goals of Rowe’s essay: to interrogate U.S. global hegemony and critique the national megalomania that inspires it. What is disturbing, however, is the assumption that a literary character—and an author—must be a political revolutionary in order to be fully realized, to say nothing of truly inspired and inspiring, and, implicitly, truly moral. Social revolution here utterly, unquestionably trumps subtle interior change, and, implicitly, any subjective experience. Radicalism not only happens on the outside, it is projected outward, it has material implications, obvious, visible, thoroughly empirical effects in the material and social world. Hawthorne’s romancer’s ability to inhabit multiple times and places in the act of imaginative authorship necessarily assumes a suspicious cast precisely because it is about myriad possibilities that have no clear, tangible outcomes, save the literary objects, printed books, which do not connote empirical achievement—“Here is the result of my transmigratory fantasy”—so much as they reify the troublesome, if not altogether

immoral, uselessness of literary fantasy, of literature itself. Considered in any depth at all, this absolutely utilitarian view of the usefulness of fantasy—which amounts to its own colonization of fantasy (in the Freudian sense of “phantasy”) for its own ends—and literature smacks sharply of the era in which novels were considered immoral, goads to sensual indolence, back even further to Puritan categories of the necessary and the immoral in life. A deep, abiding strain in the Bad Politics school of Hawthorne criticism is the one inherited from the very beginnings of our national culture, an utter revulsion against uselessness figured as and through multivalent categories of luxury. “No figure,” as Lori Merish writes, “was as universally employed in discussions of luxury during the Enlightenment than the representation of luxury as ‘feminizing.’”¹⁷ It is precisely in this implicit view of authorial luxury that a covert—though, I hope, unwitting—gendered war on the “apolitical” author continues to be conducted.

Continuing the ambiguous academic critical practice of ransacking letters and journals for evidence of an author’s “real” character, Rowe uses Hawthorne’s *Italian Notebooks* for further evidence of his indifference to politics. “He takes comfort and even finds a certain charm in French troops occupying Rome. . . . What seems remarkable in Hawthorne’s otherwise touristic impressions is the pleasure he takes in the cosmopolitan atmosphere in Rome and Italy, even when it is an effect of the political violence reshaping modern Europe” (99). Hawthorne’s indifference to the political tumult in Europe manifests itself for Rowe most amply in the novel Hawthorne wrote in the aftermath of his European travels, the 1860 *The Marble Faun*. “Hawthorne Americanizes nineteenth-century Italy by projecting onto it his own fantasy of the transnational ideal for the American citizen, drawing both on the aura of ancient imperial Rome in its global reach and at the same time emphasizing the American transumption of this ‘ruined’ heritage” (100). Again linking his project to Bercovitch’s, Rowe positions *The Marble Faun* as another work that represents the transmutation of personal ambitions for revolution into what Bercovitch called a “vision of continuity.”¹⁸ Worse, *The Marble Faun* tames “the threats of Europe’s mid-century, nationalist revolutions and the international claims of women’s rights,” thereby “turning their related social problems into the aesthetic concerns and allegorical figures of an American romance”—no mean feat, and a truly “miraculous transformation” indeed. This final completed romance is Hawthorne’s “contribution to the transnational ambitions of U.S. ideology at the beginning of the Civil War and prophetically anticipates how U.S. cultural work today incorporates the histories and cultures of other peoples for its own glory and their control” (106).

A transformation of a different kind occurs in Rowe’s work: Rowe processes the perplexities and perversities, the irreconcilable and dis-

cordant, the wild and unstable qualities of Hawthorne's work into a uniform ideological sludge. *The Marble Faun* is not sludge; it's more like a gumbo, an ideological gumbo full of diverse ingredients that each add to an overall consistency yet remain distinct. Hawthorne's work contains radical elements as well as reactionary ones—its volatile interest in the female will to power and in female sexuality is as enduringly transgressive as it is phobic; its attraction to Catholicism is at least as fervent as its calumniating revulsion to it; its uses of the classical past as much denature and defamiliarize the concepts of art and tradition as they exploit them for conservative, order-cincturing purposes. What the novel asks us, forces us, to do is to tangle with an endless array of aesthetic as well as political challenges, to negotiate its confusing, even tormenting, mix of metaphors and their multivalent purport.

Yet Rowe insists upon this work's coherence as both ideological product and ideological agent. Rowe straightens out a queer text—in the effort to make its ideological impact legible, he must make the work legible as well. The essential, inescapable quality of the novel, of Hawthorne's art, is that it simply cannot be used for any one agenda's purposes, including my own: I claim Hawthorne's radicalism as a critic of heteronormative standards of gendered identity, but I cannot do so without acknowledging the severe lapses on his part in this regard. Rowe has no difficulty in presenting us with a Hawthorne whose work accommodates, in its accommodationist fashion, a coherent ideological agenda. What I want to suggest is that there are many other ways of responding to a literary work, or any work of art. A different terminology altogether can be employed to grapple with the work of what is irreducibly imaginative literature: *beauty*, *eroticism*, *perversity*. Academic criticism has so long abused these terms and their values—consider the current use of the word *bellevistic* as a term of abuse—that perhaps, having been banished for so long, the terms and their values may now be productively, suggestively defamiliarized and deroutinized, put to new uses.

Gender concerns are indeed addressed in Rowe's critique. Hawthorne's purported gendered infractions include colonizing Hester's "power as a 'prophetess'" in "becoming Hester and feeling in his own body the 'burning heat' of both her sin and her sex" (96), an experience he notes in the moment of "The Custom-House" essay in which he recalls (in a famous duplicitous literary flourish) having donned his heroine's symbolic letter. Miriam Schaefer, the mixed race, possibly Jewish heroine of *The Marble Faun* "embodies the threat of liberated femininity in the arts and politics" that apparently earned Hawthorne's opprobrium (100). For several reasons, Rowe's imputations of misogyny to Hawthorne are bizarre. While not the first to make such imputations, Rowe overlooks the radicalism in Hawthorne's empathy for strong, brazen, difficult women in the novel-

romances. The act of placing Hester's gravely freighted symbol on his own chest literalizes Hawthorne's connection to women, femininity, and female experience. *The Scarlet Letter* continues to affect readers all over the globe profoundly precisely because Hawthorne makes Hester's subjectivity so complex, arresting, and interesting, qualities achieved precisely through Hawthorne's imaginative empathy with woman's experience (however ambivalent his overall treatment). Similarly, *The Marble Faun's* Miriam and Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* may indeed be threatening figures, but Hawthorne also contrasts their vitality and strength to the brute oppressiveness of the male characters in the novels—however powerful and compelling they may be, they are nevertheless victimized by masculinist men who attempt to control and thwart them. It is hard not to see Rowe's critique of Hawthorne on gender as halfhearted, a "While we're on the subject of Hawthorne's political failures . . ." gesture. By conscripting Hawthorne into a political plot, Rowe forces the unyieldingly apolitical Hawthorne to yield. Regeneration through violence is not the recourse of the critic than it is of the fictionist.

Given the sensitivity and complexity of Rowe's treatment of Henry James, whose gendered and sexual themes Rowe examines in his study *The Other Henry James*, Rowe's adamantly ideological treatment of Hawthorne is especially striking and troublesome.¹⁹ One gets the sense that something particularly maddening and exasperating about Hawthorne exists for Rowe, whose interrogation of Hawthorne's work renders it inert and ideologically suspect.

Arac and Action

Jonathan Arac's elegant "The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*" remains indelibly an index of the poststructuralist critique of Hawthorne's work, centering on the slavery question that Hawthorne, by all accounts, kept ducking. Bercovitch took a different but like-minded and equally influential tack, arguing that Hawthorne's ambiguity works to facilitate the proper functioning of the "office of the scarlet letter" on Hester Prynne, who, in Bercovitch's argument, learns how to become properly socialized by renouncing her sexuality, thereby joining in with the dictates of her community. The issue of slavery and Hawthorne's response to it is of vital importance, particularly considering Hawthorne's years-long, passionate friendship with his former Bowdoin classmate Franklin Pierce, the Fourteenth President (1853–1857), and political appointments within the Democratic Party. Yet what remains curious in Arac's approach—which I view as emblematic of the broadly Foucauldian approach to nineteenth-century American writing he and Bercovitch innovated—is his reliance upon masculinist gendered standards.

First, Arac rather nostalgically reclaims Hawthorne, along with Harriet Beecher Stowe, as a self-consciously political author writing in a time when it “was not yet taken for granted that literature must be intransitive, useless as well as harmless.”²⁰ Hawthorne, Arac notes, “recognized slavery as potentially divisive, and he did not favor slavery; he only urged that nothing be done about it” (254). Hawthorne “envisaged” the “logic of romance” for American politics, since he shuddered at the thought of the “horrible convulsion,” “this dreadful convulsive action” as Sophia Hawthorne echoed it, of the Civil War. “Action is intolerable; character takes its place,” Arac surmises. Hawthorne inherits the Romantic reinterpretation of *Hamlet*, its rejection of Aristotelian theories of character as one who “acts.” Now, as Hawthorne’s narration-heavy writing demonstrates, literary character becomes “one who is known” (255). “Hawthorne’s name circulated as a sign in a complex system of exchange that made it worth the [Democratic] party’s while to provide him a livelihood and that gave him the character of a Democrat without requiring action” (256). Reminding us of Hawthorne’s “abject identity with Coverdale” in Hawthorne’s 1852 novel *The Blithedale Romance*, Arac reduces Hawthorne’s life and work to a philosophy of “Let others do it” (260).

Like Cheyfitz, Arac chafes against Hawthorne’s apparently “immoral passivity.” But Arac blinds us to the political work undertaken by the novel, perhaps failing to see that it is precisely through Coverdale’s misanthropy, through Hawthorne’s own perversity, that this political work is conducted. As Irving Howe wrote of the novel in his essay “The Politics of Isolation,” Hawthorne harshly critiques the utopian’s impulse to “cut himself off from the ugly world.” In order “to preserve his utopia,” he must “become a ‘practical agriculturist’—which means to model his utopia upon the society he rejects. This criticism, which strikes so hard a blow at the political fancies of many 19th century American intellectuals, is advanced by Hawthorne with a cruel and almost joyous insistence, but that does not make it any the less true. Hawthorne, of course, was as far from the Marxist imagination as anyone could be, but almost any criticism of utopian politics from a point of view committed to struggle within the world would have to render a similar judgment.”²¹ Hawthorne’s identification with Coverdale does more than simply confirm Hawthorne’s love of inaction, his aesthetic and social politics of “uselessness.” It also reminds us that Hawthorne’s work critiques the very same stringent gendered standards that undergird (unwittingly, I presume) critiques such as Arac’s. Coverdale is many unpleasant things, but he is also a severe critic of the misogyny and hypocrisy embodied in the most ambiguous character in the book, the social reformer Hollingsworth, the object of the novel’s most stinging critique.²²

Arac and Rowe sound an awful lot like the people in Hawthorne’s circle who frowned at his effeminacy. “The self-doubts, the uncertainty,

the sense that even his best gifts were not entirely admirable did little to enhance Hawthorne's confidence in his own masculinity. In this area, too, he was split, and in ways recognizable to his contemporaries. Lowell, Longfellow, Alcott, Emerson, and Margaret Fuller all observed a doubleness of sensibility to which Julian Hawthorne also attested. These observers reported traits of coyness, *passivity*, and an intuitiveness regarded as feminine but mingled with a genuine manliness. They reported the double sensitivity without sneers, but rather as indicative of a fuller nature than uniformity would produce."²³ Hawthorne always had his champions, but sneers certainly came his way as well. For example, in his June 13, 1838 journal entry, Emerson wrote of Hawthorne: "Alcott and he together would make a man."²⁴ Overall, Hawthorne's gendered identity quivered with anxieties threatening to spill out at any time. As Brenda Wineapple reports, even the early praise Hawthorne received could be irritatingly suggestive of his gendered instabilities. "Park Benjamin went so far as to characterize 'the soul of Nathaniel Hawthorne' as 'a rose bathed and baptized in dew,' a maddening, insulting phrase that Hawthorne caught."²⁵ Hawthorne's gendered intermixture was both deeply appealing and vexing for many, certainly for himself; it continues to be vexing to several critics.

The rigid impulse to transmogrify all aesthetic production into political "action" relies upon a hierarchical logic of categories of gendered identity and qualities, with masculine action, rationalism, certainty, and absolutism at the very top. These are the very standards that informed and organized the Jacksonian man-on-the-make manhood that Hawthorne both supported *and* critiqued in his work and continue to shape standards of normative American manhood. Arac's critique of Hawthorne's inaction echoes longstanding Puritan clichés conflating idle hands and devil's work, his rhetoric remarkably similar to that of the antebellum reformers in their screeds against the sensual lassitude to which young men especially were susceptible and which almost inevitably led to the pernicious solitary vice of onanism. Moreover, the indolence of the inactive male writer coalesces rather too easily into such calumniated antebellum categories such as foppishness and luxury, which rendered the male subject who fell into them feminized.²⁶ Certainly, I, too, cringe at Hawthorne's political lapses, most kindly termed his moral myopia. But I also cringe at the aspects of leftist thought that uncritically perpetuate biases that rely upon gendered conventions and commonplaces.²⁷

Decadent Liberalism

Writing in a 1983 collection of Marxist-Foucauldian feminist essays, *Powers of Desire*, psychoanalytic theorist Jessica Benjamin made the point

that any political criticism had to take account of “the erotic, fantastic components of human life.”²⁸ Benjamin’s advice has not been heeded, particularly in leftist criticism, which eschews the erotic, reifies the fantastic into further political product, and overlooks or obscures the importance of personal fantasy to the reading of literature. Critically occluded and duplicitously presented (in that the presentation purports to take seriously what it only obligatorily makes note of), textual desire—desire as it emanates from the shared space of the author’s mind, the text, the reader’s mind, and the mutual needs of each to give life to the other—remains a crucial aspect of the work, in all of the multivalent capacities of the term, of literature. In its obfuscation of desire, leftist criticism fails to recognize it as a category of human experience, as relevant as any other, to say nothing of its importance to literary art or its role in political matters.²⁹ Moreover, psychoanalysis—despite its considerable ideological lapses, the major discipline to treat issues of both gender and desire—rarely receives mention, and, when it does, this attention is mostly dismissive if not derisive.³⁰

The oft-stated goals of leftist criticism remain salutary ones. We have to continue to wage our battles against the myriad forms of oppression, both as that oppression manifested itself in the past and takes shape in the present. Yet the manner in which academic criticism goes about dismantling the machines of oppression mechanizes literature and the act of critical appraisal; it turns the text into a machine, the critic into the ultimate machinist. The particular kind of leftist criticism I’ve been examining here insists upon the material reality of all aspects of art. In so doing, it proceeds from a fatal literal-mindedness that reflects what Irving Howe called “the mania for certainty,” in this case the absolutist insistence on the empirical verifiability of every literary quality.³¹ Literature is always about ideological commitments, but it is also no less deeply an attempt, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it, *to say the unsayable*; it’s precisely this fundamentally unrationalizable aspect of literature that leftist criticism fails to acknowledge and that causes it the greatest amount of consternating difficulty.³²

I propose that what we need instead of this new literary positivism is *a decadent liberalism*, one as alive to the perverse and unstable qualities of art as it is to the pressing, profound ideological realities of which literature is not only a response but also a reflection. We need a liberalism that can encompass the disorientingly wide range of effects, concerns, qualities, achievements, failures, and maddening paradoxes of literature, of *all* art. This liberalism is decadent in at least two senses of that term—it acknowledges its own failure (no system can be the complete filter for all that passes through it), and it embraces perversity (both its own as a methodology and that within the objects it studies). Leftist literary criticism needs to make a place for the erotic and for fantasy, for the

inexpressible and the irreducibly mysterious, for the irrational, in short, for the perversities of literary art.

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NOTES

1 Exceeding the scope of this essay but in great need of a discrete analysis, the problem of the combination of Foucauldian and Marxian approaches in criticism lies in part in the conflict between the approaches themselves. "Foucault's disagreements with Marxism were profound. He rejected the realist epistemology on which the ideology/science distinction had been founded: he also rejected the notion of the subject which Marxism assumed (both individual agent and class subject)." Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 50–51. Nevertheless, however unwieldy the fusion, leftist critique proceeds from a cross-fertilized Foucauldian-Marxian perspective, paying particular attention to the discursive implications of interrelated epistemological systems (Foucault) and maintaining a critical distance towards the designated custodians of power in an unequal society (Marx). "What leftist 'cultural studies' challenged," writes Vincent B. Leitch, "was the reign of the traditional intellectual and the dominance of formalism. As far as Leftist Critics were concerned, literature needed to be redefined to encompass a much wider range of discourse than the old belletristic canon had allowed. And the tasks of teaching and criticism required reformulation to include ideological analysis and social inquiry as well as textual exegesis. Authority figures had to change. Marx took the place of Kant, and Foucault replaced Derrida." Leitch, *American Literary Criticism from the 30s to the 80s* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), 391.

2 For an analysis of the gathering momentum of Marxian criticism in the era in which Bercovitch's pioneering work on Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* appeared, see Michael Denning, "'The Special American Conditions': Marxism and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 356–80. Making note of the places in which Bercovitch uses the Marxian term "hegemony" rather than the Americanist term "consensus," Denning situates the problems of an Americanist Marxian approach in debates over American exceptionalism.

3 Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999), 36–37.

4 Helene Moglen, *The Trauma of Gender: A Feminist Theory of the English Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2001).

5 Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 6; see also 37–38, 66–69.

6 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (1950; New York: Anchor Press, 1953). All references to this work will be noted parenthetically in the text.

7 For left-to-liberal intellectuals from the thirties, the knowledge of the atrocities being committed in Stalinist Russia was an especially shattering "reality-check." Gradually, but unmistakably, the tone of liberal thought underwent a radical change or reversal. Bad, "old" liberalism was facile, unimaginative, wavering in its rejection of totalitarianism. The new liberalism, on the other hand, was bracingly new: unequivocally opposed to totalitarianism and the fuller, broader account of human motives it provided; determined to speak of "progress," "history," and "the liberation of the masses" with "the kind of irony that recognized that these ideas could be realized, if at all, with only partial success." Schaub convincingly argues that the liberal narrative treated political issues with a moral ahistoricism. Because conservative dogma seemed confirmed by the recent war, left-to-liberal intellectuals scrambled, in essay after essay, to explain recent history as a lesson in

innocence and naivete, in heated opposition to the “unalloyed” liberalism that coursed through American culture, leaving a “dangerous innocence” in its wake. “This habitual and dangerous innocence” was thought to plague American political life, leaving it “insufficiently complicated and disciplined by an opposing conservatism.” Jonathan Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: Wisconsin Univ. Press, 1991), 7–11.

8 William C. Spengemann, *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (Dartmouth, NH: New England Univ. Press, 1989), 146.

9 Spengemann, *Mirror for Americanists*, 148.

10 In the Poe story Cixous examines, “The Oval Portrait,” the narrator recounts the tale of a painter who uses his wife as a model; so fastidiously and obsessively does he paint her that her essence—her life itself—is absorbed by the art object, and, by the end, the masterful portrait is alive and the wife is dead. But, as Cixous points out, we have done the very same thing—to the narrator, from whom we “disinvest. We reinvest in the painter’s scene; so that’s it, farewell narrator . . . We [become] the murderer-painter” (30). And what’s more, she says, “God is not there.” We are forced to realize that “there can’t be life on both sides” (31). It is “the soft and mysterious violence of writing” (33) which provides the only higher experience, the only semblance of passage; through literature, we may experience the higher truth, and this discovery is as high as we can get. Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993).

11 James J. Sosnoski, “A Mindless Man-Driven Theory Machine: Intellectuality, Sexuality, and the Institution of Criticism,” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1997), 38.

12 Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983).

13 Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994), 26.

14 In a scorching of an essay that assails the very idea of canonical literature and its perpetuation, Eric Cheyfitz chides Arac and Bercovitch for not going further in their critique of what Cheyfitz views as Hawthorne’s “immoral passivity.” See Eric Cheyfitz, “The Irresistibility of Great Literature: Reconstructing Hawthorne’s Politics,” in “Curriculum and Criticism,” *American Literary History* 6, no. 3 (1994): 539–58.

15 Millicent Bell, preface to *Hawthorne and the Real: Bicentennial Essays*, ed. Millicent Bell (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2005), viii.

16 John Carlos Rowe, “Nathaniel Hawthorne and Transnationality,” in *Hawthorne and the Real*, 88 (hereafter cited in text).

17 Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), 34, 45. Merish goes on to discuss the ways in which Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophers reconceptualized terms such as luxury as the “favorable culmination of ‘civilization,’ human morality, and social advance” (34).

18 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Office of “The Scarlet Letter”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), 80.

19 Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1998).

20 Jonathan Arac, “The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*,” in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 251 (hereafter cited in text).

21 Irving Howe, “The Politics of Isolation,” in *Politics and the Novel* (1957; New York: Meridian, 1987), 168–69. Though Howe very perceptively reads the novel, he adamantly refuses to think of it as anything but a deeply flawed work.

22 For a consideration of Hawthorne’s novel as a satirical critique of the new American hypermasculinity of the 1850s, see David Greven, “In a Pig’s Eye: Masculinity, Mastery, and

the Returned Gaze in *The Blithedale Romance*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 34, no. 2 (2006): 131–59.

23 Gloria Erlich, *Family Themes and Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Tenacious Web* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1984), 124.

24 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Heart of Emerson’s Journals* (Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 1995), 32.

25 Brenda Wineapple, *Hawthorne: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 93.

26 For more on the subject of the antebellum campaign against onanism and other forms of autoerotic indolence, see Greven, *Men Beyond Desire: Manhood, Sex, and Violation in American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

27 Larry J. Reynolds provides a well-informed corrective to Arac’s essay that rightfully points out the limitations of Hawthorne’s moral vision but also contextualizes his opposition to abolitionism as the result of his abhorrence of political terrorism specifically, violence generally, and the demonization of those with an opposing view, altogether a position in conflict with many core tendencies in American political thought and action. See Larry Reynolds, “‘Strangely Ajar with the Human Race’: Hawthorne, Slavery, and the Question of Moral Responsibility,” in *Hawthorne and the Real*, 64–5.

28 Jessica Benjamin, “Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 297. See also Benjamin’s *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1998).

29 This aporia in leftist criticism applies no less to those who make gender their primary focus of study. The strange aspect of the queer theory side of this hard facts, Bad Politics school of leftist criticism is its thoroughly complementary disregard, from many prominent quarters, for the affective dimensions of the experiences of reading literature, to say nothing of a love of beauty. Foucauldian queer theory’s general impetus has been an adamant effort not to allow “sex to degenerate into love,” to pick a common phrase in the writing of David Halperin. In *The Power of Feelings*, Nancy Chodorow links some versions of Foucauldian, Lacanian, and feminist theory in their united elimination of the “realm of personal emotional meaning,” its subordination to and determination by “language and power.” “I suggest,” writes Chodorow, “that gender cannot be seen as entirely culturally, linguistically, or politically constructed. Whether racial-ethnic, international feminist, linguistic, performative, micropolitical, or based on the analysis of discourse, gender theories that do not consider individual personal emotional and fantasy-related meaning cannot capture fully the meanings that gender has for the subject. They miss an important component of experienced gender meaning and gender subjectivity.” Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), 71.

30 Though certainly writing from a positive perspective on Hawthorne, Michael J. Colacurcio provides one of the most stringently antipsychoanalytic treatments of Hawthorne in his *The Province of Piety: Moral History in Hawthorne’s Early Tales* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1995), a study that unswervingly argues that Hawthorne should be viewed as an eminent historian of the Puritan American past. Perhaps the most decisive blow against a psychoanalytic Hawthorne has been delivered by Frederick Crews, who has substituted his carefully considered Freudian readings of Hawthorne in the 1950s and 1960s with a heatedly anti-Freudian retraction of the earlier views.

31 Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, 164.

32 As Sedgwick puts it: “I’m always compelled by the places where a project of writing runs into things that I just can’t say—whether because there aren’t good words for them, or more interestingly because they’re structured in some elusive way that just isn’t going to stay still to be formulated. That’s the unrationalizable place that seems worth being to me, often the only place that seems worth being.” “This Piercing Bouquet: An Interview

with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,⁷ in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, ed. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 246. I am not certain that Sedgwick would endorse the argument I have been making here, but the view she expresses here speaks directly to my concerns.