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The Queer Work of Fantasy: The Romance in Antebellum America

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE QUEER WORK OF FANTASY:
THE ROMANCE IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

ZACHARY NEIL LAMM

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“The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotions—while separating it sharply from reality.”

—Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”

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INTRODUCTION

THE ROMANCE, IN THEORY

Romances are bad novels: their narratives are often incoherent and their plots illogical; their characters are often immoral, insignificant, or, perhaps not surprisingly, insane; their critical and (sometimes their popular) reception at the time of initial publication—if they made it to publication at all—was oftentimes poor. I am referring, of course, not to the genre of the popular “romance novel” marketed since the mid-twentieth century to a largely female audience, but to what I refer to as the “literary romance,” the non-realist narrative fiction genre that developed (and declined, I contend) a century earlier and includes many of the works best known today by the likes of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville, to name a few of the more familiar authors.¹ This is not to say that the “badness” of the literary romance does not

¹ I am not intending to make a high-art/low-art distinction between the literary romance and the popular romance novel; in fact, not only were a number of the romances discussed here part of what might be identified as the “popular literature” of the nineteenth-century, but the romance, as I will argue, seems to be doing a kind of cultural work not unrelated to that of the romance novel. In her authoritative study *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway argues,

The reading experience is valued for the way it makes the reader feel, but the feeling it creates is interpreted by the women themselves as a general sense of emotional well-being and visceral contentment. Such a feeling is brought on by the opportunity to participate vicariously in a relationship characterized by *mutual* love and by the hero’s quite unusual ability to express his devotion gently and with concern for his heroine’s pleasure. (70, emphasis in original)

This fantasy work, providing escape from the norm—if not the normative—of women’s lives might be said to parallel the fantasies of alternative forms of living that comprise the work of the literary romance. The important distinction here is between the locus of the desiring subject of textual composition: in the popular romance novel, desire is assumed to be already constituted in the female reader, and the text is written to suit needs that she is presumed already to feel (Radway notes that readers, especially those who participate in reading groups, often defer to a “mediator” who will select works suited to an already-established sense

mean that it is without its merits; indeed, most of the canonical fiction of the decades just before the American Civil War can be identified as romances or partake of the romance's conventions, in as much as canonicity is a marker of literary merit. In a widely-distributed pamphlet from the antebellum period entitled "Beware of Bad Books," the members of the American Tract Society, a reformist group founded in 1825 and dedicated to publishing materials intended to uphold Christian virtue and ensure national character, define "bad books" as "whatever books neither feed the mind nor purify the heart, but *intoxicate the mind and corrupt the heart*. . . . Books of fiction, romance, infidelity, war, piracy, and murder are '*poison*,' more or less diluted, and are as much to be shunned as the drinkard's cup. They will 'bite like a serpent, and sting like an adder'" (59; emphasis in original). Poisoning, biting, stinging: these are exactly, I argue, what the writers of romance intended to do, though perhaps in more subtle ways than the snake, the pirate, or the murderer. Writers of romance, I argue, work to disparage antebellum culture, particularly its heteronormativity, through a deployment of fantasy as a means of narrative theorization about desire—that is, as the Tract Society would have it, writers of romance seek to "poison" normative American sexual culture by offering the romance as a critique of that culture and by presenting alternative visions of sociality and sexuality—virtuous work, to my mind.

The foremost theorist of this "queer work of fantasy" in the romance is Hawthorne, who observed, in the preface to his 1851 romance, *The House of the Seven*

of taste and a pre-conceived notion of women's sexual and affective desires [50]); in the literary romance, the author writes to theorize about sexuality—in particular, about its refusal to conform to notions of normativity—and while the author may write from observation, the theorization about desire that takes place in the romance is his or her own.

Gables,

When a writer calls his works a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture. (1)

Hawthorne makes two central points here: one formal and one critical, and the one follows from the other. Writers of romance are granted “a certain latitude” so that they might “enrich” their works with formal elements outside what would be permissible in the realistic novel—that is, elements of fantasy—and these authors are allowed this latitude in as much they use it to survey these “truth[s] of the human heart” that Hawthorne believes provide literature its true value. There is no ambiguity on this point: the fantasy work of the romance is to be in service of the pursuit of truth, not mere escapism or diversion. The fantasies permitted in the romance thus take the shape of visions, such that the defining characteristic of the antebellum romance is that it never

becomes merely “fantastic” or “speculative” literature as such, but instead presents visions of alternative ways of living that affirm the “heart truths” the writer of romance seeks. This visionary work could not be accomplished in realistic novels, and in his critique of the novel, Hawthorne seems to suggest that representations of “reality” have no inherent value if they demonstrate nothing new about human life or the human heart.

The romances under consideration in the following were written between 1838 and 1855, with the greatest concentration between 1850 and 1855. In the decades just before the American Civil War, the romance became a predominant form of prose fiction; at the same time, social movements organized around abolition, women’s rights, and utopian socialism excoriated the status quo of U.S. culture, demanding fundamental changes in social, political, and intimate life in the not-so-new nation. The simultaneity of these two shifts in American culture was no coincidence. Authors of romance undertake a form of visionary labor, employing fantasies of alternative ways of living as a means of subverting the inadequacies of heteronormative antebellum culture.² As an alternative to reform movements, which sought to bring behaviors in line with normative, biblically-derived notions of moral rectitude, the fantasies enabled by the romance offered non-pragmatic, non-pedagogical explorations of forms of feeling and ways of living that, rather than presenting idealized models, sought to offer fantasy itself as a reactive means of managing the political and social hardships of antebellum society.

² Michael Warner explains that heteronormative culture “thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist” (xxi). While antebellum citizens would not have had the language of heterosexuality available to them, it is clear, as the American Tract Society pamphlet demonstrates, that models of normative sexuality are privileged and that deviations from that are to be abhorred and are morally on par with forms of criminality, including murder.

The fantasy work of the romance often occurs within instances of what I call “visionary affect,” in which an intense attraction arises between characters—often between characters of the same sex—enabling them to envision ways of life that would, were they to be realized, exceed social propriety and expose cultural instability. These affective bonds ring with modern readers as distinctly “queer,” implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) resisting the normative force of antebellum sexual culture, as authors utilize the romance as an opportunity for imaginative experiments in intimate living. This anti-normative impulse, I contend, aligns romancers with contemporary queer theorists, both of whom extol the value of so-called “minor intimacies” and offer analogous critiques of heteronormativity.³ While the rise of realism in the wake of the Civil War and the Reconstruction eras did much to diminish the importance of the fantasy work of the romance, the innovative practice of romance writing illuminates a desire for social and sexual revolution in an often overlooked epoch of American sexual history: an epoch in which authors proffered visions of queer living and pursued the radical idea that, more than any attempt at so-called literary realism, the exploration of fantasy might reveal some truth about the psychic reality of human subjects.

While American writers of romance have often been accused by critics of writing literature that was merely escapist, some critics have understood these authors—and perhaps especially Hawthorne—as responding to and theorizing about social and cultural phenomena. In his classic study, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Richard Chase identifies how the romance takes a structural approach to dealing with worldly issues:

³ I take the phrase “minor intimacies” from Lauren Berlant’s introduction to the volume *Intimacy*.

The American novel tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience. When it attempts to resolve contradictions, it does so in oblique, morally equivalent ways. As a general rule, it does so either in melodramatic actions or in pastoral idylls [. . . This] account[s] for the strong element of “romance” in the American “novel.” (1-2)⁴

I read Chase as reading the American novel queerly, in that he notes the resistance to teleological determinism that would mandate novelistic normativity; we might thus say he portrays the American romance as a queer genre. For Chase, moral tensions (such as, we might imagine, one’s sexual desire meeting up against the resistance of heteronormativity) are commonplace within the American romance, but the seemingly inevitable intrusion of heteronormativity in the romance’s end does not erase the potential for alternatives that arises elsewhere. This is to say that the ending of the romance—which is, as Chase notes, almost always awkwardly normative and dreadfully melodramatic—cannot erase what came before: not simply because these endings are almost always unlikable or unbelievable, but because the ending does not have to dictate our reading of the rest of the romance.⁵ Resting in tension, unable to resolve to a single psychic or social reality: these may be the conditions that Hawthorne believed the romance could both mark and mar. This uncertainty produces the kind of deconstructive

⁴ On the issue of romance as an analysis of social issues, see Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance*.

⁵ Chase’s affection for and wonder at the novel’s development, and the romance as a significant novelistic innovation, in the U.S. reveals perhaps as much about Chase’s investment in the development of non-normative narratives as it does about the novels themselves; in other words, Chase’s reading of the novelistic tradition, now often construed as conservative and monolithic, did in fact do a kind of counterintuitive, revolutionary work amid a definitively conservative 1950s culture in which it was written.

scene that provides ample material for queer theorization and out of which the most profound critiques of normativity arise.

In his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D.H. Lawrence sings the praises of antebellum U.S. authors for performing exactly the kind of difficult negotiations Chase describes in a nation in transition:

There is a new feeling in the old American books, far more than there is in the modern American books, which are pretty empty of feeling, and proud of it. There is a “different” feeling in the old American classics. It is the shifting over from the old psyche to something new, a displacement. And displacement hurts. This hurts. So we try to tie it up, like a cut finger. Put a rag round it.

It is a cut too. Cutting away the old emotions and consciousness.

Don’t ask what is left. (8)

Lawrence imagines the American author as surgeon and inventor, and he contradicts Donald Pease’s contention that authors of the American Renaissance provide nostalgic “visionary compacts” intended to bring the nation together through the sense of a common past. While the two are talking about different senses of history (Lawrence has the American Revolution against European control in mind; for Pease, it is the nation’s founding and early history), I think Lawrence is right in his future-oriented understanding of antebellum literature; the “different” feeling he describes is exactly the queer visionary work of the romance I have sought to describe.⁶ *Contra* Pease, instead of offering scenes

⁶ In his important work on the romance, Christopher Castiglia emphasizes the significance of “ephemerality

of national unification, the romance presents the intimate as the locus of social transformation, such that interpersonal relationality and personal longing supercede the visionary compact's larger communal-historical objectives.

Lawrence's emphasis on creativity echoes that of other critics who describe the romance in relation to the world-making projects of American writers of romance. Richard Poirier describes American authors as engaged in a project of "building," an "effort to create a world in which consciousness might be free to explore its powers and affinities" (xix; xxi). And Emily Miller Budick explains, "The texts, in other words, go about the business not so much of representing a world but of creating one, *ex nihilo*" (8). With this issue of creative license in mind, Budick notes the concern of critics who ask, "Does the form of romance fiction suggest a distancing of the text from the socioeconomic and political realm in which it is produced?" (6). Her response is the same as mine: No. Conducting an extended reevaluation of the romance in light of contemporary queer theory, I want not to argue for a genealogical link between this "classical" American literary form and queer theory but instead to illuminate the vital insights into the complexities of social and sexual systems the romance offers in the imaginative work of fantasy, most significantly the idea of imaginative work as a form of social critique.

I hope to show how writers of the mid-nineteenth century were themselves doing critical work much like that of queer theory, though most of today's queer theorist have

and contingency of the present, the conditions that democratic sociality most requires" (257). I have much sympathy with his insistence on the present as the site of pleasure and of the social, though I think the romance is better understood as presenting visions of living that might initiate themselves in the present but that nevertheless project themselves into a revolutionized future.

paid the American romance little attention. Writers of the romance intended to get outside of reform and into fantasy through an understanding that trying to tell the truth about desire and fantasy gets us much closer to the reality of inner life than any realist literary genre ever could. By establishing a novelistic literary form that would allow them both to register social discontent and to rehearse a variety of desires for escape from the repressive force of normative culture, writers of the romance established themselves as pioneers of cultural theory as well as architects of an American literary innovation. While I do not want to make a claim that the models of intimate living offered in these romances are necessarily ideal, I do think the important critical work they perform in their deployment of fantasy should be acknowledged both as a precedent for contemporary queer theory and as an essay at envisioning new forms of living that attempt to move outside the bounds of heteronormativity. I hope to demonstrate the significance of the romance as not only a transformative moment in the course of American literary history but also as indicative of the yearning for a sexual revolution in antebellum culture that was both a reaction to the rumblings and displaced by the eruption of the Civil War. I want centrally to reveal just how strange the literature of the antebellum era truly was, and how queer its authors, through their emphasis on the exploration of fantasy, wanted both their work and their world to be.

The “visionary affect” I describe is a “force of fantasy,” to use Judith Butler’s term, offering intimate, often non-normative bonds between subjects as an opportunity for social and sexual experimentation. Writing against arguments that establish a direct connection between representations of violence and violence in the real world, Butler

insists on a revaluation and reassessment of that role fantasy, explaining, “Fantasy is not equated with what is not real, but rather what is not *yet* real, what is possible or futural, or what belongs to a different version of the real” (185; emphasis in original). Meant both to demonstrate the shortcomings of heteronormative culture and to provoke the imaginations of author and reader, the romance, I argue, presents fantasies of humans coming together in new formations beyond *just* the nation or the family or the couple in a milieu that is not yet real but might be on the verge of becoming so. Authors such as Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, and Julia Ward Howe sought a medium for the expression of fantasy yet were faced with the difficult reality of desire’s inability to be either properly contained or satisfactorily articulated. The radical potential of human unions intrigues writers of romance, and such arrangements are more in line with the desire for pleasure in the present so vital to queer theory. The centrality of this desire forms the basis of my case for reading the romance not simply through queer theory but *as* queer theory.

In her study of lesbian sexuality in canonical American literature, Valerie Rohy argues, “Generic distinctions like realism and romance are, of course, not exempt from systems of social discipline; they never escape the cultural law that would produce heterosexual ‘romance’ not only as a ‘realistic’ expectation but as the sum of sexual reality” (14). Rohy gets at two important points here: the pervasive heteronormativity of mainstream American culture *from* its founding, and the status of non-normative sexualities as unrepresentable, at least in any explicit way. Romances, however, get us very close to representability, bringing queer feelings and intimacies into consciousness, if not into view; they open up spaces for queer freedom by locating the borders of

normative culture and insisting that we move outside, often literally. As we will see, a number of romances take place in geo-socially liminal spaces: rural communities, bucolic hermitages, private homes, nautical vessels; some of these romances even move outside the borders of the nation altogether. And these texts also position readers outside of heteronormative institutions of marriage and family. In all of the romances under consideration here, marriage is always under suspicion, and those romances that do end in marriage, such as Lucy Holcombe Pickens's *The Free Flag of Cuba*, end with a caveat that calls into question the happiness of the marriage and thus the mismatch between personal desire and the cultural drive to marry. Many of the romances are also written in praise of the unmarried—in particular of the bachelor, a figure of great interest to readers throughout the nineteenth century.⁷ Indeed, characters in several romances expound the virtues of bachelorhood and the superiority of men who do not marry. In the end, though romances may never truly shake off the shackles of heteronormative culture, they explicitly and undeniably do much to subvert it through their fantasy work.

But where does this leave us? And why does the romance matter today? In his important discussion of the romance, Christopher Castiglia declares, “Fantasy is not, in and of itself, a *social* solution . . . Rather, fantasy is a placeholder, archive, and staging ground,” which “take[s] us beyond what *must* and toward what *might* be, a record of what citizens can do—and, indeed, are doing—to maintain inventive sociality” (257; emphasis in original). In their fantasy work, romances provide us with visions of the possible, even if the narrative’s end often shuts down the possibilities raised. While heteronormative

⁷ On both American and British interest in bachelor literature, see Katherine Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood, and the Novel*.

culture may not be overcome by the antebellum romance, these writers and works nevertheless embody a sense of dissatisfaction that leads to dissent, the key affect within a revolutionary ethos. Even if the visions set forth in these romances are ultimately failures, what romances do well is *to encourage vision*, to refute that life narratives are or should be repeatable, safe, or universal. Not communal living, nor gender segregation, nor closeted intimacy, nor the rearranging of familiar terms of intimacy (the visions of alternative life narratives offered in the romance under consideration) will necessarily lead to universal happiness, but the Hawthornian mode of romance, which is what I present in my archive, does offer both a theory of form and a theory of cultural dissent that encourages the kind of queer thinking that leads to the subversion of heteronormativity, and thus has a transhistorical valence wherever heteronormativity persists.

In the first chapter, I take seriously the homo-erotics of the relationship between Coverdale and Hollingsworth, the two male protagonists of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*. I argue that the intimate bond between the two men is not only more intensely erotic than the connection either has to the female characters in the romance but also that it serves as the source for visions of queer futurity, in which sexual freedom increases alongside a correlating reevaluation of pleasure in the present central to human sociality. I begin by examining Hawthorne's ambivalent rejection of the theories of French utopianist Charles Fourier. Considering how traces of Fourier's championing of non-normative relations, though publicly disavowed, undergird the American utopian

movement—especially through the work of Albert Brisbane—I demonstrate how Hawthorne adopts many of the central tenets of Fourierism in *Blithedale*, though in contrast to Brisbane’s deflection of the erotic, Hawthorne recuperates the imaginative possibilities enabled by theories of sexuality that emphasize the pursuit of pleasure. Because Coverdale is the fictional author of the text of *Blithedale*, I contend that the thematic of experimentation adapted from Fourierism becomes the aesthetic mode of the romance. Hawthorne employs an Emersonian understanding of the contradictory role of the poet, such that Coverdale’s identification as a “minor poet” in the romance’s preface sets the stage for him to serve as a “poet of the minor” throughout, always seeking to tell uncomfortable or unacknowledged truths of human desire yet simultaneously anxious about the poet’s representative function. I conclude by demonstrating the development of truth-telling as a theme in the romance, such that, as Coverdale’s stuttering final confession of heterosexual love and the oft-referenced myth of the Veiled Lady illustrate, Hawthorne assumes the role of queer theorist in *Blithedale*’s assertion that desires are almost always outside the bounds of normativity and that the expectations set up by heteronormative life narratives serve only to thwart satisfaction. The future, as the romance figures it, holds promise only if it allows for present pleasures.

Though sexuality has long been part of theories of imperialism, Chapter 2 seeks to explore instances of desire that exceed the paradigm of the erotic imperial encounter with the Other in imperialist American romances. By reading imperialist romances in which the “contact zone,” to use Mary Louise Pratt’s term, is marginalized, I demonstrate how imperialist ambitions open up possibilities for explorations of queer desire not simply

through imperialist/imperialized power dynamics but also through the Deleuzian deterritorialization of space enabled by imperial endeavors. I argue that the time of imperialism is also time outside of heteronormativity, and thus the “imperialist romance” serves as a locus for the performance of queer theorization. Beginning with Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, I focus my analysis on the often overlooked first two-thirds of the romance, in which same-sex desire leads Pym away from the heteronormative existence his family has planned for him and into scenes of male intimacy, in which the demise of normative life narratives ensures that he finds himself, both in the narrative and in his imagination, constantly faced with erotic scenes of death. Reading *Pym* against theories of death and eroticism from Lee Edelman and Georges Bataille, I consider how Poe makes use of a “death drive” that is enabled by a sense of American imperial entitlement. While racism pervades both *Pym* and the second text I consider—Lucy Holcombe Pickens’s *The Free Flag of Cuba*—racial anxieties are frequently subordinated to homoerotic desire in these imperialist romances. Holcombe’s text is more unabashedly imperialist than Poe’s, with one of the female protagonists, Mabel Royal, joking at one point that the U.S. should seek to annex the moon; but, ironically, no scene of imperial encounter is present in this romance at all. Instead, *Free Flag*, like Mary Peabody Mann’s *Juanita* (with which I end the chapter), focuses almost entirely on intimate homosocial exchanges, and the texts are at their most visionary when imperialism results in the production of sexually segregated worlds; only then do feelings of intimacy flourish in these romances. Though she repeatedly tries out different scenarios of intimacy, Mann, however, ultimately resolves, unlike Poe and Pickens, that

no deterritorialization of space can become truly stable under systems of inequity, such as racism and sexism. In the end, all three texts exploit the imaginative possibilities opened up by both the form of the romance and non-normative intimate relations to generate the “visionary affect” that is key to the fantasy work of the romance.

Though no actual representations of genitals appear in the romance discussed in Chapter 3, the lack of signification signaled by their absence leads to a crisis for heteronormative culture and, in turn, an opportunity for fantastic interventions by a writers of romance. I begin with a discussion of the mind-body problem in relation to gender through Judith Sargent Murray’s essay “On the Equality of the Sexes,” which theorizes that men and women have similar minds even if their bodies are suited to different forms of labor. This split between mind and body is important to Murray’s figuration of early feminism, and the dichotomy informs the fantasies and anxieties of the texts I consider in this chapter. I then make a claim for reading Julia Ward Howe’s recently recovered manuscript, *The Hermaphrodite*, as a romance, and consider it alongside the popular bachelor romances of Donald Grant Mitchell, *Reveries of a Bachelor* and *Dream Life*. The trope of the vision or dream was the major narrative device for Mitchell, and Howe also surrenders her principal narrative to dreamlike passages during several episodes in the romance. In their dreams, Mitchell’s bachelors—anatomically male, one presumes—bear an ambivalent relation to normative living, and though they seem ultimately to surrender to normative life narratives, the romances end without properly resigning their men to a comedic fate. Howe’s protagonist, Laurence, though he performs both male and female with equal success, incessantly returns to visions of worlds in which his body is

no longer marked as indeterminate or deformed, and in which he can love freely without concern for gender. He perceives his own body as failing to signify a sex properly, yet having been raised as male, he creates a persona in his adolescence that signifies masculinity, and he follows the “manly” pursuit of the life of the mind; I contend this leads to recurrent representations of Laurence’s anatomically anomalous body as projecting a gender that is merely spectral, and thus the question of the body’s malleability and materiality leads to episodes of physical and religious transcendence and amorous associations with both men and women. I conclude by reading *The Hermaphrodite* against Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and her more recent work on trans- and inter-sexuality, as well as Swedenborgian theology of the body (a major influence on Howe), in order to demonstrate Howe’s use of the hermaphrodite’s semiotically difficult body as simultaneously embodying her anxiety over her husband’s suspected homosexuality and exploiting the association between hermaphroditism and homosexuality for all its anti-normative force.

The final chapter demonstrates how the point-counterpoint construction of his romances’ narratives represents Melville’s ambivalent relation to the form of the romance. I characterize Melville as wanting desperately to believe in the visionary project of the romance, but that desperation runs up against the hard facts of materialism, representing a “tyranny of facts” that Melville and his romances cannot overcome. For instance, in his short romance “The Paradise of Bachelor and the Tartarus of Maids,” the homoerotic visionary affect so palpable in the “Paradise” section gives way to the emotional and aesthetic numbness of economic and political reality in “Tartarus.” I

illuminate Melville's production of fantasy worlds rife with queer affect in his other romances, including *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and "Bartleby, the Scrivener," all of which he undercuts by demonstrating the misfit between fantastic representations and material realities. Though the all-male world of the whaling industry, the subjective renegotiation of familial and social bonds, and the desire to live apart from public approbation all get at something of the truth of human desire as Melville sees it, these texts' status as visionary and non-normative renders such ways of living invalid and unsustainable within his conception of social reality, in which the romance project must always be a failure. Proceeding through an extended reading of *Pierre*, I discuss the prevalence of what I call "heterodoxical melancholy," a term I derive from Judith Butler's notion of "heterosexual melancholy," in which a sense of loss for an attachment drives the formation of sexual identity, though in *Pierre* the nature of the attachments and the identities produced by their loss are strange, disparate, and unstable.⁸ The drive for truth in *Pierre*, including Pierre's own authorial ambitions, embodies Melville's ambivalent relation to the romance, as he sees truth as both desirable and unobtainable. The ubiquity of dissatisfaction leads to the suspicion that truth might be a queer thing, but skepticism of such a belief is necessitated by heteronormative culture; all strange feelings must be, like the curious portrait of Pierre's father, consigned to a closet or destroyed.

⁸ See Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*.

CHAPTER 1
THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE, AMERICAN UTOPIANISM, AND THEORIES OF
QUEER LIVING

Midway through Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), in a pivotal chapter entitled "A Crisis," one comes across one of the most explicitly homoerotic scenes to be found in the canon of antebellum American literature. Thus far, the relationship between Coverdale (the narrator-protagonist of the romance) and Hollingsworth (his partner in what seems a mutual affection) has seemed to be one of amorous reciprocity and a common interest in theories of social progress, though Coverdale is becoming increasingly committed to utopian socialism, while Hollingsworth maintains a desire to establish an institute for the reform of criminals.¹ In this "crisis," just before the two men are driven apart by irreconcilable differences in their approaches to social change, the two men are at work in the fields of Blithedale farm, and Coverdale makes a declaration of his vision of the future:

"When we are come to be old men," I said, "they will call us Uncles, or Fathers—Father Hollingsworth and Uncle Coverdale—and we will look back cheerfully on these early days, and make a romantic story for the young people (and if a little more romantic than truth may warrant, it will be no harm) out of our severe trials and hardships. In a century or two, we

¹ For an overview of representations of reform in antebellum literary culture, including a brief reading of *Blithedale*, see Christopher Castiglia, "Reform and Antebellum Fiction."

shall every one of us be mythical personages, or exceedingly picturesque or poetical ones, at all events. They will have a great public hall, in which your portrait, and mine, and twenty other faces that are living now, shall be hung up; and as for me, I will be painted in my shirt-sleeves, and with the sleeves rolled up, to show my muscular development. What stories will be rife among them about our mighty strength,” said I, lifting a big stone and putting it into its place; “though our prosperity will really be far stronger than ourselves, after several generations of a simple, natural, and active life!” (129)

Though Coverdale imagines the current Blithedale residents as “fathers” in this passage—though just as often he imagines them as “uncles”—they are not fathers in any biological (or social) sense so much as idealized but as ostensibly representative community members, propagating a new way of life, though not one that they expect to be repeated in exactly the same way for every generation.² The future generations Coverdale pictures in his erotic vision are not his progeny, and he does not exist to them as ancestor but rather as predecessor or figure of myth, muscled and strong-willed, able to found ideologically revolutionary communities and to perform the hard labor necessary to maintain them—in theory.³

² In “Tales of the Avunculate,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, “It is the very badness of the fit of aunt and uncle—the badness of their fit with each other in the first place, but also with the streamlined modern model of ‘family’ and of same-sex attachment—that makes them such good places to look for some of the gravity of . . . resistance to the sleek ‘same’/‘difference’ scientism of modern gender and sexual preference” (60).

³ For an influential queer reading of this scene, Lauren Berlant’s “Fantasies of Utopia in *The Blithedale Romance*.” She argues, “We must read the homoerotic bonds at Blithedale as *relays*, signifying complexly motivated relations among men. The operation of homosociality in *Blithedale* is politically multivalent—

This vision of Coverdale's represents a *queer futurity*, in which the radical potential promised not only by utopian communities but by literary romances as well has come to fruition, and in which heteronormativity has not only been destabilized but has become socially superfluous to a new order of realizable potentialities.⁴ Rather than presenting a stratagem for future of reformations, this is vision of limitless possibilities, where the work of fantasy is valued over social expectation. Coverdale's vision rejects what queer theorists have identified as "reproductive futurity": the culturally idealized longing of present generations to produce a future in which their values as well as their genes will persist, such that the present and its pleasures are dismissed, and the eternal is taken to be inherently more valuable than the ephemeral.⁵ Coverdale, by contrast, imagines a future that surpasses his own moment, in which the citizens of Blithedale will be stronger, more prosperous, and, most importantly, "active." Rather than delaying pleasure for a future that he will never experience, Coverdale embodies in his vision the demand of many current queer thinkers for pleasure in the present, and his devaluation of

describing relations between philosophy and the desiring subject, as these conjoin in the utopian project; between men competing, patriarchally, for women and other profitable resources; as well as between men who desire each other sexually and emotionally" (37). I differ in that I understand homoeroticism as an end in itself, one that parallels other projects or is coincident with them, such the production of socialist community, but not as a mechanism for the accomplishment of other ends. In fact, I argue that homoerotic feelings are one of the "truths" social experimentation (and the romance) is intended to express. See also David Greven, *Men Beyond Desire*; and Benjamin Grossberg, "The Tender Passion Was Very Rife among Us."

⁴ A recent special issue of *Radical History Review* deals with the topic "Queer Futures," though the focus throughout is primarily on the notion of "homonormativity," a term they adopt from social historian Lisa Duggan, to describe forms of homosexual culture that accept and aspire to many of the regulations and institutions of heteronormativity. The overriding assumption of this issue seems to be the idea that queer sexuality and futurity are almost always incongruous, and that the proper response to such discussions will always be negative modes of critique. The romance, and *Blithedale* in particular, seems to offer a form of positive response in its representations of visions of queer life that include a future without disparaging the pleasure of the present.

⁵ On reproductive futurity, see Lee Edelman's *No Future* and Lauren Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*.

reproduction in favor of non-normative intimacy leads Coverdale to assume a queer subjectivity. His implicit critique of normativity and rejection of reproductivity echoes with queer theorists, such as Judith Halberstam, who tells us:

Part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space . . . The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and [. . .] squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand. (1-2)

Halberstam's reorientation of potential from the future to the "here and now" represents a shift in social valuation that Coverdale echoes. Though Coverdale envisions a future, he does not project his subjectivity into it, since personal futures are, as Halberstam asserts, diminishing. Instead, while Coverdale hopes that he and his peers might be remembered, he sees a discontinuity between them and the future citizens of his vision: they are not maintaining an ancestral way of life, which may now exist only in memory, even if they recognize the contributions of their visionary forebears to their present liberty. This cross-temporal echo demonstrates how the visionary work of the romance might be thought of as a kind of queer theorization about futurity—the idea that queer presentism is not incompatible with a vision of the future, especially when one aspires, as Coverdale does, for a future that will take whatever form its citizens desire.

Key to this social reorientation are new emphases on experimentation and

honesty, both of which are fundamental components of Hawthorne's theory of romance, of which I believe *The Blithedale Romance* is the most fully developed expression. In his remarks on the romance as a genre in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Hawthorne famously acknowledges the right of writers of romance to "mingle the Marvellous" into their works, not to hold themselves to the constrictions of literary realism, to which the novel-proper is bound in his estimation. For Hawthorne, the romance serves as an opportunity for the exploration of fantasy—not detachment from reality altogether, but the use of fantasy writing in service of envisioning a life in which honesty, especially about one's desires, is more closely aligned with daily living. He contends that the romance might reveal something of "the truth of the human heart" in its devaluation of literary realism in service of imaginative experimentation (1). Though Hawthorne offers this as an aesthetic claim, I contend that it also establishes the romance as politically and sexually radical in its representation of human desire, and I argue that the revolutionary ethos that inspires the political project of *Blithedale* also marks a transitional moment in the history of sexuality in the U.S., in particular through considerations of the text's negotiations of Fourierist utopianism, authorial anxieties, and queer eroticism.

Normative "Association"

In one of the early chapters of *Blithedale*, not long after his arrival at the farm, Coverdale makes the following declaration: "The footing, on which we all associated at Blithedale, was widely different from that of conventional society. While inclining us to

the soft affections of the Golden Age, it seemed to authorize any individual, of either sex, to fall in love with any other, regardless of what would elsewhere be judged suitable and prudent” (72). In this passage, the normative modes of intimacy shift, as a conscious reevaluation of morality has taken place and, it would seem, opened new gateways for the expression of human passion; indeed, the transformation of human interaction and community building introduced new possibilities for intimate experience, dismantling—or so it would seem—any sort of regulatory system, whether based on gender, class, or other common indexes of social propriety. For Coverdale, this deregulation of intimate experience is desirable not only because it enables queer intimacies without concern for social approbation but also because it acknowledges that one cannot know what forms desires will take when they can be explored without anxiety. It also embodies the principles of the anti-institutional stance that Hawthorne takes throughout his romances. Indeed, for Hawthorne, it seemed an impossibility that humans could ever assemble into a society that reflected human desire in the least while still maintaining what he believed to be a detrimental insistence on policing practices of intimacy, so they might seek to get outside it.⁶

Blithedale is in large part a response not only to the heteronormativity of antebellum society but also to what Hawthorne believed to be the flawed pursuit of utopian socialism in mid-century America. Drawing upon Hawthorne’s own experiences at the Brook Farm community in 1841, *Blithedale* is the story of a group of intimate acquaintances who are participating in a socialist community and living in a communal

⁶ See Christopher Castiglia, “The Marvelous Queer Interiors of *The House of the Seven Gables*.”

phalanx.⁷ The aspiration in this romance for a communal existence focused on pleasure mirrors much of the rhetoric of the utopian socialist movement in the mid-nineteenth century, which was inspired by the work of French philosopher Charles Fourier, though Hawthorne casts *The Blithedale Romance* as unequivocally anti-Fourierist, in particular because of Fourier's numerologically-obsessed sense of order.⁸ Like the experimental community it depicts, the romance is a kind of experiment in vision, exploring the limits of the social and the individual, attempting to imagine ways of living outside the bounds of sexual and social normativity within the imaginative space of the text.⁹ Utopian socialism, institutions of reform, gender inequality, class difference, the supernatural, human ambition, sexual desire, and sexual non-conformity all come under the microscope in *Blithedale*.

Between his departure from Brook Farm and the publication of *Blithedale*,

⁷ In a letter of July 24, 1851, Hawthorne explains, "When I write another romance, I shall take the community for a subject, and shall give some of my experiences and observations at Brook Farm" (*Letters* 465).

⁸ It is beyond the scope of this essay to explain Fourier's theory of human sociality in all its nuances, but I will lay out some of the general principles. There are four kinds of movement in the universe—material, organic, animal, and social—and we have yet to experience much of social movement, which is the key to human progress and happiness. These movements occur in a kind of rhythmic pattern that has been largely invisible to us given the macro-level at which these changes occur, and humans are destined to move up the chain in a wave of ascension that will likewise have a congruous decline. The members of human society have been led into great misery as a result of the selfish of its leaders, and current labor practices and social hierarchies have been established to ensure that this inequality continues to favor those on top, leaving those below in a constant state of economic and emotional poverty. There are seven stages that humankind must transcend through in order to achieve Harmony, and we have only recently progressed out of Barbarism (the fourth stage of human society) into Civilization (the fifth and the next to last stage, and the final stage of human misery). By doing away with hierarchies of gender and class and enabling the pursuit of pleasure, especially in labor and sex, human society will become more just, or "harmonious," and individual happiness and satisfaction will increase in turn. Most significantly, regulations of gender and sexuality will be done away with, along with their concomitant institutions: in particular, marriage

⁹ Though *The Blithedale Romance* may be the only canonical literary text focusing explicitly on the American utopian socialist movement in the nineteenth century, it is far from representative of the movement and its textual productions, as we will see. Also, for a perspective on the potential influence of Fourier on one of Hawthorne's contemporaries, see Michael Moon, "Solitude, Singularity, Seriality: Whitman vis-à-vis Fourier."

Hawthorne maintained a long-standing fascination with Fourierism, and in his *American Notebooks*, he remarks upon and notes reading Fourier a number of times between 1844 and 1851. In the lengthiest of these remarks, from July 27th, 1844, he constructs a conceit comparing the Fourierist community to an ant colony he observes while lounging in a valley he calls “Sleepy Hollow”:

Here is a whole colony of little ant-hills, a real village of them; they are small, round hillocks, formed of minute particles of gravel, with an entrance in the center; and through some of them blades of grass or small shrubs have sprouted up, producing an effect not unlike that of trees overshadowing a homestead. Here is a type of domestic industry—perhaps, too something of municipal institutions—perhaps, likewise (who knows) the very model of a community, which Fourierites and others are stumbling in pursuit of. Possibly, the student of such philosophies should go to the ant, and find that nature has given him his lesson there.

Hawthorne then enacts the role of “malevolent genius,” “drop[ping] a few grains of sand into the entrance of one of these dwellings, and thus quite obliterat[ing] it” (249).

Observing the likeness of the industrious anthill to the idyllic Fourierist community, Hawthorne makes a joke of the tenuousness of such communities, which are so dependent upon the maintenance of their self-imposed social and economic order that they not only, to his mind, diminish the possibility for individual liberty but also falter at the merest sign of distress. He imagines that the clouds he observes from his hermitage are “scattered about the sky, like the shattered ruins of a dreamer’s Utopia,” and when he

considers the futility of language in its attempts to express human feeling, he disparages, “It is a wonder that any man ever takes up a pen a second time” (250). And yet Hawthorne does take up a pen again, and does so to wrestle with the utopian philosophies he ridicules and yet cannot escape.

In late July, 1851, Hawthorne’s friend Mrs. Tappan loans him “two or three volumes of Fourier’s works, which I wished to borrow, with a view to my next Romance” (446). (Re)reading these books throughout early August, Hawthorne records one of the more eccentric passages from Fourier’s grand political opus, *The Theory of the Four Movements*: “Fourier states, that, in the progress of the world, the ocean is to lose its saltness, and acquire the taste of a peculiarly flavored lemonade—*limonade a cedré*” (310); Coverdale also notes this sea-change theory in describing Fourier’s work to Hollingsworth.¹⁰ His only note on the content of Fourier’s works, this record of Hawthorne’s reading extracts what is among the most absurd moments of Fourier’s philosophy, in which he seems to imagine that the improvement of the human condition will lead not only to happier, more productive ways of living but also to physical transformations of the natural world. While this talk of lemonade oceans is somewhat hard to swallow, Fourier’s notions of the “passionate attraction” and general equality of human beings was appealing to many readers of the mid-nineteenth century, including

¹⁰ Coverdale clearly states the following in a mocking fashion: “When, as a consequence of human improvement . . . the globe shall arrive at its final perfection, the great ocean is to be converted into a particular kind of lemonade, such as was fashionable at Paris in Fourier’s time. He calls it *limonade a cedré*. It is positively a fact! Just imagine the city-docks filled, every day, with a flood-tide of the delectable beverage!” Hollingsworth jokingly replies, “Why did not the Frenchman make punch of it, at once? . . . The jack-tars would be delighted to go down in ships, and do business in such an element” (49).

members of Hawthorne's intellectual circle—and, I believe, Hawthorne himself.¹¹

Margaret Fuller, like Hawthorne, was largely skeptical of the practical application of Fourier's systems, and yet she could not but find something appealing in his optimism and his desire for human equality: "The mind of Fourier, though grand and clear, was, in some respects, superficial. . . . His eye was fixed on the outward more than the inward needs of man. Yet he, too, was a seer of divine order, in its musical expression, if not in its poetic soul. . . . Better institutions, he thought, will make better men" (73).¹² She is right (and in line with Hawthorne) in her skepticism toward Fourier's insitutionality: for Hawthorne, as for Fuller, the problem is Fourier's suggestion of the seemingly cyclical replacement of institutions by "better," supposedly more beneficent institutions, when the problem maybe the creation of institutions tout court.¹³ Hawthorne and Fuller also share

¹¹ Fourier's modern editors blame such "eccentricities" of the text for its failure to achieve a warm popular reception at the time of *The Theory of the Four Movements*' initial publication in France (1808). They claim selective cherry-pickings by readers have resulted in misperception of the intended work of the text, which was not "to clarify, but to tantalize. His books should provide no more than 'a glimpse' of the truth. It was only to be prospectus" (viii). His modern biographer, Jonathan Beecher, similarly regards the initial failed public reception of Fourier on his "presenting his theory in a bizarre and visionary manner"; the first readers of *Four Movements* failed to see "the pearl in the mud," inserted into such a mire because, according to Beecher, "he did not want to give away his secret, but he had to reveal enough to lay claim to his discovery" (121). As punishment for *Four Movements*' neglect and mistreatment during those decades following its publication, Fourier withheld publication of his subsequent work until 1822, when he published his *Treatise on Domestic Association*.

¹² Hawthorne met Fuller in 1839 and maintained an intimate five-year friendship with her. In his book on their personal and literary relationship, Thomas Mitchell explains, in his friendship with Fuller, Hawthorne . . . confronted a woman who . . . possessed the power to penetrate into the deepest regions of her friends' most private selves and establish an intimacy they could share with few others" (58). He "found in Fuller not only an engaging and entertaining friend but also a friend whose intensely intimate self-revelations and profound compassion for others both modeled and encouraged the trust that Hawthorne needed to be similarly open" (59).

¹³ What Fuller most admires about Fourier, as one might suppose, is his emphasis on the equality of men and women: "He, too, places woman on an entire equality with man, and wishes to give to one as to the other the independence which must result from intellectual and practical development. . . . The object of Fourier was to give her the needed means of self help, that she might dignify and unfold her life for her own happiness, and that of society" (73). She also makes note of Fourier's presumption that roughly a third of each sex will want to pursue activities typically associated with the opposite sex, which she believes can be intuited from watching "the desires of little girls . . . or the ennui that haunts grown

a concern that a great disparity exists between the queer social ambitions of Fourier's theory and his ubiquitous fixation on establishing orders and hierarchies. The impasse between the utopian destiny laid out in Fourier's manifesto and the visionary aspirations of the Blithedale community, modeled by Coverdale in the early chapters, has everything to do with the question of the relationship of social regulation to the practice of personal freedom. According to his modern biographer, the question is, how one can imagine "a social order so conceived that the gratification of individual desire always serve[s] to promote the good?" (Beecher 239-40). The issue of how one can be truly free within the intricate and manifold systems in which Fourier places human subjects and their society is sufficient reason to doubt both the coherence of his logic and even the sanity of his mind.

Yet there is a kind of prescience to Fourier, who is now understood as an important precursor to Marx and Engels, and even in Hawthorne's text, not everything about Fourierist theory is bad all of the time. Moments of bliss, taken as signs of humankind's general improvement, lead to some moments of reverence for utopian living. Coverdale laments early on pouring through "a series of horribly tedious volumes" of Fourier's works, and he asserts that, though there exists an "analogy" between Fourierist utopia and Blithedale, "the two theories differed as widely as the zenith from the nadir in their main principles" (45); but despite living in this low-theory version of socialist community, Coverdale nevertheless feels something of the philosopher's utopian vision drawing near:

women" (102).

Emerging into the genial sunshine, I half fancied that the labors of the brotherhood had already realized some of Fourier's predictions. Their enlightened culture of the soil, and the virtues with which they sanctified their life, had begun to produce an effect upon the material world and its climate. In my new enthusiasm, man looked strong and stately!—and woman, oh, how beautiful!—and the earth, a green garden, blossoming with many-colored delights! (61-62)

Perceiving in his immediate environment exactly the sort of changes to the physical world that Fourier foresees, Coverdale offers up a moment of visionary clarity, of unparalleled community intimacy, producing “a society such as has seldom met together”: “Persons of marked individuality—crooked sticks, as some of us might be called—are not exactly the easiest to bind up into a faggot” (62-63). In this vision, principles central to the ideals of the American revolution—individual liberty coexisting with feelings of group identification—are taken, perhaps somewhat skeptically, as vital components of utopian existence.¹⁴ Even if Hawthorne is somewhat mocking in this passage, he sees value in Fourier's vision of human unity overcoming heteronormative culture through a renewed insistence on the value and commonality of the pursuit of present pleasures. From this perspective, it is easy to understand the appeal of utopian socialism derived from Fourierist ideals in the United States.

As a subject for a romance relevant to his contemporary culture, Hawthorne chose well in his examination of communities of experimental living, as a number of utopian

¹⁴ Fourier had likewise been inspired by the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century; he began writing *The Theory of the Four Movements* sometime around the revolution's conclusion in 1799.

socialist movements sprung up in the mid-nineteenth century in response to a congeries of economic and social conflicts and transitions. The formation of the communities resulted in an explosion of periodical publication in the 1840s and 1850s, after which the majority of Fourierist phalanxes in the U.S. shut down.¹⁵ Foremost among these periodicals were *The Phalanx* (1843-1844) and *The Harbinger* (1844-1848), both published by the Brook Farm community, of which Hawthorne had briefly been a member. The founder and inaugural editor of *The Phalanx*, Albert Brisbane, also published a number of book-length texts on Fourierist socialism, the most famous among them being his 1840 best-seller, *The Social Destiny of Man: or, Association and the Reorganization of Industry*, an adaptation intended “to lay before the American public . . . the profound and original conceptions of CHARLES FOURIER, on the subject of a re-organization of Society” (iii; emphasis in original). Brisbane had studied with Fourier in France during the 1830s, and upon his return he became the major proponent of Fourierism in the U.S.; he devoted virtually his entire career to popularizing and analyzing Fourier’s “social science,” believing, “Fourier is to be ranked among those bold and original geniuses, like Columbus, Copernicus and Newton, who open new paths to human sciences, and who appear upon the stage of the world to give it a new impetus, and exercise an influence, which is to be prolonged for ages” (*Social Destiny* iv).

Though Fourier’s masterwork, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, was made somewhat available within the U.S. in the original French (Hawthorne had read or was at

¹⁵ On the economic and social causes for the rise and decline of utopian social movements, see Brian J.L. Berry, *America’s Utopian Experiments: Communal Havens from Long-Wave Crises*. He contends that these movements tend to arise during periods of sustained economic decline coupled with mounting disquietude over social issues, and they inevitably decline as a sense of resolution arises.

least familiar with the principles laid out in the text by 1844), Brisbane was largely responsible both for the dissemination and popularization of Fourierist ideas in America and the notion that, for Americans of his age, the “practicable parts of Fourier’s social science” (to borrow the subtitle of Brisbane’s second volume, *Association*) reinforce values, such as the notion of the pursuit of individual happiness within a community of belonging, already accepted in American culture. As such, *The Social Destiny of Man* is no mere translation of Fourier: in Brisbane’s attempt to rework Fourier’s ideas for an American reading audience, he removed much of the Frenchman’s more scintillating notions about human intimacy and desire. According to historian Carl Guarneri,

As a universal, secular, and socialistic ideology, Fourier’s theory presented serious difficulties to Americans applying it to their own environment and eager to win converts. Responding to the challenge, Brisbane and his colleagues tried to reconcile Fourierism with American ideas and practices, partly by modifying the theory they had imported and partly by explaining its consistency with the noblest aims of national life. (93)

An October 1840 review of *The Social Destiny of Man* in *The Dial* praises Brisbane for his prudence, explaining, “[Fourier’s] general principles should be cautiously separated from the details which accompany their exposition, many of which are so exclusively adapted to the French character, as to prejudice their reception with persons of opposite habits and associations” (266). The reviewer praises Brisbane for removing the more salacious features of Fourier’s texts in *Social Destiny* so as to make more digestible the Frenchman’s ideas concerning labor and communal living, ideas

which might not otherwise be entertained by sexually conservative Americans—a conservatism here figured as part of the national character.

In *The Social Destiny of Man*, Brisbane represents Fourier as primarily a theorist of labor, which is not entirely an inaccurate description;¹⁶ however, Brisbane’s exclusion of the more illicit aspects of Fourier’s vision does not keep the revolutionary stance that Fourier takes on marriage and sexuality from bleeding over into Brisbane’s texts entirely. In his introduction, Brisbane exclaims, “We assert, and will prove, that Labor, which is now MONOTONOUS, REPUGNANT and DEGRADING, can be ENNOBLED, ELEVATED and made HONORABLE;—or in other words, that INDUSTRY CAN BE RENDERED ATTRACTIVE!” (vi; emphasis in original). “ATTRACTIVE INDUSTRY,” we are told, “is the first remedy to be applied to Social evils; it would replace the present poverty and anxiety by riches and contentment, and relieve the mass from those harassing cares and physical wants, which deaden the intellect, and smother or pervert all the higher sympathies and feelings” (vii; emphasis in original). Following Fourier, Brisbane contends that pursuing passion in labor is the best way not only to secure happiness but also to alter the status quo of “the present” (signifying both the present age and the present moment), which he perceives to be productive only of perpetual sorrow and suffering.

¹⁶ Fourier has long been read a precursor to Marx and his tradition, but it was Engels who brought Fourier into the Marxist tradition through his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. According to Beecher, “Although Engels made no claim to comprehensiveness, his essay in fact defined the parameters within which several generations of historians were to discuss Fourier. The very substantial body of Soviet writing on Fourier remains to this day [Beecher was writing before the fall of the Soviet Union] wedded to the ideas and phrases from Engels essay and from the section on the utopian socialists in the *Communist Manifesto*” (2). One might make the argument that Engels played for the Soviets the kind of ambassadorial role Brisbane filled for Americans, although Engels influence was less direct and yet longer-lasting.

Later in the work, however, Brisbane moves beyond the proto-Marxist assessment of the laborer's sufferings to introduce a critique of the privileged model of the private family; he asserts, "Industry exercised by isolated families, or—as it might be termed—piece-meal, fragmental cultivation, is a miserable system of waste and poverty." "The positive object" of his text, he tells us, "will be to show . . . that Association is possible, that it is the destiny of man, the only order in which his attractions, passions and instincts find a true development, and a useful employ" (8). According to this logic, if human communities were constructed so as to encourage communal interaction rather than isolation and the accumulation of private property, each individual would become not only a better relative or neighbor but also a better human being in general, with respect to both individual and communal existence.¹⁷ He even goes so far as to assert, in his conclusion, "The duty of man is to search for the Divine code in the study of Attraction" (480), and this concern supercedes all of the anxiety-inducing regulations of heteronormative culture. Though Brisbane seeks to render Fourier acceptable to an audience immersed in normative sexual culture, he cannot avoid championing attraction as humankind's primary motivating force, despite its prurient implications, and he leaves the door open for the rejection of modes of normative living even as he pays lip service to anxieties over their disappearance.

¹⁷ In an 1845 article from *The Harbinger* entitled "Individuality in Association," the author asserts, "The word selfishness will become obsolete in true Association. In the complete Phalanx, in Association realized, individualism is but the definite and actual side of the reigning unitary idea, which otherwise were *but* an idea, an abstraction without life" (264).

Critical Ambivalence

Hawthorne and Brisbane obviously differ in terms of the esteem in which they hold Fourier, and yet both engage in a kind of ambivalent disavowal of him when they write about utopian socialism. For Hawthorne, this means making a mockery of Fourier and the eccentricities of his theories in both his journals and in *The Blithedale Romance*, though, like Fuller, he reluctantly embraces something of Fourier's endorsement of non-normative forms of sociality and his predilection for intimate experimentation, even if they only achieve the status of fantasy; for Brisbane, this means making a display of desexualizing Fourier's theory, all the while promoting an adaptation of that theory intended to have the same libratory consequences for U.S. sexual culture. And yet though these two writers seem to work toward opposite ends in terms of their disavowal—Hawthorne dismisses Fourier's systematization of living but is intrigued by his fascination with social experimentation, whereas Brisbane does away with the language of experimentation, leaving only the bare bones of Fourier's system. The problem for both crystallizes around the issue of American unwillingness to give up all the vestiges of normative culture, particularly with regard to the problem of marriage.

For Fourier, marriage is a central problem for civilization. He engages in repeated critiques of normative futurity, especially with resistance to the institutional apotheosis of the family—something common to both Hawthorne and Brisbane's work. In one of his more eccentric moments in *The Theory of the Four Movements*—one that was no doubt influential upon Hawthorne as well as Brisbane and his disciples—while decrying “the discontents of men in the modern household,” Fourier declares,

In politics it is said that the might is right, but it is very different in domestic matters. The male is stronger, but by establishing isolated households, and the permanent marriage, which is its concomitant, he has not shaped the law to his own advantage. It is as if this order were the work of a third sex which wanted to condemn the other two to a life of discontent: could anything better than the isolated household and permanent marriage have been invented to introduce dullness, venality and treachery into relations of love and pleasure? (111)

For Fourier, unhappiness is the byproduct of institutional obligation overriding the pursuit of pleasure, and humans have not dismantled regulatory institutions such as monogamous marriage despite the fact that such marriages inherently require one to deny oneself sexual pleasure outside of the marital relationship—and, thereby, perhaps to deny oneself sexual pleasure altogether.¹⁸ However, more than simply requiring the denial of pleasure, the institutionality of monogamous marriage also devalues present pleasure in its inherent emphasis on reproductive futurity.

And yet despite the association of marriage and reproduction, the discourse on utopian socialism holds that the isolation of the household in permanent marriage results in a concomitant reduction in the physical production of labor. In both *Blithedale* and the writings of the American utopianists, the practice of familial isolation and the idealization of individual possession as virtues—phenomena associated by Hawthorne and the Fourierists with capitalism— not only represent ineffective aspects of industrial

¹⁸ On this topic, Fourier is a significant precursor to Frederick Engels, especially his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

production but also result in the inevitable alienation of the individual, not simply through unrewarding labor, but also as a result of the stifling of the passions. Just before the breakdown of relations between the Blithedale, Coverdale has another of his euphoric episodes, in which he looks upon a utopian geography that seems, for a moment, idyllic, but that even in his description shows its faults:

The Community were now beginning to form their permanent plans. One of our purposes was to erect a Phalanstery . . . where the great and general family should have its abiding-place. Individual members, too, who made it a point of religion to preserve the sanctity of an exclusive home, were selecting sites for their cottages, by the wood-side, or on the breezy swells, or in the sheltered nook of some little valley, according as their taste might lean towards snugness or the picturesque. (128)

In Coverdale's use of "The Community" as both a proper and a collective noun—one which requires a verb conjugated for the plural—he utilizes a grammar of unity that is nevertheless undercut by the incommensurability of the ideals of community and privatization demonstrated in his description. Not able even to achieve solidarity in geographic terms, the Blithedale community, which still imagines itself as pre-Fourierist at this stage, repeats the problem of Americanized Fourierism in its unwillingness to reject those institutions, such as marriage and the single-family household, that maintain the social status quo. While institutions are perhaps an inevitable consequence of "permanent plans," the lack of unanimous commitment to the Phalanx and the communal lifestyle it is intended to encourage represents the worst of foundational problems: the irresolvable and recurrent conflict between the promotion of free choice and the need to

systematize community organization.

This inability to move beyond the capitalist model results not only in familial isolation but also in the reintroduction of the identitarian divisions utopian socialism was supposed to resolve. For many residents of Blithedale, one of the major draws of communal living—for many, *the* major draw—is its promise of breaking with the hierarchies of American capitalist culture, a kind of economic queering intended to break down the barriers between classes so as to promote sociality among citizens who would normally be kept apart by circumstance of birth and of the market. In following the model of the socialist phalanx, as described by Fourier, class distinctions and their associated stereotypes would become moot in the leveling of economic difference, and sex-based distinctions between the abilities of men and women would likewise fade into a memory of a more primitive past. Gale Temple, however, contends that “the Blithedale experiment [is] less an act of withdrawal from mainstream life than an expression of yet another strain of quintessentially American rhetoric and longing,” that “the motivating engine behind the disruptions they feel is capitalism itself,” and that the Blithedale enterprise thus serves to further the production of privatized selves for middle-class men and to reinforce the hierarchies of capitalist culture (288).

This maintenance of class divisions can be observed, for example, when Coverdale is disturbed by Silas Foster, the representative figure of the working class, with his assertion that livestock should be purchased and that a gendered-division of labor should be enforced to ensure that the farm “compete with the market-gardeners round Boston”; it takes Coverdale by surprise that “after our separation from the greedy,

struggling, self-seeking world” there should be need “of getting the advantage over the outside barbarians, in their own field of labor” (20). He still clearly associates Silas with these “barbarians.” Indeed, the “grisly Silas Foster” presented “the first practical trial of our theories of equal brotherhood and sisterhood,” as “we people of superior cultivation and refinement” could not but leave “the laboring oar . . . with our unpolished companions; it being far easier to condescend, than to accept of condescension” (24). The “refined” residents of Blithedale never realized how much hard work their agrarian existence would be, and how little time is left for the life of the mind when the needs of the body consume every sunlight hour and more.¹⁹ The difficulty of resolving issues of class difference, which seemed a forgone conclusion for Coverdale at his arrival in Blithedale, prefigures other struggles to overcome normative systems in this romance, and this first large-scale failure of the utopian community is indicative of the interpersonal struggles that Hawthorne’s characters will face in their attempts to throw off normative anxieties in pursuit of personal pleasure.

This is exactly the problem that arises in the romantic relationship that the two male protagonists share early in the novel, one which is undermined by Hollingsworth’s

¹⁹ While the issue of class dissension reasserts itself a few times in the narrative, it never amounts to much in terms of the creation of conflict. It does however, as previously mentioned, serve as a sign of the persistence of capitalist culture into the utopian space of Blithedale, and the pursuit of capitalistic ends will ultimately serve as the undoing of the bonds between the four major characters: in particular, Zenobia and Hollingsworth. When Zenobia’s rivalry with Priscilla for the love of Hollingsworth ultimately results in feelings of betrayal for Zenobia, she suspects that Hollingsworth’s motivations are to a significant degree financial ones. After inquiring whether or not her former lover supposes her wealthy, she informs him (and suspects he already knows) of her new poverty before exclaiming, “I was willing to realize your dream, freely—generously, as some might think—but, at all events, fully—and heedless though it should prove the ruin of my fortune. If, in your own thoughts, you have imposed any conditions of this expenditure, it is you that must be held responsible for whatever is sordid and unworthy in them” (200).

duplicity in his capitalist aspirations and his reformist ambitions.²⁰ His ultimate goal is to replace Blithedale with a rehabilitation facility for criminals, returning himself and his “inmates” to normative, capitalist culture. We learn from an encounter late in the romance between Coverdale and Hollingsworth—who has now, in a move toward social respectability, taken the young purse-maker Priscilla as his lover—that the latter’s attempt to reform criminals has been unsuccessful. Coverdale inquires, “with a bitter and revengeful emotion, as if flinging a poisoned arrow at Hollingsworth’s heart,” “Up to this moment . . . how many criminals have you reformed?” “Not one!” he replies, “Ever since we parted, I have been busy with a single murderer!”—referring, of course, to himself, after Zenobia named him her murderer just before her suicide (243). Because Hawthorne could not imagine a scenario in which capitalism did not reassert itself, even within an attempt at a revolutionary Utopia, *The Blithedale Romance* could not but be a tale of the utopian project’s failure. Hollingsworth’s return to heteronormative existence within the world of capitalism exemplifies how Hawthorne’s ambivalence toward capitalism is an inversion of his ambivalence toward Fourierism: in the former, he recognizes the problems it brings about, such as despair and poverty (often through marriage), though he cannot imagine a world without it; in the latter, he appreciates its fantastic aspirations, though he cannot imagine a way of those fantasies coming into being in the world.

Though critique of capitalism was Brisbane’s primary objective in *Social Destiny*,

²⁰ On the suspicion of reformers in this romance, see Robert S. Levine’s *Conspiracy and Romance* and Peter J. Bellis’s *Writing Revolution*.

his followers began more explicitly to critique institutions of normative culture and, like Coverdale and his peers, tried to imagine ways of living outside of them. Marriage was the favorite target of the Fourierist publication industry in the nineteenth century.²¹

Brisbane, in his second book, simply called *Association*, informs us, “*Association will maintain the Family and Marriage Ties*; for they exist in the moral Nature of man, and any system which would destroy them, betrays an utter ignorance of his nature and true social principles”; but, “Those ties are now often outraged and broken by jarring discords, by quarrelsome ignorance, monotony, tyranny, drunkenness and other vices inherent in the present system of Society; but Association will correct these evils and give to the Family Union a purity, elevation and harmony, which it now rarely possesses” (9-10; emphasis in original). What the caveat makes clear is that, while some forms of coexistence called “marriage” and “family” will continue into the development of Associative living, only the name, and not the structure, will remain the same. Brisbane’s critique of sexual normativity in this passage is subtle: the “purity, elevation and harmony” to which Brisbane aspires in marriages and families are not characterized by Christian conceptions of heterosexual marital monogamy, but rather by the Fourierist pursuit of pleasure and variety (one of the highest passionate attractions, according to his theory), and his insertion of “monotony” into a central position in his list makes it easy to overlook. By removing their institutional and regulatory functions, Brisbane queers marriage and family by opening them up to the radical potential that the pursuit of pleasure provides.

²¹ One can find dozens of articles relating to this topic in both *The Phalanx* and *The Harbinger*.

In her *Albert Brisbane: A Mental Biography* (1893), Brisbane's wife, Redelia, offers her own marriage as exemplary of the revisionist principles of marital living. In her introduction, Redelia elaborates some of the idiosyncrasies of both her late husband and her unusual family life with him. About their marriage, she remarks,

True, it was my privilege for a brief period to stand nearer to Mr. Brisbane than any other; but the feeling of possession or ownership, so generally characteristic of the marital relation, never entered into my sentiment for him. He always seemed to belong to a greater than I. His very impersonality gave a certain abstraction to everything relating to him, and caused those nearest him to view him in a distinct light—apart from the ordinary domestic or social sphere. (9)

This characterization of the Brisbanes' marriage works on multiple levels: it establishes both husband and wife as partners rather than owners; it allows those partners a freedom of movement and exploration that a more traditional marriage would stifle; it offers a critique of capitalist culture, and private property in particular; it demonstrates, in Albert's mental abstractness, the value of not taking for granted what has been taken as the natural.

In an attempt to recount an incident that, in her eyes, exemplifies Albert's "capacity for mental absorption," Redelia describes an episode "which may seem incredible":

Getting into a street-car one day, [Albert] observed at its extreme end, sitting on the lap of her nurse, what appeared to him a very pretty little

girl. He was in a meditative mood, but every few moments his eye would vaguely and instinctively wander to the child. Finally he reached his destination and left the car, as did also the nurse, when suddenly he discovered that the mysteriously attractive child was his own. (11-12)

The scene of child-forgetting undercuts what we might expect to be a sentimental narrative of familial reunion and of the inevitable sense of emotional attachment and excitement our cultural narratives suggest the presence of family should bring out. This is reinforced by Redelia's lack of exclamation or chastisement; this is, to her mind, an exemplary and not a scandalous scene. But this cuts both ways: "To the same degree that Mr. Brisbane lacked the positive side of the lower psychical notes was he deficient on their negative side. . . . He could not resent a personal injury, and unfavorable criticism scarcely ever failed to suggest to his impartial mind a possibility of its truth" (12). The median emotional state in which Redelia claims her husband existed might, to some, represent a kind of indifference or coldness, but instead the assertion here seems to be that the over-sentimentalization of the family in U.S. culture has led to a larger surrender to emotionalism that undercuts the value of reason and denies the truth that engaging the mind in activities other than the reinforcement of sentimental bonds might better serve not only the cause of humanity but the individual as well.²²

Perhaps more than any other theoretical claim, thought on Fourierism, whether from Hawthorne or from the American Fourierists, bears out an interest in candor in

²² On the culture of sentiment versus the culture of reason in the United States, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*. While Douglas has perhaps rightly been criticized for placing the blame of this cultural trend largely on women writers of the nineteenth century, her arguments against sentimental culture remain provocative today.

representations of desire, and, if the parallel was not already obvious, the mass of textual production that falls under the rubric “queer theory” has consistently maintained a similar truth-claim: that candor in discourse is central to ethical living. In his seminal work *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner argues for the necessity of “a frank embrace of queer sex in all its indignity, together with a frank challenge to the damaging hierarchies of respectability”: “Were we to recognize the diversity of what we call sexuality with the kind of empathic realism in which many queers are unsurpassed, the result would not be separatism, and could not be, because it would give us no view of who ‘we’ are apart from the fact that there are a lot of non-normative sexualities in the world” (74-75). The “queer” is nevertheless both capacious and ubiquitous, and exploring the lives and ideas of those who have rejected heteronormativity can tell us as much about the mainstream, and what supports its existence, as it does about the marginal. And, writing with Lauren Berlant, Warner observes, “Queer commentary shows that much of what passes for general culture is riddled with heteronormativity. Conversely, many of the issues of queerness have more general relevance than one is normally encouraged to think” (“Queer Theory” 349). By reversing the typical oppositional narrative of sexuality, queer thinkers posit the non-normative as the omnipresent, leaving “normative” heterosexuality and its institutions as the superficial center that, if we were to tell the truth about our urges and wants, could not hold. This emphasis on honesty and the ubiquity of dissidence (sexual and otherwise) is, I believe, a common bond between the antebellum romance, Fourierism, and queer theory.

“Minor” Poetry

In light of this reevaluation of the minority as the majority, we might do well to remember that Coverdale is described to us in *Blithedale*'s preface as a “Minor Poet, beginning life with strenuous aspirations, which die out with his youthful fervor” (2-3); indeed, the narrative of *Blithedale* represents something of this decline, as the “frosty bachelor” who serves as the first-person narrator and fictional author of the text is a pale specter of the ambitious and vital youth we meet early in the romance (9). The discourse of writing in this romance is key to understanding how his queer aesthetic—an aesthetic of the minor—is facilitated *and* inhibited by Coverdale's narration. In his struggle to articulate truth, Coverdale finds that the desire to speak is always paired with the possibility of misspeaking, or of being misunderstood, or of being admonished. That private/public boundary requires mediation through language, expectation, mores, and a host of forms of public policing that are not always at work within our private fantasies, and it is the difficulty of mediation that haunts Coverdale in his attempts to produce true poetry. Like Hawthorne and Brisbane, Coverdale seeks to represent truth in his writing, and this means negotiating the omnipresence of non-normative desires for public presentation within normative culture.

In his essay “The Poet,” Emerson describes his subject as “the man of beauty” whose “problem is great, for the poet is representative”: “He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth” (448).²³ He stands among men Emerson describes as “minors” as the accomplished

²³ Capitalization of the word “Poet” in this article is intended to distinguish the professional poet, like

individual and yet must also be a Poet of minors, speaking both for and to them, a idealized exception for which others can strive but never meet—and yet they must see themselves in him. By asking his Poet to speak in a universalized voice, Emerson requires a representative individualism that bridges the gap between man and his word.²⁴ In his epistemology of the human mind, Emerson claims that all of humanity has sensory knowledge of the world around them, but for most of us, something gets lost in the translation to language; he reports, “in our experience, the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the production of themselves in speech.” The gift of the Poet, then, is not merely one of perception but an ability to serve as a medium for the natural world, acting as a vessel through which external stimuli are directly yet beautifully rendered in the form of language. We are told, “The poet is the person in whom these powers [of sense and speech] are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart it” (448). The poet is thus as much a vehicle for the sensual world as an artist rendering his own vision of it, a kind of ambivalent figure, caught in the act of working out exactly what it means to be a “liberating god” (461).²⁵

The seeming impossibility of the Poet’s task and the undecidability of his

Coverdale, from the idealized Poet of Emerson’s essay.

²⁴ Emerson’s Poet is decidedly male. I will follow Emerson’s gendering of this figure by using the masculine pronoun universally in my analysis of his essay, though I will revert to properly gender-neutral pronouns elsewhere.

²⁵ Emerson uses the phrase as a statement on the Poet’s use of and relation to mythological types and as a claim regarding the significance of “liberty” to the role of the poet and his function in human society.

representative status—speaking both for humanity and for the universe while remaining himself an artist—lead to a certain amount of ambivalence on the subjects of the use of poetry and of the purpose of the Poet.²⁶ David Van Leer notes a seeming disparity between “The Poet” and the larger Emerson corpus, explaining how in this essay Emerson’s “preoccupation with the single great man . . . seems far from the pluralism of the other essays,” positioning the Poet awkwardly both outside and among the masses, a representative minority within the majority (63). The Poet is a symbol of freedom and serves an emancipatory function in human society, yet his mode of artistic production would seem to leave him bound to the world, subject to nature, stuck somewhere between acting as the generator of the world and merely its genius. Emerson claims, “We love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded to us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene” (463). In his role as civic leader, the poet is of the people and loved by the people—a source of identification for the populace that is nevertheless not identical with them; the audience is liberated by the Poet’s work and yet cannot share in the freedom his connection to the Universal provides. Likewise, the Poet’s representative role means that even while he must be exemplary *for* the people, he must also be exemplary *of* the people, bound by the rules and norms that shape human societies. While it may be the case that the Poet is the ultimate symbol of freedom of expression, his ambassadorial role

²⁶ In a reading of the essay characteristic of his assertion that Emerson seeks to display “the enhancement of freedom through the loss of private and public control,” Christopher Newfield resolves this tension by asserting that Emerson’s Poet merely “transcribes the law” (5; 51). Richard Poirier’s reading contradicts this starkly, taking an opposing view in which the Poet is the very symbol of freedom: “He is supposed to be simply and magnificently himself in whatever he chooses to do” (22). To different readers, the Poet symbolizes either the evacuation of individuated selfhood or its fullest realization.

means that his speech must not go unchecked into the world.

In Emerson's estimation, the Poet is the highest form of human being, a model to the rest of us of the possibility of human achievement, and yet, as Lawrence Buell summarily states, "No human, no modern human anyhow, seems able to reach the poet's lofty plateau" (120). I want to further this caveat, adding that not only is the Emersonian ideal of the Poet an impossibility in terms of human capability but also that Emerson's Poet represents a kind of epistemological incoherence. The double-bind of the Poet, it would seem, is that he must be both self and other, depicting in his work worlds both internal and external, free for self-expression only in as much as that expression does not violate his status as representative for his people. Van Leer suggests that in Emerson's portrayal, "the poet is less the sayer of beauty than himself the beautiful thing"; in the critic's estimation, the essay describes a cyclical system in which the image of the Poet is derived from exactly the kind of vision that one needs a Poet to elucidate properly. In a moment of hesitation, Emerson admits, "adequate expression is rare. I know not how it is that we need an interpreter; but the great majority of men seem to be *minors*, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature" (448; emphasis added). The admitted rarity of true Poets, coupled with Emerson's surprising inability to offer any definitive example of a poetic career drawn from history,²⁷ leads us, I believe, to conclude that the Emersonian Poet represents an impossibility in terms of literary production, an idealized poetics that no work of art nor its maker could ever achieve.

²⁷ We need only look at *Representative Men* to see how much Emerson enjoys examples.

Emerson's abstract Poet represents exactly the type of authorial ideal to which Coverdale aspires in *The Blithedale Romance*. In his attempts disclose fantasies of intimacies not recognized or legitimated within heteronormative culture, Coverdale attempts to represent the ubiquity of non-normative desire, and yet must negotiate his representation of the minor within a culture of minors. In Emersonian terms, "minor" subjects are those who have "not yet come into possession of their own," who have not yet achieved the self-actualization and self-reliance required to attain the status of Poet. The concept of "the minor" thus might function, in social and aesthetic senses, as that which is not fully possessed of the rights and responsibilities of the social or that which falls short in terms of achievement. But "minor" might also function in a subversive way, signifying that which goes unacknowledged or unrecognized, that which is outside of the majority or the norm. By performing a reading that transcends the banal to the subversive, we might read Coverdale not as a "minor poet" but as a "poet of the minor," albeit one who leaves both his readers and himself wanting, never able to demonstrate the secret generality of non-normativity.

This is not to say that the poet's status as a minor in the banal sense is without consequence. Upon learning of Coverdale's departure for Blithedale, Moodie begins to inquire of him after the women's rights advocate Zenobia, but the old man hesitates, declaring, "perhaps I had better apply to some older gentleman, or to some lady, if you would have the kindness to make me known to one, who may happen to be going to Blithedale. You are a young man!" (7). Here, youth figures as minoritizing for Coverdale, operating as both a sign of inexperience and vulnerability, or so it would

seem; Moodie never explains why Coverdale's youth is a problem. Indeed, Moodie's hesitancy provokes a kind of gendered anxiety in the young man, who declares, "But what can this business be, Mr. Moodie? It begins to interest me; especially your hint that a lady's influence might be found desirable" (7). But Coverdale misreads Moodie's statement: the older gentleman does not suggest that a woman would be ideal for his task, but instead that a woman would simply be better suited for it than Coverdale. Less than a lady, Coverdale also describes himself as inferior to the "older man . . . Mr. Hollingsworth, who has three or four years the advantage of me in age, and is a much more solid character, and a philanthropist to boot" (7). Whether the solidity of Hollingsworth's character is a result of age or aptitude is not clear, but whatever the cause, Coverdale's feelings of inadequacy, of feeling minor, serve as a recurring trope in the romance, whether relating to the status of his masculinity or his authorial abilities.

The romance's introduction informs us that Coverdale's "strenuous [poetic] aspirations . . . die out with his youthful fervor" (3), and yet even in this early episode of the romance, he admits his deficiency, declaring, "I am only a poet, and, so the critics tell me, no great affair at that!" (7). However, this critical evaluation is sloughed off once Coverdale arrives at Blithedale and actually meets Zenobia, after whom Moodie asked, and she turns out to be quite an admirer of the young poet's skill: "I have long wished to know you, Mr. Coverdale, and to thank you for your beautiful poetry, some of which I have learned by heart;—or, rather, it has stolen into my memory, without my exercising any choice or volition about the matter" (14). The young writer's infectious poetry has had such an effect on Zenobia that she is momentarily troubled by Coverdale's presence

at the commune, privileging her taste for his work over the good he might do the community: “You do not think of relinquishing an occupation in which you have done yourself so much credit. I would rather give you up, as an associate, than that the world should be deprived of one of its true poets!” Echoing Emersonian ideals of the Poet, Coverdale assures his compatriot,

there will not be the slightest danger of that . . . I hope, on the contrary, now, to produce something that shall really deserve to be called poetry—true, strong, natural, and sweet, as is the life which we are going to lead—something that shall have the notes of the wild-birds twittering through it, or a strain like the wind-anthems in the woods, as the case may be! (14)

He imagines that rather than staying his tongue, Blithedale will provide him with a limitless number of muses, from the organic to the ethereal, and will elevate his status above that of “minor poet.”

Freedom to write—and to write what one wants—is primary among the attractions of the utopian experiment for the romancer, and the liberty the community promises suggests that one need not concern oneself with consumer markets or conservative political culture. Gillian Brown explains, “One permutation of work ethics in utopianist and reformist thought is thus the alignment of true self-expression with leisure, a principle following from the redefinition of leisure as a nonconsumerist activity and value” (109-110). The fantasy of leisure that the utopian community inspires—a fantasy that will give way within this romance to the reality of the daily toil agrarian living requires—is not only of the free time necessary to create but the freedom of speech

that the Poet's idealization of self-expression makes desirable. Becoming a true (or major) Poet, Coverdale imagines nature will flow through his mind into his poetic works, producing a universalized example of individual experience. His poetry will, he believes, ring with "natural" truth as a result of the simple living he will experience at Blithedale. In Coverdale's theory of poetry, as in Emerson's, the true and the natural are one, and the poet is their conduit into the world of verse. Though it is true Coverdale is involved in another form of "making" through the social project of Blithedale, the goal of writing remains a constant throughout his stay at the phalanx.

Yet over time even Zenobia comes to doubt Coverdale as a poet—and perhaps the poetic endeavor more generally—as she presumes that her worldliness enables a practical empiricism that can grasp at the truth of the world with greater accuracy than the transcendental Poet. Zenobia breaks from Emersonian understandings of the Poet, seeing poetry instead as a mere medium for amusement rather than capturing any as-yet-unspoken truths about the world. After the appearance at Blithedale of Hollingsworth and the beautiful Priscilla, who finds herself passively positioned at the center of multiply triangulated networks of desire, Zenobia suggests that Coverdale "had better turn the affair" of her arrival "into a ballad," "Since you see the young woman in so poetical a light." The story of their entrance into the phalanx on a dark and stormy evening would, she proposes, make a good subject for a fanciful tale, and her reductive assessment of poetry as nothing more than mere entertainment is punctuated by her assertion that after the ballad has been composed, Zenobia "will favor you with my idea as to what the girl really is." Coverdale seems to confirm his inadequacy, pleading for Zenobia's acute

perception: “Pray let me have it now . . . It shall be woven into the ballad.” Whereas Coverdale rhapsodizes over Priscilla’s beauty, Zenobia perceives her—accurately, some might say—to be “neither more nor less . . . than a seamstress from the city, and she has probably no more transcendental purpose than to do my miscellaneous sewing”; in Zenobia’s estimation, Priscilla is so commonplace in every capacity other than her beauty that “she will hardly expect to make my dresses” (33). Zenobia’s pragmatism, she seems to imply, enables a worldly perception that supercedes what she believes to be the escapism of poetry. She teases, “I am afraid you did not make a song, to-day, while loading the hay-cart . . . as Burns did, when he was reaping barley,” and later, “Your literature . . . will be the Farmer’s Almanac” (66-67). Enduring such belittling, Coverdale feels reduced to a mere verse-maker, and then a laboring nonentity. He capitulates, “Our labor symbolized nothing” (66).

While Coverdale certainly wants to become a better poet, the text positions him as lacking not so much in ability as in subject. It is with his production of the *Blithedale* narrative that he truly becomes a “minor” writer through his recounting of the intimate relationships he experiences while in residence at the commune. Lauren Berlant describes “minor intimacies,” those intimacies that aspire to recognition in public narratives of life but are shunned or ignored, as “forced to develop aesthetics of the extreme to push [stable cultural] spaces into being by way of small and grand gestures” (*Intimacy* 5). The romance represents an extreme in its creation of a literary space for the author in which, according to *Blithedale*’s preface, “the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the

actual events of real life” (1); Blithedale the fictional locale represents an extreme in its removal “from the highway of ordinary travel,” geographically outlying but also radical in its philosophies of sociality and economy (1). Producing a kind of “safe space” for expressions of queer desire, the romance and the community it portrays enact a form of abstraction that on the one hand provides plausible deniability through admissions of fantastic or experimental status but also, in that same insistence upon experimentation and fantasy, threatens the commonplace elision of heteronormativity and reality.

Bringing the minor to the fore, *The Blithedale Romance*, especially in its first half, records a series of daring claims about intimate life and the potential for human existence outside of both capitalism and heteronormativity (which are intimately intertwined in its depiction), but the text never quite gets over the anxieties brought on by the failure of the Blithedale community ever to become fully insular with regard to old systems of exchange and familiar patterns of human bonding.

On Endings

Perhaps it goes without saying, then, that *The Blithedale Romance* ends badly. The last chapter of *Blithedale*, entitled “Miles Coverdale’s Confession,” simply peters out into an unconvincing and stammering profession of heterosexual love: Coverdale tells us, “There is one secret—I have concealed it all along, and never meant to let the least whisper of it escape—one foolish little secret [. . .] I—I myself—was in love—with—Priscilla!” (247). For a narrator who has been rather loquacious throughout, who has never found himself coming up short on detail or fumbling for words, Coverdale becomes

uncharacteristically dumbstruck when he reveals his ultimate confession of love, further discrediting what already sounds like a lie.²⁸ In his supposed attempt to tell the truth about his affective life while a member of the Blithedale community, Coverdale finds himself incapable of speaking freely, almost incapable of speaking at all. His stutter leads readers to question the veracity not only of the confession but also of the reliability of Coverdale as a narrator throughout the romance.²⁹

Unable to tell the truth—that his primary amorous relationship at Blithedale was in fact with Hollingsworth—the narrative makes clear that the policing function of

²⁸ According to Gordon Hutner, “Even if the reader could take Coverdale at his word, the final confession completes the narrative by making a closure out of a problematic act of disclosure. This personal act bespeaks the secrets of public life, for the ‘one secret’ is not so much the identity of Coverdale’s beloved as it is the general social, political, and cultural nature of his delusion” (117). While Hutner’s attempt to make clear why Coverdale’s confession is so confounding yet telling for readers, Stacey Margolis offers the following interpretation: “The rather anticlimactic confession of Coverdale’s love actually represents in stark terms the imagined effects of associative life; it is a way of suggesting that someone else’s love story might, in fact, turn out to be one’s own love story after all” (50). While both emphasize the significance of outside influence to the realization of desire, Hutner’s assertion that Coverdale’s coming out, as it were, represents a “delusion” comes much closer to my claims about Coverdale’s need for confession, whereas Margolis reads it as a truth of the heart that has simply taken a while to achieve recognition as one’s own desire—and not merely envy of another. David Leverenz suggests that Hollingsworth’s confession might be an admission either of his admiration of Priscilla’s awkward domination of Hollingsworth in the romance’s final scenes or of his identification with the downtrodden Hollingsworth (252). Leverenz also provokes a queer reading of the text in which Coverdale’s love for his friend is overridden by “terror of being penetrated and possessed” by him (251).

²⁹ There is a long tradition in Hawthorne criticism of calling into question the veracity of the ending, with some critics arguing that the true object of Coverdale’s affection is the feminist and gender-nonconformist Zenobia. Critics in this line include Claire Sprague, Donald Ross, and Leland Person. None of these critics, however, tend toward a queer reading of the text; Person, in fact, claims “Coverdale’s climactic confession of his love for Priscilla appears to displace Zenobia in his narrative and in his emotional life . . . But Coverdale’s own words belie the very conclusion he hints at” (159).

Jonathan Arac, however, takes Coverdale at his word (yet also acknowledging the anticlimactic quality of the ‘confession’ by placing it inside quotation marks), claiming, “The ‘confession’ [. . .] explains the bitterly ironic tone that at times inflects the narrative, for Coverdale seeks to distance himself from the pain of lost love, which has made his last years increasingly barren and frustrated.” In the extra-textual life narrative that Arac constructs for Coverdale, the period between his taking leave of Blithedale and his narration of the romance that is *Blithedale* is filled with romantic despair and loneliness, and Arac’s Coverdale looks back upon his Blithedale days with a sense of nostalgia, not because they represent a moment in which he was participating in a radical world-making project but because he, like Theodore in Zenobia’s tale of “The Silvery Veil,” can look upon a particular period in his life as a mark that is both the moment for the potential fulfillment of a romanticized version of reproductive futurity and its failure. This is, Arac believes, the impetus for Coverdale’s writing of the text.

heteronormativity persisted even in the supposedly progressive culture of Blithedale and into Coverdale's post-Blithedale authorial solitude; within Hawthorne's milieu, a profession of heterosexual love, even a dubious one, seemed the only way this narrative could have ended. In his psychoanalytic reading of Hawthorne's prefaces, Joseph Adamson remarks, "In each of the prefaces [. . .] Hawthorne expresses a wish for a cooperative audience, a wish that reflects a fear of showing his inner self, or *inmost me*," borrowing a phrase from "The Custom House" (54; emphasis in original). It seems fitting then that *Blithedale* would end with a stutter, as we imagine fear is a common cause for stuttering, and Coverdale's attempt to redeem his narrative through a heteronormative disavowal of his affection for Hollingsworth seems cowardly, to say the least. Stuttering is anti-narrative—still it tells us something significant about the narrative itself.³⁰ Readers already doubt the content of Coverdale's confession of love for Priscilla; that the confession takes the form of stuttering makes it entirely unbelievable. It is also surprising, given Coverdale's authorship of the narrative, that the stutter persists into the written text. I want to claim that we hear in Coverdale's stutter the moment of radical possibility entering the realm of speech. It marks not simply the anxiety of public articulation but the desire to articulate something else that has not yet been spoken, for which there might not yet be right words.

The inability to reconcile queer fantasy to lived experience is, I believe, the "closeted" theme of Hawthorne's romance, always resonating from within the text but

³⁰ In her important essay on Melville's *Billy Budd*, Barbara Johnson notes the multivalent ways in which Billy's stutter both "'mars' the plot" and "constitutes it" (87). "At those moments," she tells us, "the constative or referential content is eclipsed; language conveys only its own empty, mechanical functioning" and nevertheless serve as the cause for meaning (94).

never able to attain full recognition. D.H. Lawrence in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* insists on a homosexual reading of the romance; he goes so far as to insist that the love story between Coverdale and Hollingsworth is in fact the central plot of the novel: “The two men love one another with a love surpassing the love of women.” He believes that the major conflict in the novel is not so much the doomed struggle to maintain the Blithedale community but Coverdale’s anger over the “tyrannous monomania” of Hollingsworth (114). If it is not accurate to say that homosexuality existed as such at this time, it is clear that a kind of heteronormativity did, and it asserts itself blatantly within this romance in the heteronormatively conciliatory confession of Coverdale’s love for Priscilla tossed off at the narrative’s end.

Much about the workings of sexuality in the romance can be gleaned from Zenobia’s retelling of the story of “The Silvery Veil,” a story that also ends with a narrative stutter, a hesitation that undoes the queer futurity her story promises. The Veiled Lady’s suitor, Theodore, can either demonstrate his love for her, which he seems already to feel, by kissing her through the veil, or he can see her face, thereby visually confirming that his desire has not led him outside the domain of the normative; he will judge by sight whether or not the “mysterious creature” obscured behind the veil is a woman of marriageable quality (112). But there is a catch: she allows that Theodore may lift the veil, but warns, “from that instant . . . I am doomed to be thy evil fate; nor wilt thou ever taste another breath of happiness!” But rather than playing along with the dangerous script of delayed disclosure—which his “natural tendency . . . toward

scepticism” [sic] has already convinced him to doubt—Theodore gives up the prospect of fantasy in the name of securing normative futurity for himself (113). He feels his desire in a moment of pre-socialized fantasy, but the need to ensure social approbation short-circuits his desire, requiring that he perform the very action that he has been forewarned will separate him forever from his fantasy-object. That hesitation on his part, his request for visual confirmation, represents *the moment of the normative*, in which desire is sacrificed at the altar of social expectation, leading him into unhappiness and solitude. In this reading, the lady’s veil not only negotiates the public/private division of her body—always on display in her performances yet maintained “in a bondage which is worse to me than death” by the veil, leading to a lack of self-possession—but also demonstrates how the desiring subject’s private longings and fantasies are regulated by public narratives of relationality and reproductive futurity (113).³¹

The Veiled Lady serves as a queer object of queer desire in the story: unknowable but alluring, offering fantasy in place of the guarantees of normative sociability and heterosexual productivity. To desire her while she remains within the veil is necessarily to flirt with that which is outside the bounds of heteronormativity because she avows no certainties outside of desire itself, but to commune with her, one must cast aside the anxieties that reproductive futurity instills. Romantic projects (both love and literary romances) are obliterated, or so the story’s allegorical work would have it, when external anxieties override the potential to live out fantasies. This model extends beyond Zenobia’s folk story into the daily operations and relations of Blithedale and its residents.

³¹ Stacy Margolis explains, “Her veil, rather than a form of protection from the public eye, represents both her complete passivity and her vulnerability to such influence” (44).

Like the story of the Veiled Lady, Blithedale and the fantasies of non-normative socialization it represents are ultimately dismantled by outside society's intrusions into personal life in the form of capitalistic and moralistic anxieties.

Theodore surrenders queer futurity because he dismisses it as a trifle, as minor, as something not to be taken seriously. For him, visions of the future can exist only in the social security that heteronormativity provides, such that he dismisses the possibilities for pleasure that the non-normative can provide. He fails to heed the Veiled Lady's promise that its rejection will lead to future unhappiness, a lesson that Coverdale and Hollingsworth learn all too well. But Coverdale, acting as the Poet of the minor, ends the vision of the future with which I began by imagining the Blithedalers as existing in a queer temporality, in which they all "figure heroically in an Epic Poem" for future generations, and he will "bend unseen over the future poet, and lend him inspiration, while he writes it" (129). Rather than imposing himself on the poet in the mode of reproductive futurity, Coverdale seeks only to admire the future poet's productions. The feelings of admiration Coverdale imagines the future poet will have for the founders result not in an attempt to recapture them but to produce fantastic visions of them that are, like *Blithedale*, inspired by the past that is revisited only in service of the present community. The *visionary affect* of Coverdale and Hollingsworth—which allowed Coverdale to envision an alternative social world in which their intense desires can be acknowledged publicly and are able to attain recognition as valid ways of living—has, in his vision of the future poet, supplanted heteronormativity through founding of a community in which feelings of queer futurity have altered both intimate relations and

communal senses of propriety and pleasure. And it is because of his commitment to both social critique and imaginative possibilities—represented in his theory of the romance and enacted in his fiction—that I believe we might see the correspondence between Hawthorne’s romance and contemporary queer theory. The former were written in a moment when fantasy and its potential for radical change emerged in the public sphere as a response to national crisis; queer thinkers must write now in the hope that we might do similar work. Through *Blithedale*, Hawthorne demonstrates that aspiring to envision a future does not mean dictating what it will become.

CHAPTER 2

QUEERS WITHOUT BORDERS:

DESIRE, LOCATION, AND THE IMPERIALIST ROMANCE

The scene of the imperial encounter has long been central to analyses of Western imperialism, and theories of colonialism have taken the nationalized and racialized negotiation of self and Other to be central to Western thought since at least the early modern era. Central to these imperialist texts is the production of “contact zones,” to use Mary Louise Pratt’s term, “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (8).¹ “The objective of colonial discourse,” Homi Bhabha tells us, “is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (70). But what about imperialist texts without such contact zones—those texts in which imperial or colonial discourse is ubiquitous, and yet the representation of the cultural contact zone is somehow excluded from the text, or at least relegated to the position of textual bookend,

¹ On the representation of the colonial encounter in literature, see also Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism*; Laura E. Franey, *Victorian Travel Writing and Imperial Violence*; Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*; Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism*; Edward Said, *Orientalism*; and David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*.

or in which the negotiation of colonizer/colonized never truly gets underway?

The marginalization of contact zones occurs in the three antebellum romances under consideration here: Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Lucy Holcombe Pickens's *The Free Flag of Cuba* (1854), and Mary Peabody Mann's *Juanita: A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago* (c.1847; 1887).² All three texts endorse some form of American imperial ambition, yet all three also spend much more textual real estate working through issues of social propriety, domesticity, and, most important for my purposes, sexuality. As the work of Ann Laura Stoler and Amy Kaplan has made clear, all three of these issues have played important roles in the spread of imperialism,³ and yet the three romances I want to consider here deal with these issues in ways that often circumvent exertions of imperial power, focusing instead on fantasies of homosocial and often homoerotic bonds between Western subjects. For these authors, the imperial enterprise did not promise to be an erotic one, at least not within the contact zone model.

Sex, as recent criticism has made clear, plays a vital role in imperial projects, and it is most often understood as reinforcing normative identities. Cross-racial sexual encounters were enabled by the power structures of imperial culture, but the simultaneous promotion of stereotypes of the lasciviousness of non-white peoples ensured that the moral inferiority and attendant sexual availability of the colonized in the Western mind

² Though Mann's romance was not published until 1887, it was largely composed during the 1850s, and because of its claims to the status of romance (a form Mann would have known well; she was Nathaniel Hawthorne's sister-in-law) as well as its abolitionist agenda, it makes sense to read it as an antebellum text.

³ See Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*; Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*; and Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*.

would remain in tact. Ania Loomba asserts that the spread of Western imperial power represented a “promise of sexual pleasure,” one that “exploited inequities of class, age, gender, race, and power” in encounters both heterosexual and homosexual (158).⁴ While exploitation is no doubt part of both normative and transgressive sexual practices at home as well as abroad, the geographic, political, and economically complex yet rigid structure of imperial power ensures that, even when sex exceeds the bounds of racial propriety, it is nevertheless incorporated as the exception that proves the rule of white racial superiority.⁵ However, even if cross-racial sex might be improper, it is not inherently “queer,” as it works to enforce heteronormativity, policing cultural boundaries even as it crosses them. The texts I consider, however, move outside of this understanding of imperialist sexual freedom to explore other ways in which imperialism creates spaces of erotic experimentation.

The romances under discussion here are unambiguously imperialist, embodying feelings of national and racial superiority to those Others encountered during imperialist ventures; they also, however, exemplify a displeasure with antebellum American sexual culture in their representations of homosocial and homoerotic relationships that supercede normative relations. In these romances, the most frequently exploited aspect of American imperialism is not the power differential between the imperialist and the subjugated but the sexual segregation that is often part of imperial undertakings. Because Western men often departed without women for the outward reaches of the empire, imperialism

⁴ On homosexual projection through Orientalist fantasies, see Joseph A. Boone, “Vacation Cruises; or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism.”

⁵ See Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, esp. 41-55.

frequently resulted in the production of all-male or all-female worlds, such that a kind of intimate bonding could occur between members of the same sex that might be judged improper otherwise. Men alone together on ships; women left to their own devices in “empty” houses; solitary travelers, male and female, in imperialized spaces whose sense of moral and racial boundaries are repeatedly called into question: the characters that populate these romances find themselves sometimes awkwardly but almost always pleasurably isolated with other Westerners of their gender, and the desire that is exchanged between these characters represents an ideal of sexual freedom that is, perhaps ironically, enabled by the imperial endeavor, in that it is productive of spaces in which queer affect can flourish.

Despite the prominence of queer feelings in imperialist romances, it is not the case that heteronormativity does not assert itself. The rejection of reproductive futurity in Poe’s *Pym* results in an indissoluble linkage between death and homoeroticism, such that Pym finds himself fantasizing increasingly more gruesome *and* increasingly more erotic scenes of death alongside his male compatriots. Pickens’s heroines resolve themselves to marriage as a necessity for social respectability and financial security, yet they relish their separation from their partners and bask in imagining the honor they would receive as the widows of war heroes. Mann sees her primary targets of critique, slaveholders and promiscuous women, as devaluing the bodies of the women with whom she becomes increasingly infatuated; her heroine, however, tries out various fantasies of queer equality apart from the systems of power that corrupt both desire and morality, though she is never able to locate a sustainable space of freedom, as culture norms of domination seem

inescapable for more than a brief while. In each of these romances, sexual segregation creates a new kind of “contact zone,” in which queer fantasies can be realized, though only because of a deterritorialization of meaning, to borrow a concept from Deleuze and Guattari, such that new subversive meanings are given to the domestic and commercial spaces in which the narratives unfold, even while maintaining normative meanings of space.⁶ The sexual experimentation enabled by these queer reclamations of space offers an uncomfortable parallel to imperialist conquests of other spaces, yet I contend that we need not overlook the libratory function of the first because of the violence inherent in the latter. These queer byproducts of imperialism tell us much about how these writers theorized the relationship between sexual self-expression, heteronormative culture, and privatized spaces through their erotic fantasies, which most often overlook—for a while, at least—racialized disparities of power in favor of demonstrating how the crossing of geographic boundaries manifest in imperialism also enabled, for some, crossings of the boundaries of normative sexual culture.

(Dis)Location and Death

In his seminal work on “location” in the discourse of imperialism, Homi Bhabha

⁶ On deterritorialization of meaning, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, esp. 8-12. Deterritorialization is a component of their rhizomatic concept of semiotics, in which “A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (7). Under this linguistic system, the rhizome “contains lines of segmentarity [of meaning] according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees” (9). In the romances I am discussing, spaces of normative meaning are constantly deterritorialized in that they retain traces of their original meanings, as commercial and domestic spaces, but they are made to signify queerly as well, such that spaces of privatization become private not in a proprietary sense but in a much as they provide privacy from the policing of heteronormative culture.

describes existence within imperial cultures as characterized by a sense of “unhomeliness,” an “estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world” in which “the recesses of domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between the home and the world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (9). We might do well to see a kind of homology between Bhabha’s notion of “the unhomely” and the contemporary concept of “the queer.” If the queer is by definition the anti-normative, and the domestic space of the familial home is generally taken to be the locus of normative existence, then queers are by necessity outcasts from the “homely,” and are often literally cast out: of homes, of lives, of the coherence of identity that senses of belonging provide. Proscribed from so much of both private and public existence, queers have had to reclaim spaces for sexual liberty where they could. They seek to make lives and connect with others where they can, and their revaluation and reclamation of spaces both private and public make location central to the formation of queerness in and around U.S. culture. But in the nineteenth century, when notions of “manifest destiny” seemed a reality, the possibility of territorial expansion meant a corresponding potential for new spaces of freedom, and some queer visions for freedom took on an imperialist tone.

Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is such a vision. Though scenes of imperialist contact do not arise until late in the text, the epistemology of imperialism permeates the narrative, enabling a sense of entitled, borderless selfhood that repeats normative notions of race even while it seeks to demonstrate the ways in which

desire meets up against the regulatory policing of heteronormativity. This cognitive dissonance is pervasive in the narrative and manifests itself in the production of queer gothic fantasies, fantasies aimed at representing the non-normative but unable to shake off the anxieties of normative culture.⁷ As such, *Pym*'s theorization of the workings of sexuality—that so-called non-normative sexualities are in fact irrepressible facts of culture, facts that heteronormative culture seeks to suppress—produces an enlightening parallel to recent movements in queer theory, driven by Lee Edelman's reinsertion of the Freudian "death drive" to a place of prominence in criticism of sexuality. For Edelman, "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability"; it is "the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within" (9). In his reading of Poe, Eric Savoy argues that Poe "situate[s] the literally dead in relation to the traumatic shattering of the protagonist's ego" (184). In what follows, I want to proceed with a consideration *Pym* noting Poe's prefiguring of Freud's notion of the death drive by creating a character, Pym, who persistently obsesses over death, producing ever more exotic and erotic scenes of demise. Pym's queer desire figures as an excess within heteronormative culture, and Poe cannot but represent this struggle against normative life narratives as a quest for death.

But to achieve such scenes of death, *Pym* engages in a chiasmatic construction of

⁷ According to George Haggerty, "Gothic fiction is . . . about the fact of desire itself. And throughout these works this desire is expressed as the exercise of (or resistance to) power. But that power is itself charged with a sexual force—a sexuality—that determines the action and gives it shape" (2). In gothic fiction, "queer . . . is the manner in which normative sexual relations are articulated and codified" (3). In *Pym*, the desire for queer freedom is coupled with a sense of American imperial entitlement, and the protagonist struggles against the regulatory power of American heteronormativity and simultaneously asserts the righteousness of the nation's imperial power.

terms. Whereas life is stagnant and repetitive to Pym, death, or the threat of death, is a kind of vitality; to his mind, you only really live when you're dying. Georges Bataille theorizes eroticism as "assenting to life up to the point of death," such that eroticism exceeds the "natural goal" (his term) of reproduction. Though the erotic represents "an exuberance of life," its pleasures are "not alien to death" (11). Bataille, like Poe, is captivated by the notion of continuities and discontinuities of selfhood, and he comes to understand the erotic as apart from reproductive activities. As in Poe's romance, furthermore, Bataille's notion of eroticism takes shape as a reactive force against the perceived pragmatism of reproductive sexuality. But Bataille makes a key reversal of the terms of continuity in Edelman's theory; whereas reproductive futurity is, for Edelman, an instantiation of the desire for continuity of the self, reproduction is, for Bataille, the touchstone example of the discontinuity of the self, and deathly eroticism serves as a form of continuity of the self that exceeds the limits of cultures of life:

Reproduction implies the existence of *discontinuous* beings.

Beings which reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents. Each being is distinct from all others. . . .

But I cannot refer to this gulf which separates us without feeling that it is not the whole truth of the matter. (12-13)

Bataille acknowledges that, although this gulf of selfhoods cannot be done away with, "we can experience its dizziness together. It can hypnotize us. . . . This fascination is the dominant element in eroticism" (13). Because we are forced to acknowledge others as

limits of our own life, incapable of incorporation into the self, our erotic fantasies tend toward union with others, which represents, paradoxically, both the demise of selfhood and the extension of the self's continuity. It is the desire for intimate relations that exceed reproductive models that drives Pym from home, and Poe's abandonment of the "culture of life" that domestic life represents leads to a fascination with death in the romance, a fact evident in Pym's longing to experience homoerotic relations but only being able to do so through erotic scenes of death. In death, concerns for the perseverance of life are done away with, and the continuity of selfhood into the scene of death represents a longing for sexual expression that is impermissible within the normative world of reproductive futurity.

Every pleasure in Poe's romance results from, or is concurrent with, pain and death, and every time the potential for the representation of a coherent, continuous "life" begins to take shape in the narrative, it leads to either horror or ennui—which is its own kind of horror. Bored with life at home, the narrator Pym tells us from the romance's beginning that he and his best friend and frequent bed companion, Augustus, "were in the habit of going out on some of the maddest freaks in the world; and, when I now think of them, it appears to me a thousand wonders that I am alive today" (3). But death quickly moves from an averted threat to a key trope in the romance's aesthetic, as Pym's "somewhat gloomy, although glowing imagination" leads him to respond to Augustus's tales of life at sea, garnered from his captain father, with "visions . . . of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown."

The sharing of tales of the sea represents a form of intimate bonding between the two young men, and that intimacy leads to Pym's visions of struggles which, as becomes clear later in the narrative, he does not undergo alone but shares with his male friends in scenes of homoerotic endangerment. He has, he informs us, "limited sympathy" "for the bright side of the painting." These "visions or desires—for they amounted to desires—" represent a killing of "the self" that signifies for Poe, as it does for Edelman, a reanimation of radical potential for sexual subjects (11). While literal death is not a satisfactory resolution to the problem of censured desire, the killing off of that part of the self that is bound by normative culture can be a form of freedom.

Pym initially regards his visions of desire as "prophetic glimpses of a destiny which I felt myself in a measure bound to fulfil," [sic] and shipwreck, famine, and death are vital components of Pym's narrative (11). But it is Pym's vision of "captivity among barbarian hordes" that is the first unambiguous indication of the romance's imperialism. Violent imperial contact seems something of an inevitability even in this early chapter of the narrative. Though much delayed, the representation of the contact zone that occurs in the last third of the narrative is prefigured here and is indicative of a feeling of American imperial entitlement that persists even in a text such as this, which one might struggle to identify as nationalist. Pym's sense of cultural and moral superiority—of his civilization—represents an imperialist attitude that is reflected in his sense of borderlessness, in the feeling that he is entitled to seek out, and to leave his mark upon, places and peoples of which he might not yet have knowledge or experience as part of a manifest destiny of which he has only yet had prophetic glimpses. The threat of non-

Western populations, however, represents only one potential threat among Pym's litany of sea-faring dangers. Like the other dangers Pym imagines and experiences, captivity is represented as a manifestation of his desire, part of his erotic fascination with finding himself in bodily peril, especially in the company of other men. While one might be hard-pressed to contend that Pym's imagination is explicitly imperial, imperialism informs his sense of racial superiority and geographic entitlement. His Western origins mean he can go where he wants and do what he wants, once he escapes the boundaries of heteronormative culture.

Though much recent criticism, inspired by Toni Morrison's tour de force reading of "Africanism" in *Pym*, has focused on the last section of the romance, which details the experiences and impressions of Pym and his colleagues in the "contact zone" of Tsalal, a fictional territory populated by dark-skinned cannibals, many critics have overlooked the portions of the narrative dealing with Pym's developing sense of "unhomeliness" and the shockingly grim yet sublimely erotic consequences of his attempt to escape his family and the heteronormative life they have prescribed for him.⁸ While Poe's emphasis on light and dark in relation to both place and people is, as Morrison demonstrates, productive of an aesthetic of racial anxiety, the primary cause of angst and object of scorn in *Pym* is the family. Reading the metaphorical use of race in his deployment of Africanism, Morrison explains, "Poe meditates on place as a means of containing the fear of borderlessness and trespass, but also as a means of releasing and exploring the desire for a limitless empty frontier"; this characterization also, I believe, embodies the nature

⁸ For insightful readings of race and imperialism in Poe influenced by Morrison, see Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America* and Dana D. Nelson, *The Word in Black and White*.

of Poe's approach to desire in *Pym* more generally (51). Because Pym frets constantly about intrusions upon his body and his mind, his anxieties about the boundaries of the self represent an ironic reversal of his imperialist desire to extend himself out into the world. Geographic borders can be shifted or traversed, but the limits of the self can only be crossed, as Bataille argues, in death.

But the trouble, as it often does, starts at home. Pym's domestic problems, the source of his sense of unhomeliness, is inherently gendered and heterosexualized: his family expects him to fulfill the masculine cultural narrative of becoming a productive provider and father for a family while Pym would prefer to spend his days at sea with his best friend, risking their lives in the pursuit of adventure. Pym begins his narrative with a self-description that places his life within the context of his family's patriarchal hierarchy, a confession of how his identity has thus far been shaped by his coexistence within a system of reproductive futurity: "My name is Arthur Gordon Pym. My father was a respectable trader in sea-stores at Nantucket, where I was born. My maternal grandfather was an attorney in good practice . . . He was more attached to myself, I believe, than to any other person in the world, and I expected to inherit most of his property at his death" (3). He imagines his life narrative as confined to an inevitable repetition of the lives of those before him: he is to become the patriarch his grandfather is, to live in his house, to carry on his work, and to produce an heir who will fall into the same line. By writing the father out of the story, supplanting him with dominant grandfather, Poe subverts the Oedipal narrative, making the grandfather's patriarchy an insurmountable object in the grandson's development.

In his presciently queer reading of *Pym*, Leslie Fiedler claims, “The outcast wanderer—equally in love with death and distance—seeks some absolute Elsewhere, though more in woe than wonder.” He sees the romance as containing “all the attributes of the highbrow Western”: “the rejection of the family and of the world of women, the secret evasion from home and the turning to the open sea” (393). But Poe’s queer theorization of sexuality supercedes the well-known model of “innocent homosexuality” Fiedler offers, and his rejection of the family and of women has less to do with an inability to cope with the institutions of normative living than the realization that such coping might not be necessary. When Pym chooses to follow Augustus aboard the *Grampus*, the record of his family’s reactions to the news represents a catalog of stereotypes of normative living: the bored and indifferent father; the scandalized and hysterical mother; the stern, patriarchal grandfather, most reviled of all. The Pym family, in their unmoving dedication to normative models of living, represent, to Poe’s mind, an instance of what Russ Castronovo calls “necro citizenship,” the commitment of “an acquiescent and passive citizenry” to forms of social governance, such that “it becomes hard to distinguish between actual and figurative death” (xii). Because it figures in the romance as already dead, Pym’s rejection of the family represents not simply an inability to become a self-possessed sexual subject in civilization but rather an instance of social necromancy, in which Pym revives himself from the deadening of desire that comes from the surrender of non-normative pleasures and intimacies.⁹

When, in a stroke of what might look like bad luck, Pym runs into his grandfather,

⁹ See Gustavus T. Stadler, “Poe and Queer Studies.”

Mr. Peterson, just as he sets out to sneak aboard the *Grampus*, the old man's recognition of his grandson seems almost to give him a heart attack, as he "started back two or three steps, turned first pale and then excessively red"; the surprise of his grandson's attempt to escape family life, despite his forbidding it, might have killed him, if Pym had not been able to trick him into believing he was a "salt water Long Tom" (13). Though Pym's quest for escape from heteronormativity is filled with visions of and encounters with death, Poe also seeks to demonstrate that those queer deaths are merely the flipside of the always already dead state of normative living—the necro citizenry who confuse reproduction with self-continuity. In *Pym*, the shock of queerness threatens to destroy normative life, which is contingent upon its misrecognition as life, and Pym's drive toward death and same-sex intimacy figures as the "dismantling surplus" Edelman describes, placing queer desire at the bounds of normative culture and within the "dizzying gulf" between selves Bataille imagines to be the deathly space of eroticism.

The idea of heteronormativity as a form of necro citizenship is further enforced by the encounter of the survivors of the mutiny on the *Grampus* with a ship full of decayed bodies. The stranded men are elated by the sight of the approaching brig and feel encouraged by the apparition of a sailor "nodding to us in a cheerful although rather odd way, and smiling so constantly as to display a set of the most brilliantly white teeth." As the presumptive rescue ship makes its slow approach, however, the men's merry mood is undercut when suddenly, "there came wafted over the ocean from the strange vessel (which was now close upon us) a smell, a stench, such as the whole world has no name for—no conception of—hellish—utterly suffocating—insufferable, inconceivable" (69).

The unspeakable stench of death sickens the men, and once they gain a full view of the deck, they are struck by a “triple horror” from the spectacle:

Twenty-five or thirty human bodies, among whom were several females, lay scattered about between the counter and the galley, in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction! We plainly saw that not a soul lived in that fated vessel! Yet we could not help shouting to the dead for help! Yes, long and loudly did we beg, in the agony of the moment, that those silent yet disgusting images would stay for us, would not abandon us to become like them, would receive us among their goodly company! We were raving with horror and despair—thoroughly mad through the anguish of our grievous disappointment. (70)

Despite the horrific scene, the appearance of the ship arouses the survivors in a way that hardly compares with the brief scene depicting the appearance of their actual ship of rescue, the *Jane Guy* (91-92). The presence of women onboard the ship of the dead indicates that, potentially, this ship, rather than producing the same-sex world such as that of the *Grampus*, was engaged in the continuance of heteronormativity onto the high seas, a space in which it was, to Poe’s mind, doomed to failure. While death and suffering are present in Pym’s voyage on the whaling ship from its departure, tragedy comes in ebbs and flows, and eroticism is produced in the uncertainty of the men’s fate, whereas on the mixed-gender vessel, “death, to judge from the positions of the bodies, must have come upon them in a manner awfully sudden and overwhelming, in a way totally distinct from that which generally characterizes even the most deadly pestilences with which mankind

are acquainted.” The mystery of the cause of death means that the episode will forever remain “the most appalling and unfathomable mystery,” one that can continue to fascinate Pym until his own death. Languishing in his mind, the dead gain a kind of vitality the bodies’ positioning implies was missing while they were alive, as they seem to have been engaged in mundane tasks, not at all roused by their tragedy. The means of their death provides much fodder for Pym’s erotic imagination, though the *mise-en-scène*, with Pym’s insistence on mentioning that there were women among them, implies that lack of sexual segregation led to the continuation of heteronormative lives—of reproductive futurity—which are snuffed out in the queer space of the sea.

To Poe’s mind, when it comes to reproductive futurity, one must choose between two options: submission or evasion. Pym chooses the latter, breaking the tautological family cycle with an escape from home into “the limitless empty frontier” that the sea provides. *Pym* is principally a novel of the sea, and while the sea is, in fact, little represented in the text, the expansiveness and capaciousness it symbolizes are central to the romance; and it makes a certain sense to read *Pym* as an instance of maritime literature. I would, however, argue that the romance is an exception to Hester Blum’s characterization of antebellum American sea literature as “stress[ing] the interpretation of the spheres of manual and intellectual labor, finding an empirical basis for imagination” (2-3). If anything, *Pym* is an instance of reactive literature, of writing against the realities of labor and the perceived necessity of productivity. Both the narrative and its gothic aesthetic seem aimed at distancing themselves from reality, in much the same way that Pym distances himself from home and familial obligation, generating instead scenarios in

which any sense of realism or any semblance of the imagination as anything other than cryptic and fantastic is done away with. This is a sea novel with no mimetic ambitions, and while Poe clearly knew something of life and labor at sea, he had no real interest in representing either the romance or life at sea as anything other than flights from reality.¹⁰ Though many sea narratives represent some aspect of the dangers of maritime living, in Poe's romance, the sea signifies as limitless in terms of the possibilities it provides for dying, a literal gulf of selves consonant with Bataille's notion of deathly eroticism, which is how *Pym* signifies true intimate living.

This flight to the sea brings forth an excitation in Pym such that he claims "I never experienced a more ardent longing for wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator" than after his first venture out with Augustus (11). In fact, Pym escapes to the sea not once but twice within the course of the narrative—once, alone with Augustus, aboard Pym's small vessel, the *Ariel*; and later, stowing away aboard the whaling ship, the *Grampus*. Taking to the sea was for Pym a means of escaping the "reality" of normative life narratives and pursuing instead the endless bounty of opportunities for pleasure (and danger) that the sea could provide. The outing on the *Ariel* at the romance's beginning stirs Pym's desire for maritime travel and all its attendant sensations. The voyage was undertaken on a night when both "were not a little intoxicated" and had already, as was their usual practice on such nights, retreated to Augustus's bed "in preference of going home." In his drunken state, Augustus declares

¹⁰ In his biography of Poe, Jeffrey Meyers explains that Poe had very little firsthand knowledge of maritime life and made extensive use of the sea narratives of Benjamin Morrell and Jeremiah Reynolds (95). He also clearly drew upon later portions of Owen Chase's *Shipwreck of the Whaleship Essex*, which provided the inspiration for the starving crew's resorting to cannibalism.

that they should not neglect the solid breeze blowing that night by sleeping through it, but should instead take out Pym's small vessel, a plan that leads to Pym's springing out of bed with "a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure." Upon leaving the house, however, Pym realizes that the wind is in fact "blowing at almost a gale," and upon setting out, he inquires when his friend, who is manning the helm, plans to turn around. Augustus replies, "*I am going to sea—you may go home if you think proper*" (11; emphasis in original). Not long after setting out, however, inebriation gets the best of Augustus, and he loses control of the ship in the storm; being too drunk to man the helm himself, Pym attempts to secure both himself and his friend within the boat, but they soon collide with a whaling vessel, the *Penguin*, thoroughly destroying the smaller boat. And though rescue seems close at hand, the sailors from the *Penguin* find that Pym has become fastened to the boat in a most extraordinary fashion: "The head of the bolt had made it through the collar of the green baize jacket I had on, and through the back part of my neck, forcing itself out between two sinews and just below the right ear" (8). Though "of ugly appearance," the wound in Pym's neck was "of little real consequence," and the scenario of danger and injury at sea proves to be one that Pym not only will suffer repeatedly throughout the narrative but one that he desires to repeat in a gothic eroticisation of the painful and the horrific.

After his injury, one might imagine a reasonable Pym would have been dissuaded from pursuing a sailor's life, but eschewing concerns for both physical safety and heteronormativity, Pym declares, "These difficulties, however, so far from abating my desire, only added fuel to the flame. I determined to go at all hazards." To do so, Pym

must stow away aboard the *Grampus*, where he hides in a dark, secret passage for much of the early part of the journey. Augustus sees that Pym is well-stocked for a few days stowage, but the eruption of the mutiny onboard the ship means that Pym remains stranded below deck for much longer than either intended. As the days drag on in a haze, the hideaway becomes more like an early grave, and Blum argues that Pym's box becomes a metaphorical coffin, "a container that proves inadequate to its task of containing death's proliferation" (183). Indeed, death proliferates on both sides of Pym's coffin-like enclosure, both in the violent mutiny taking place outside and in the rapid declension of both Pym's physical and mental resources within.

Both Pym's food supplies and his mind are quickly depleted, and an aesthetic of rotteness dominates the stowage episode, spurring Pym's imagination on to the first in his succession of grim erotic fantasies. The rapid decay of flesh is a recurrent image in this romance, as evidenced by the aforementioned ship of the dead; while still hidden with the ship's hold, Pym finds, much to his amazement, that after just a few short days, his cold mutton had gone bad: "What was my astonishment in discovering it to be in a state of absolute putrefaction!" His excitement over this discovery "occasion[s] . . . great disquietude" and inspires him to further fantasies of death (16). Unaware of the mutiny, he imagines that Augustus must have died to leave him entombed so long, and he falls into a trance-like sleep in which "every species of calamity and horror befell me." "Among other miseries," in Pym's vision, "I was smothered to death between huge pillows, by demons of the most ghastly and ferocious aspect. Immense serpents held me in their embrace, and looked earnestly in my face with their fearfully shining eyes. . . . At

my feet lay crouched a fierce lion of the tropics. Suddenly his wild eyes opened and fell upon me. With a convulsive bound he sprang to his feet, and laid bare his horrible teeth” (18). Each of these fantasies involves a form of intimacy, even if non-human, and each threatens a form of violence.

Violence enters into Pym’s life outside of fantasy once he emerges from hiding, only to find a crew dealing with the aftershocks of a bloody mutiny. With a damaged ship and supplies destroyed or inaccessible, one of the starving survivors suggests that, to relieve their starvation, the men might have to resort to cannibalism, “that one of us should die to preserve the existence of the others” (77). Pym explains, “I had, for some time past, dwelt upon the prospect of our being reduced to this last horrible extremity, and had secretly made up my mind to suffer death in any shape or under any circumstance rather than resort to such a course” (78). This secret occupation of his mind represents a form of heightened physical intimacy between the men, though one only possible through a death, and though Pym proclaims repeatedly throughout this first scene of cannibalism that the things that occurred were unspeakable and that he will spare the reader the gory details, he is sure to tell how the men “appeased the raging thirst which consumed us by the blood of the victim,” and after removing the inedible portions of the body, the men “devoured the rest of the body piecemeal” over the course of four days (81). Consuming their companion brings the men closer together, though it is represented merely as gruesome, as a last resort to avoid death—not a form of debasement, and distinct from the cannibalistic threat of the natives of Tsalal, described by Pym as “the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether

fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe” (145-46). The survivors’ cannibalism is quickly forgotten once they ascertain a way to work together to retrieve food concealed in a previously unreachable storage compartment, seemingly without regret that their cannibalism might have been averted.

The scene of cannibalism is, however, only the first gruesome encounter with the death of one of their own for the survivors. After receiving what would prove to be a fatal wound to his arm, Augustus’s health deteriorates quickly, and “He constantly prayed to be relieved from his sufferings, wishing for nothing but death.” The mortification of his arm proceeds quickly, and even before his death it had become “black from the wrist to the shoulder” (87). His weight, according to Pym, decreases at a miraculous pace and to fantastic levels: from 127 before the *Grampus* set sail to “*forty or fifty at the farthest*” just before his death (88; emphasis in original). Even more fantastical is the rapid decay of Augustus’s body; he dies around noon, and by the time the men gather the resolve to throw the body overboard, it has rotted so rapidly that one of the legs comes off in the grasp of its bearer. Once the body is in the water, Pym describes the body as merely a “mass of putrefication” so full of bacteria that it even gives off a phosphorescent glow, by which the men watch while it is consumed by sharks (88). Though recorded in the narrative as fact, the scene of Augustus’s death is impossible, even in the fictional milieu of the text, to read as anything other than another of Pym’s erotic fantasies of demise: the beautiful male body rapidly transforming, in need of the touch of others, and ultimately dissolving itself in the arms of another man. Death encourages contact between the dying and the caretaker, and it is in these capacities that encounters between men become most

acceptable and most urgent.

Death can also require intimate contact between killer and victim, as the men's cannibalism demonstrates, and nowhere does this threatening contact receive more extensive treatment than after the shipwreck of the men's rescue vessel, the *Jane Guy*, in the "contact zone" of Tsalal. Yet while the natives are clearly viewed by Pym and his compatriots as primitive and menacing, even more gruesome are Pym's fantasies of dying during escape. Having evaded the natives and retreated to a hiding place high in the hills, Pym and Peters, who quickly assumes Augustus's former status as Pym's closest companion despite being "a half-breed Indian" (1), attempt an escape down the side of a cliff on rope Peters assembles from handkerchiefs and clothing. And as they begin their descent, Pym falls into another "crisis of fancy," "in which we begin to anticipate the feelings with which we *shall* fall—to picture to ourselves the sickness, and dizziness, and the last struggle, and the half swoon, and the final bitterness of the rushing and headlong descent" (142; emphasis in original). These initial fantasies transform into visions of doom as the perceived direness of the situation and Pym's emotional intensity increase: "The faintest possible idea of ultimate escape wandered, like a shadow, through my mind—in the next my whole soul was pervaded with a *longing to fall*; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable" (143; emphasis in original). This longing becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Pym swoons during his descent, only to be caught safe in the arms of Peters. The episode is a final evasion of the "ultimate escape" of death, though it leads ultimately to the most intimate contact with another that Pym experiences outside of cannibalism. While his rescue might not lead to the escape he was

looking for, it does rejuvenate Pym, alleviating his fears; he “felt a new being,” and, with further help from Peters, is able to reach the canoe that provides escape from the island of their captivity.

Escape figures in the text in a multitude of ways: as an evasion of heteronormativity; as liberation from imprisonment or captivity; as release from the mortal coil. *Pym*'s theorization and operation of sexuality requires a rhizomatic deterritorialization of all three meanings, and their interplay is productive of the narrative's conclusion. Fleeing Tsalal (with a dying native aboard), Pym and Peters descend further toward the South Pole, into an ever more deathlike world of cold and white, and after several days lost at sea, they find themselves drawn into “a chasm [which] threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure . . . And the hue of the skin of the figure was the perfect whiteness of snow” (151). This towering pale figure of vitality stands in contrast to the dead black man that lay at the bottom of their boat, and the movement toward the rapture s/he represents is the ultimate shared escape for which Pym has longed. In the imperial logic of the romance, the world is Pym's, and this pallid being in the void represents the world's acknowledgement of that right. It also provides an otherworldly space in which transcendence of the physical also means a transcendence of normative life narratives.

It is in this narrative non-resolution that Poe's theorization of sexuality and of imperialism come together most fully, as queer forms of living seem, in this romance, realizable only when one feels empowered (or entitled) to carve out spaces of freedom, even if that means excising or excoriating those who already occupy those spaces. Aside

from his demonstrations of feelings of racial superiority, Poe makes no explicit claims for the justness or necessity of imperialism. David Spurr describes imperial undertakings as “self-inscription onto the lives of a people who are conceived of as an extension of the landscape,” and *Pym* is representative of this. Not only are the people of Tsalal fully identified with their territory—in fact, Nu-Nu, who stowed away on Pym and Peters’s canoe, dies after his removal from the land—Pym presumes that he should be able to write *himself* upon this new province, and he seems to resent the natives as much for their hypocritical display of welcoming the Westerners as for the violence they enact. Gustavis Stadler explains that in Poe’s works, “Manifestations of non-normative desire tend to take place very much under the pressure of constriction—of law, of family, of conscience,” and in this romance of sexual escape, death and imperialism figure as the only ways out of such constrictions.

Taking to the sea, Pym avoids the family narratives of home. Yet while the all-male world of the whaling vessel provides ample opportunity for non-normative intimacies, the liminal space of the ship—away from home but still of home—means that queer desire can only find expression in the likewise liminal states of dying and dreaming, in which selves can merge fantastically outside the limits of physical and psychic selfhood Bataille describes. It is only when imperialism realizes itself in the romance that the potential for queerness as a way of life seems realizable. Pym can be rescued from death by Peters and maintain a vital intimacy with him because Pym feels imperial entitlements in these new contact zones, and while they do not succeed in any kind of civilizing project with the natives, Poe seems to suggest that perhaps civilization

is not the answer to the problem of heteronormativity. Stadler claims, “Sexuality is vexed in Poe . . . it seems unable to realize itself, to make itself fully coherent as sexuality,” but he urges us to consider that maybe this is the point, “that sexuality is [not] *ever* finally coherent enough to delineate the normal and the abnormal.” Even if Poe is not pushing for such a strong revision of sexual culture, it is nevertheless the case that coherent sexualities apart from the heteronormative are not possible within normative Western cultures, and those who experience non-normative desires can only seek vital sexualities in spaces that have been reclaimed for queerness.

Queering the Domestic

Lucy Holcombe Pickens’s *The Free Flag of Cuba* offers a fascinating counter to the necessity of escape from the home in Poe: does one necessarily need to abandon domestic space in order to produce a space of freedom for queer expression? Whereas the home in *Pym* was a space of normativity and necro citizenship, the home in Pickens’s novel is deterritorialized as a space of queer sexual freedom. Poe turns to imperialism to facilitate the escape from heteronormativity in the all-male world of the whaling ship; Pickens, however, exploits imperialism as an opportunity for the sexual segregation at home, and in the absence of men engaged in imperial endeavors (and in anticipation of it), domestic space provides for women the privacy necessary for pursuing non-normative desires without having to seek flight from the home.

Ostensibly an endorsement of General Narciso López’s 1851 filibustering expedition to liberate Cuba from Spanish control, *The Free Flag of Cuba* is in truth a

queering of domestic fiction, exploiting the erotic potential of the homosocial spaces produced when men disappear for the front, leaving women home alone. As her contemporary editors note, Pickens's romance does not fit well within Nina Baym's well-known description of nineteenth-century "woman's fiction": they explain, "There is no defining plot wherein a woman proves herself against adverse circumstances put in her way by evil or stupid men. . . . No female character needs to grow more independent by resisting male authority" (5).¹¹ The book is also ill-described as traditional "domestic fiction", though much of the narrative centers around a discourse between the two female protagonists, Mabel Royal (Pickens's textual proxy) and Genevieve Clifton, regarding the righteousness of marriage and a gendered notion of personal duty.¹² Instead, *The Free Flag of Cuba* is a romance intended to contextualize and dramatize an idiosyncratic (though potentially paradigmatic) affective experience of a historical episode Pickens feels has been unappreciated in the national consciousness and in U.S. political culture, and to do so by focusing much of the text on middle-class domestic life before and during the filibustering expedition.¹³

Published three years after the López expedition's failure, *Free Flag* is a reaction

¹¹ See Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction*.

¹² On the politics of domestic fiction, see Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*; and Elizabeth Moss, *Domestic Novelists in the Old South*.

¹³ For some American readers, though, the idea that the López might be understood through an affective lens was nothing new. Ned Buntline's fictional *The Mysteries and Miseries of New Orleans* (1851) puts the fault of the López filibuster's failure on the shoulders of a vengeful woman, Fanny Gardener, who seeks revenge upon her neglectful husband for assassinating her lover. When Fanny learns that her husband has joined López's party, she travels to Cuba to expose their plot to General Concha of the colonial army, thereby dooming the expedition, and her sole request is that Concha allow her to watch her husband executed. Buntline was, in fact, in favor of the expedition, and he hoped to annex Cuba to the U.S.; perhaps putting the blame on a woman's outrage, which he seems ultimately sympathetic with at the novel's close, is intended to preserve something of the perceived nobility of López's cause. On Buntline's politics, see Shelly Streeby, *American Sensations*.

to the disappearance of that event from popular memory, but the romance is also an embodiment of a longing for imperial undertakings that exceed simple nationalist or racist feelings. Pickens develops a form of queer domestic fiction that is, it seems, contingent upon U.S. involvement in imperial expansion. The association between imperialism, female intimacy, and the heroic departure of husbands repeats itself throughout the novel. For Pickens, the project of manifest destiny and the production of spaces for female homoeroticism are entirely codependent. In the romance, women's discussion of marriage and the departure of their future husbands for the filibustering expedition alternates equivocally between expounding the virtues of heterosexual marriage, the necessity of male participation in filibustering, and pleas for intimate female contact. While filibustering has the explicit aim of liberating foreign peoples and lands, it would seem in this romance to have a corresponding libratory effect back home.

This makes the role of the home in *Free Flag* far from representative of its role in other forms of popular antebellum discourse. In the antebellum period, as historian Mary Ryan has argued, a shift was underway in terms of domestic ideology: the home was transformed from the province of the patriarch into, to borrow a popular term of the day, "the empire of the mother." Ryan explains, "By maintaining a constant vigil in their detached and individual, sometimes isolated, but rarely unique and idiosyncratic homes, women could provide the solace to the male workers and the intensive socialization of the young that were indeed vital to social and national order" (113). According to such logic, the home bears a synecdochic relationship to the nation, resulting in a chiasmatic understanding of the nation as a home, and *vice versa*. Amy Kaplan expands Ryan's

ideas of “imperial” motherhood onto the stage of actual imperialism, arguing that “domesticity is a mobile and often unstable discourse that can expand or contract the boundaries of home and nation, and . . . their interdependency relies on racialized concepts of the foreign” (26). The ideology of domesticity is, in this figuration, interdependent with the ideology of imperialism, such that home was thought not only to support but also to model the imperial nation, and the expanding empire is likewise thought of as representing an expansion of the home, in which it is conceived that mothers and national leaders perform similar roles, if not literally the same work.

The home in *Free Flag* defies this logic altogether. While the romance is nevertheless working within a concept of the domestic and the imperial that is pragmatically interdependent, Pickens breaks the symbolic chain linking the home and the empire, envisioning a renegotiation of domestic space that produces parallels with imperialism but does not confuse their borders. For Pickens, the home is one thing; the frontier, another.¹⁴ While it is the case that none of the women in *Free Flag* are mothers *yet*, and therefore already fall short of the idealized domestic model, the romance can little be described as anything other than “queer” in its domestic politics. Despite the explosion in the 1840s and 1850s of Fourierist utopian socialism, which encouraged communal living over privatization, Ryan notes that discourses of domesticity in the 1850s represented the home as increasingly isolated, though the metaphorical work of the home had everything to do with the perceived health of the nation; and despite their presumptive isolation, homes were also assumed to be uniform in their operations and

¹⁴ On the symbolic relation of home and frontier in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, esp. 75-122.

politics. But the isolation of home in Pickens's romance leads to unpredictable idiosyncrasies, and its isolation is in large part from the working of politics, even though the political is a constant resource for conversation, such that no actual or symbolic relationship seems to exist between the home and the spaces of imperialism. In her fantasy of imperialist politics, women need not concern themselves with either the maintenance of the home or heteronormative pressures related to marriage. In fact, once they get men out of the way, it seems, domestic space can become reinvented as a space of freedom from normativity rather than the central mechanism of its maintenance.

Despite the many distractions from the imperial venture in the romance, as well as the romance's frequent focus on distraction as a theme, *Free Flag* is conceived explicitly as a historical romance. Pickens begins her preface by declaring, "The meagre [*sic*] accounts we have of the deeds and sufferings of the brave soldiers, who died in 1851 for Cuba's freedom, leave impressions on our minds wholly inadequate to the realities of those scenes"; however, she tells us, "We have dreamed of those scenes and we will endeavor . . . to share our dream" (53). However, the dream this romance shares has much more to do with imaging the potential for human intimacy by taking the sexual segregation colonial activity requires as an occasion to contemplate the queer feelings people of the same sex might have for each other. Pickens's selection of the López expedition as a subject for romance has, perhaps, as much to do with the event's place in her own vexed relation to heteronormativity as it does with her belief in the mission's justness.

In the nineteenth century, *filibustering* was the formation of private armies to

invade and “liberate” foreign territories without official sanction from the U.S. government. Though a number of filibustering expeditions were undertaken during the antebellum era, including two prior missions to Cuba organized by López in 1849 and 1850, it is his final, fatal gambit against Spanish colonialists that is best remembered. Filibustering was officially outlawed by President Jackson in 1850, but a large number of Americans still supported the practice, especially as it related Cuba and other regions of Latin America proximate to the United States, such as Mexico and Puerto Rico. Organizing a party of around four hundred men, López set out for Cuba in August, 1851, launching from New Orleans. Many of the men of the party hoped to liberate Cuba for the ultimate purpose of annexing it into the U.S., a political stratagem of particular interest for Southerners, who thought that Cuban statehood would mean having the island enter the union as a pro-slavery ally in the abolition debate.¹⁵ Setting out with such a small force against the military resources the Spanish imperial government had in place in Cuba may seem a fool’s errand, but López and his men counted on gaining the support of native and creole Cubans, which seems not to have been the case. Without local support, and with reinforcements much delayed, the filibustering party was struck down by Spanish forces, and López himself was executed.¹⁶

While these facts are for the most part represented accurately in Pickens’s romance, it is also the case that she had a personal investment in the López expedition

¹⁵ On the debate over Cuban annexation and the role of slavery in that debate, see Franklin Wright, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century*; and Caroline Levander, “Confederate Cuba.”

¹⁶ For a history of López and the development of the filibustering movement, see Tom Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*; Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld*; Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba and the United States*; and Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*. On the responses of Cuban exiles living in the U.S., see Rodrigo Lazo, *Writing to Cuba*.

that doubtless influenced her perspective. Colonel William L. Crittenden served as López's second-in-command during this final expedition; he had also recently informally engaged himself to the then nineteen-year-old Lucy Petway Holcombe. While not much is known about the nature of their courtship (according to Lucy's biographer, "Whether or not this was a serious engagement or one of Lucy's flirtations is not known" [Lewis 43]), it is certain that the two's relationship had fomented during meetings to plan the López expedition, and that Lucy was present among the throng of onlookers who saw the filibuster party off when their vessel departed New Orleans for Key West, where they were to meet reinforcements, in early August; reinforcements never arrived, but the mission went ahead. In addition to providing historical source material for her romance, Lucy's first-hand knowledge of the planning and objectives of the López expedition were no doubt central to her development as a political personage and a public figure. Yet despite the political ambition and aptitude that Lucy displayed throughout her life, especially after her future husband Francis W. Pickens's election to the governorship of South Carolina, both her biographer and her husband's maintain that the writing of *The Free Flag of Cuba* was principally an act of amorously memorializing William Crittenden, her first lost beau.¹⁷ If Lucy's problem is grief, according to this logic, the writing of the romance seems the solution as an act of memorialization. However, I want to insist that a loss of interest in heterosexual love is exactly the issue in *The Free Flag of Cuba*, which utilizes the authorial liberties enabled by the conventions of the literary

¹⁷ See Elizabeth Wittenmyer Lewis, *The Queen of the Confederacy*; and John B. Edmunds, Jr., *Francis W. Pickens and the Politics of Destruction*. On Pickens role in U.S. politics, see also Cynthia Myers, "Queen of the Confederacy."

romance, alongside a profound sense of the righteousness of the U.S.'s "manifest destiny," to queer the gendered spaces of mid-century culture.

The vision of ideal human society as seen through the eyes of Pickens is one in which the principles of republicanism shape both the political culture and personal relationships of all humankind. Her support for the imperial goal of an ever-expanding nation-state did not seem, in her mind, to contradict her support of Southern regional sovereignty, and this mirrors her vision of intimate life, in which individuals conform publicly to cultural norms but may also privately practice, as they are able, whatever version of the good life best suits them. In *Free Flag*, this vision of idealized living overrides other concerns, including representation for the people the filibuster is intended to liberate. She repeats David Spurr's paradigm of imperial discourse, in fact writing out native people altogether in the romance's filibuster episode; Pickens's version of Cuba is devoid of native life: a Cuba without Cubans. The island presents itself as a blank slate onto which U.S. national culture can write itself once the land is free of "bad" colonial control. This is the type of Cuban independence that this romance was intended to promote, one in which Cuba would become not only a territory of the U.S. but would actually enter into the nation as a state, allowing its new national identity to overwrite native and Spanish influences.

Her version of the politics of imperialism engages a fantasy of submission from Cuban citizens, something López did not himself find in Cuba, but her narrative also involves some post-event fantasies of the expedition. Though Pickens writes with some historical and geographical accuracy with regard to the planning and progress of the 1851

filibuster, her portrayal of a saintly López misses the mark in some strange ways: in the romance, López speaks perfect, almost poetic English, though he in fact spoke very little of the language and employed an interpreter throughout the planning and execution of the filibuster; and concerning that interpreter, Ambrosio José Gonzales, his analog in the text seems to be Hidalgo Gonzales, who is revealed to be a spy aligned with the villainous José Gutierrez de la Concha, the governor of colonial Cuba. Pickens tells us in the first chapter (and it's unclear if this is Pickens speaking as an author or if this is the voice of some narrator who recedes into the background after this initial bit of first-person monologue, emerging again only at the very end of the book), "My characters are not, then, all fictitious; some of them have, or have had, living originals in the actual world," but also pleads with us, "Let the eyes that are to follow me through this romance rest with kind indulgence on its pages" (55). As a writer of historical romance, Pickens weaves her materials into a text intended both to honor López as "a noble champion for Cuba's liberty and humanity's rights" and to explore exactly how and what liberties and rights may be found in reclaimed spaces of freedom, especially with regard to human intimacy (57). In the visionary work of the romance, Pickens challenges heteronormative culture, presuming that true human pleasure and passion need not necessarily follow the lines it dictates. Rather than presenting a direct challenge to patriarchal culture, *Free Flag* takes the sexual segregation that a martial imperial intervention would necessitate as her chance to fantasize about queer intimacies.

Though much of the discussion within the romance is of marriage, what the text suggests is that true human intimacy exists almost exclusively within same-sex

relationships, whereas marriage serves principally as a matter of social convention and economic obligation. The sexual segregation necessitated by filibustering, in the romance's portrayal, enables homosocial bonding both at home and abroad, and those bonds exceed all heterosexual ones even up to the marriages that provide the story's awkwardly comedic end. The relationship between Ralph Dudley and Genevieve, who are engaged at the beginning of the romance and who marry at its conclusion, is so lacking, it seems, in genuine affection that, when Genevieve slanders López before the expedition's departure, Ralph's "haughty eyes looked anything but love" as he declares, "I had rather you die than uttered words so unworthy the lips of a woman" (68). Ralph wishes his fiancé dead rather than hear her critique his pursuit of the manly task of political crusading. For Pickens, men and women seem to lead incongruous lives, such that the needs and desires of one can never be met by the other.

Friendship figures in the text as a "way of life" in the way Foucault describes, as that most un-prescribed of human relationships and thereby most likely to produce real intimacy.¹⁸ Yet paradoxically, in the queer logic of the romance, proper gender performance within a milieu of imperialism, including a commitment to marriage, rather than reinforcing a heteronormative status quo, leads necessarily to sexual segregation, thereby providing opportunity for same-sex intimacy. Mabel Royal, a Yankee and the more radical of Pickens's two female protagonists, plays the confounding dual role of both policing gender performance and initiating homoerotic intimacy. She feels titillation partaking in the discourse of imperialism, and she converts that energy into physical

¹⁸ See Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life."

desire for her best friend, Genevieve. Amid declarations of her intent to marry and to send her husband off to fight, Mabel continually “kiss[es] the sweet face hushed on her bosom” and repeatedly commands Genevieve to return her kisses (116). While Genevieve frets over the potential of her fiancé dying in battle, Mabel can imagine no higher aspiration in life than being the widow of a freedom fighter: she inquires of Genevieve, “What life is more sublime than one given to a nation struggling for the principles of moral and political freedom?” (117). Marriage marked a woman’s full entrance into adulthood in the eyes of society, and having a husband who was absent or dead meant having both social respectability *and* the freedom to pursue, within the private space of the home, whatever queer fancies might enter one’s mind.

The romance’s emphasis on female friendship over marriage marks the introduction of the idea of same-sex bonds becoming primary sources of identification and pleasure for women. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has explored these ideas in her classic essay, “The Female World of Love and Ritual,” in which she discusses how love between women “paradoxically . . . seems to have been both sensual and platonic,” at least with regard to what can be garnered from her study of women’s letters to each other (55). It is the case, however, regardless of the level of actual physical intimacy that occurred between women, that these same-sex love bonds seem to have produced worlds “in which men made but a shadowy appearance” (53). Nancy Cott notes that, as the nineteenth century progressed, “female friendships assumed a new value in women’s lives . . . because the relations between *equals*—“peer relations”—were superseding *hierarchical* relationships as the desired norms of human interaction” (187; emphasis in original). As

these desires for more equitable forms of relationality became prevalent as “norms” in women’s lives, they seem to have led to renegotiations of normativity for women, such that the company of other women—and the creation of all-female spaces of intimacy—became increasingly desirable. While U.S. culture fell far short of dissolving heteronormativity altogether (it is, as I have previously noted, ubiquitous throughout *Free Flag* in the policing of gender and enthusiasm for marriage of Mabel), the rise of intimacy between women, and the valence of women’s relationships in the production of domesticity, signified a queering of normative culture in its de-emphasizing of reproductive futurity as the exclusive means of locating subjectivity.

It is true that Genevieve demonstrates a desire to marry Ralph, though his emotional coldness to her, his declaration that he would rather her die than to defame the filibustering expedition, marks a kind of ambivalence at the core of the romance’s principal heterosexual relationship. Even after Ralph’s declaration of his desire to join the filibustering party and his initial threat to Genevieve’s person, she continues to plead with him to stay away from the mission, to remain home and, it would seem (although it is not clearly stated) to marry her. The romance portrays Genevieve as naïve in her pleading, which is all self-oriented: “Do not leave *me* for *them!* I do not care for Cuba, it will be nothing to me whether they are right or wrong if you but stay” (71). The symbol of imperial pride, Ralph declares, in a moment of visionary ambition, “Whatever the vicissitudes of my after life, Genevieve, it will be a happiness to look on Cuba as she enjoys the comfort of a happy, and pride of a great nation; and think that I, in advocating her cause, did some service to the divinest of all principles, that of human rights” (70).

Casting the filibuster as a benevolent endeavor as much as an imperial one, Ralph is intended to represent an emotional maturity that ties into nationalism and equivocates between the love of women and the love of the nation; in his vision, he imagines Cuba as a woman. The love of women is entirely replaceable within such a logic, and heteronormativity substitutable with national pride. Genevieve ultimately declares her own emotional immaturity for her inability to surrender her betrothed to the imperial cause: “I know I have not sufficient generosity to sacrifice my own happiness for the imaginary good of others. I could not love you more if you freed the whole world—and if you should fall!” (73). Her final admission is a complete inversion of the practice of heteronormativity instituted after Mabel’s arrival, a practice in which one could desire no higher satisfaction than sacrificing a potential mate to a cause perceived as just. As the troubled relationship between Genevieve and Ralph demonstrates, heterosexuality within the romance, at its best, is characterized by indifference to the physical and emotional welfare of one’s partner, subservience to the cause of the nation (not metaphorical connection to it), and desirability only as a function of social propriety.

While lesbianism as such might not have been an acknowledged or available identity or practice for women on the mid-nineteenth century, the many instances of the paradoxical maintenance of proper gender performance and of the confinement of intensity of desire to same-sex relationships demonstrate a deep-rooted “closeting” effect at the heart of the romance. I want to argue for an understanding of *Free Flag* as an instance of theorization about sexuality, and in particular as an early instance of thought on lesbianism. Drawing on Smith-Rosenberg’s writings on the history of sexology, in

which she names lesbianism “a logical impossibility” for masculinist scientists, Valerie Rohy argues that “rather than suppressing the idea of lesbian desire, the homophobic discourse of impossibility promotes and structures its articulation” (1).¹⁹ Though it predates Richard van Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* by more than three decades, *Free Flag* already sets to work at debunking his theory of homosexual inversion, presciently calling forth stereotypes of the “mannish lesbian” that would come to dominate representations of female homosexuality in the later nineteenth century.²⁰ The female sexual invert, as sexologists perceived her, was a threat, seeking, as Lisa Duggan puts it, “various male prerogatives” that threatened the masculinity of “normal” men, in addition to potentially blocking their access to “normal” women. Though neither of the women in the romance is fully represented as a mannish lesbian, the ghost of female masculinity haunts the text in various ways.²¹

When Pickens published *Free Flag* in 1854, she did so under the quasi-androgynous pseudonym “H.M. Hardimann.” Though it is the case that “Hardeman” was in fact a family surname, Picken’s use and adaptation of the name imply a heightened version of masculinity, such that “hardiness” is emphasized, and even the initials call to mind the masculine pronoun: “him hardy man.” While it was not unusual for female authors of the nineteenth century and before to elect to publish anonymously or under a

¹⁹ See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, p. 287.

²⁰ See Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers*; Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*; and Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, esp. pp. 245-96.

²¹ The first fully realized representation of lesbianism in American literature appeared in serialized form in 1854 and 1855 in a German-language newspaper circulating in New Orleans. Baron Ludwing von Reizensten’s *The Mysteries of New Orleans* features two characters that are explicitly identified as lesbians, and they too break with stereotypes of lesbian masculinity—though their sexuality may be the province of a heterosexual male imagination. Coincidentally, Pickens and von Reizenstein were writing at roughly the same time in (or near) the same city.

pseudonym—especially when they wrote fiction, which was thought to be the most scandalous form of writing for women—the implied masculinity of the name is indeed exceptional. In large part, the romance is, according to Amy Greenberg, “a celebration and vindication of martial manhood,” whose practitioners “believed that the masculine qualities of strength, aggression, and even violence, better defined a true manhood than did the firm and upright manliness of restrained men” (222 ;12). Such endorsements of a virile and violent masculinity might have led early readers of the romance to believe the author to be in fact male, a practitioner himself. But such authorial misreadings also likely left readers confused by the ideology of femininity in the text, in which Genevieve’s initial passivity and sentimentalism are overwhelmed by the assertive and logical Mabel, who is the text’s major proponent of martial masculinity.

Anxieties about Mabel’s gender proceed her introduction in ways that prefigure visions of the mannish woman, though she turns out to be anything but. When Genevieve first informs Ralph of the arrival of Mabel, who befriended Genevieve while both were attending school in New England, she regales him with stories of Mabel’s beauty: “You will think her the rarest, loveliest woman you ever knew. You have too much good taste not to admire Mabel. If you call *me* beautiful, what will you say for *her*? For she is the very perfection of the highest order of beauty” (64). Ralph is skeptical: “I dare say I shall think her a nice little Yankee girl, whom my Genevieve’s enthusiasm has idealized into ‘an angel and a dream’” (64). But when Genevieve informs her friend Eugene of Mabel’s travel from the North, he declares, “I hate Yankee girls,” then continues, “They have such large hands and feet! They ought to stay up

north, [sic] where they are put like sunflowers at the bock of the garden. It is bad policy in them to come south, among our lilies and roses.” Fantasizing the physical grotesqueness of Northern women, Eugene paints them as distinctly masculine, with large extremities and statures that, like sunflowers, tower over their peers. As he continues, the exaggeration becomes even more masculinized: “Think of a man swearing to love through life, while his eyes rested on a white satin slipper; No. 6,—and then fancy him ordering her wedding-ring to fit his own finger.—Pshaw!” (89). This comment embodies a doubly homophobic attitude: disgust that “normal” men might be attracted to a person who exhibited masculine features in any way, and in the perceived impossibility of a masculine-featured woman not being a lesbian. Though masculine lesbianism goes unspoken and unrepresented, it emerges as to haunt “proper” men whenever masculinity is threatened.

Mabel, of course, proves herself not to be a threat to properly masculine men—that is, other than wishing to see them perish in imperial conflicts. She declares her belief in the moral rectitude of American filibustering during a humorous dinner scene in which Genevieve’s father engages his daughter’s friend in a hypothetical and hyperbolic dialogue on U.S. imperialism, which her audience takes a sign of Mabel’s wit but reads as much more insidious to contemporary audiences:

“Suppose me to be your *lover*—though only for a moment,
remember—would you send *me* off filibustering over the Mexican sea?”

“I would send you to assist in liberating an oppressed and unhappy
people.”

“Oh! perhaps that *is* a better way to express it. But what if I had conscientious scruples?”

“I would try and overcome them, and any other obstacles which prevented you from doing good.”

“After Cuba was freed, I might repose on a coffee plantation; eh, Mabel!”

“No,” she answered shortly, indignant at the insinuation. “You should go wherever right was to be asserted, or good effected. Perhaps to Hungary or Spain, even to—”

“Well! when the whole world had been filibustered into republicanism—”

“Then—we would, after giving thanks, examine minutely, and if there was the shadow of a chain around the neck of ‘the man in the moon,’ we would immediately fit out an expedition for his relief” (110-11).

Reading the exaggerated but genuine amalgamation of nationalism and imperialism in Mabel’s retorts as funny, Mr. Clifton comically comments on the echoes of monarchical society in the young woman’s declarations by punning on her surname: “You are a right royal girl, Mabel; but I should not much like being at the mercy of such a lady-love.” Mabel concurs, noting the inevitable hazard she presumes herself to be to the health of her future husband: “I sometimes feel very sorry for the poor fellow I am to marry. If he only knew the life that *is* before him, I am sure he would join this expedition, or hang himself at once” (111). Eugene, the young man who acts as Mabel’s suitor in the early

portions of the romance, does in fact die while participating in the López expedition

The erotic charge Mabel brings to the dinner table in her pontification on the importance of filibustering unambiguously prioritizes such colonialist endeavors over heterosexual intimacy, de-emphasizing the family as the central institution of U.S. culture and, as already noted, creating opportunities for same-sex intimacy. Eugene confesses his interest in courting her, but things only truly get heated once she returns to her chambers with Genevieve where the two embrace and kiss as they talk alternately of love for men and the worthiness of the López filibuster. After discussing Eugene's worthiness as a match, Mabel commands of Genevieve, "Kiss me and tell me, you are happy in my happiness," to which the latter replies with trepidation and affection: "Oh, Mabel, beloved! you know it was once the dearest wish of my heart that you should love Eugene; but now, since I have grown older, and can better judge, I fear . . . he is not worthy of you; you are so high, so noble, so beautiful, Mabel—like a star" (115). Genevieve's praise of her friend coupled with her apprehension about the courtship simultaneously reveals Genevieve's reservations about heterosexual unions and the depth of the women's feelings of closeness. The talk turns to the death of husbands in battle, and Mabel reassures, "It is a glorious, a holy mission!" (118). The physical and emotional passion of the scene leaves Genevieve in tears and highlights the inextricable link that filibustering's righteousness and same-sex intimacy share in Mabel's world vision, which her friend is more and more coming to share as Mabel begins to colonize her friend's heart and mind. The bond between the two women produces a kind of visionary affect, in which Mabel serves as the idealized figure of national womanhood but can maintain her

queer relationship with Genevieve as well; she can have her cake and eat it too.

Ultimately, manifest destiny proves the enabling factor for queer erotic freedom in this romance.

Even through the faux-comedic ending, in which both women are married off, intimacy is only truly enacted in same-sex relationships, enabled by the operations of imperialism. The book ends three years after the expedition (the book was also published three years after it, in 1854) with the joint marriages of Genevieve to Ralph and Mabel to Stuart Raymond, one of the few returning participants from López's party, and yet the scene is one of remorse for Mabel. Her "glorious love-dreaming, spirit-conquering eyes were darkened with the hovering shadows of memory," yet her "radiant soul" still shines through. "Murmur[ing]" her vows, Mabel "placed all her future happiness in the hands of another." But the wedding day clearly does not mark the initiation of heterosexual intimacy; in fact, it only provides opportunity for rumination upon the nature of happiness and the inability of such ostentatious affairs to create true happiness. "Where, then, is most happiness?" we are asked: the answer, in pursuing "with steadfast faith and earnest purpose, a lofty aim, whose accomplishment is the good of our common nature, the elevation of humanity." Marriage, it would seem, does not fit the bill. When her new husband inquires, "Wilt thou, my heart-queen, my joy-consort, be happy?" Mabel cries, "*When Cuba is free!*" (207). The promise of future endeavors by American men to liberate Cuba is all that can bring joy to Mabel, providing another escape into the homosocial world she occupied with Genevieve. Mabel and Genevieve's queer association is not possible without the sexual segregation and opportunities for female

intimacy that filibustering provides, thereby demonstrating an unacknowledged link between American colonial ambitions and women's sexual freedom. Rather than memorializing, looking backward, the romance endeavors to envision alternative presents, or, at the very least, to imagine ways that one might act upon subversive feelings without a complete social revolution—at least not one at home.

The White Woman Abroad

Poe's Pym sought to abandon the home; Pickens's women seek to be left alone in the home. In the final text I want to consider, Mary Peabody Mann's *Juanita: A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago*, the protagonist, Helen Wentworth, never feels apart from her New England home *and* feels free to impart the wisdom of home at will to the Cubans among whom she is living. But for all of Helen's apparent self-assuredness, *Juanita* is a text vexed by authorial anxieties that result in both textual ambivalences and problems of literary historiography. Helen is possessed of personal liberty because she has removed herself to more "primitive" Cuban culture, a land apart from the cultural hierarchies of home in which she nevertheless finds much to fascinate her—though she seeks to distance herself from what she perceives to be spectacles of primitivism. The "queer" feelings Helen has for the island's female residents and toward their sexual expressivity mark this romance as significant to the intersected histories of American sexuality, slavery, and imperialism. The least explicitly erotic of the three romances under consideration, it is also the most tentative in terms of its vision of living, never pushing fantasy very far, and yet transfixed by spectacles of sensuality and feelings

of queerness—though never sure entirely what to make of either of them. Helen’s expedition abroad represents something of Poe’s voyage to the frontier, yet she also plays upon Pickens’s idea of sexually segregated spaces of queer privacy. No resolution to either of these is ever made, and seeing no sustainable resolution, Mann’s heroine ultimately leaves those she loves stranded in the liminal space of colonial Cuba, where moral degradation and violence threaten to unsettle every attempt by the protagonist to envision a sustainable life. Equality between partners, which is key to Helen’s designs for queer intimacy, is impossible within the system of domination and docility that Cuban slavery represents, despite the sexual permissiveness of certain facets of Cuban culture.

Juanita appears as a text both out of place and out of time. The text is unsettled in terms of place. Rodrigo Lazo rightly notes that the romance “embraces the pedagogic elements of Cuba guides by taking the island as an object of study and providing a panoramic view of its people, politics, labor conditions, and social relations” (188). The romance moves across Cuba to multiple locales, including the city of Havana as well as through several outlying plantations; but it also extends itself in geographic terms, beginning in Africa with a scene of native culture and slave capture, and eventually to New England, where Helen retreats with Juanita and the children she fosters after her friend Isabella’s death. Constantly moving, recounting stories that traverse the hemisphere, the scope of *Juanita* is itself imperial. Yet it is also very much an American book, in which ideologies of racial superiority persist even into relations between whites and characters represented as racially ambiguous, including the European descended residents of Cuba. In the romance’s presentation of Cuban culture, there is a question of

national self-possession, as the book partakes of the ideology of Cuban annexation to the U.S., and yet still views Cuban citizens as inferior to Americans even though some of them, such as Isabella, who had been Helen's classmate in their New England boarding school, "had lived too long in America" (25). Cuba is represented as persisting in a transitional state, both pre- and post-imperial, navigating the complex terrain between Spanish and American control. If we understand the term "queer" as signifying that that is not easily reconciled to normative models or that which is outside of them, we might accurately describe Cuba as occupying a queer geographic status in the romance, caught between imperial powers and not yet certain that either is desirable.

The romance is also out of time, in a couple of senses. Finally appearing in 1887, *Juanita* was published in the 1880s, largely written in the 1850s, and is based on events that occurred in the 1830s.²² Mann visited Cuba with her sister Sophia Peabody between December 1833 and August 1835; like many Caribbean travelers of the time, the sisters traveled to the island seeking recovery for the ailing Sophia, and Mary, like Helen Wentworth, worked as a governess while abroad. Sophia went on to marry Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mary became the wife of education reformer Horace Mann—both left their mark on her literary career.²³ She was also a close correspondent with (as well as the rumored lover of) Argentinean writer Domingo Sarmiento, and much of her literary labor in the middle years of the nineteenth century was devoted to translating and

²² On the publication history of *Juanita*, see Patricia Ard's introduction, and Megan Marshall's *The Peabody Sisters*.

²³ It seems likely that her relationship with Hawthorne led to Mary's decision to write a romance. Though it is not clear whether or not Hawthorne commented upon or even read *Juanita*, he did read Mary's letters home as well as the sisters' journal. Mary also became involved in her husband's education reform projects, and she wrote an number of educational texts as well as treatises on education. On the relationship between those texts and *Juanita*, see Deshae E. Lott, "Like One Happy Family."

promoting Sarmiento's manifesto, *Facundo*.²⁴ Unlike Pickens, who knew very little of Cuban culture—or any Latin American culture, for that matter—Mann had traveled throughout the continent and communicated in the language fluently. She had deep concern for Latin Americans; though she believed in the immorality of slavery, which persisted in Cuba and many other South and Central American territories longer than in the U.S., Mann hesitated in publishing *Juanita* largely, her sister Elizabeth claimed, so as not to embarrass her former hosts from her days in Cuba. Its complicated writing and publication history makes it difficult to define *Juanita* as definitively *of* one era, and regardless of the periodization of its writing, it is an abolitionist text published too late to have any effect either in the U.S., where slavery ended more than two decades before its publication, or in Cuba, which outlawed slavery the year before it appeared. Despite the text's belatedness, the subject and form of the text, as well as its inspiration and politics, lend themselves to reading alongside antebellum romances, and that is how I contextualize it.

Of all the imperialist romances I consider, *Juanita* is the only one in which most of the narrative occurs in the “contact zone,” as it were. Imperial “contact” is employed here in ways far different from that of either *Pym* or *Free Flag*. Poe's natives were savage and primitive, as if from another world and time; Pickens never seeks to represent the scene of contact, presenting an empty Cuba in need of American rescue—or reclamation (a political goal she shares with Mann). In Mann's romance, while there is certainly a sense of national character for Cubans, there is no “nativism.” Her Cubans are

²⁴ See Ilan Stavans introduction to *Facundo*, as well as Diana Goodrich's *Facundo and the Construction of Argentine Culture*.

largely either descendants of European settlers or enslaved Africans, and while even the white Cubans embody a kind of primitivism for her, the nation's industrialization and involvement in international capitalism mark it as already part of the Western world, even if only contingently so. In Mann's abolitionist logic, the practice of slavery is indicative of Cuban inhumanity, and she reckons American moral superiority on the basis of the success of abolition in the northern states—though she largely ignores the fact that, while much of the romance was written, slavery was still *de rigueur* in southern states. In the end, human and civilized statuses seem to exist in a complex and shifting matrix with regard to Cuba, and Helen figures herself as the only representative of stable culture. While, for instance, her friend Isabella was educated in the U.S. and has abolitionist leanings, her complicity in Cuba's continued use of slave labor leads to an uneasy association between the two women, one in which Helen identifies with Isabella affectively and intellectually and yet cannot but see her as somehow less human than she.

This is not to say that Helen does not express desires that deviate from normative models of gender and narratives of sexuality. Though the insinuation of the mannish lesbian is less obvious in *Juanita* than in *Free Flag*, Helen is nevertheless, like Mabel, represented as embodying both ideal femininity and a masculine sense of self-possession and intellect. Upon her first encounter with slave culture in Havana, Helen retreats quickly to her apartment in the home of Don Miguel, where she is to remain for a few days, waiting on the arrival of her conveyance to La Consolacion, the *cafetal* of Isabella's husband, the Marquis. Engaging in an intense "reverie," Helen reflects,

Her life had been one of many experiences, though she was not advanced

in years. She had been a daughter, a sister, a friend, and had felt all these relations to society keenly. She had buried parents, brother and sisters, friends. She had seen the loved go astray, and had labored long to conduct them into the right path again, sometimes without success. (14)

Her life has been characterized by intense emotional bonds, all of which, it would seem, have been undone by circumstances of life, leaving her a solitary traveler through life, a major theme for Helen in this romance. Missing from this initial list of relations in her purportedly full life is, of course, heterosexual love, and while a caveat does something toward rectifying that, it does so without proper gender reference: “She had loved nobly, and not in vain; but she had seen the object of her affections die an early death, while in the prime of life and usefulness” (14). Like all her other love attachments, the object of her romantic love went to an early grave, and one begins to wonder if Isabella is the only survivor (at least at the story’s inception) of Helen’s affection; by the end of the romance, every woman who loves Helen, or whom Helen loves, winds up dead. Turning to a masculine life of the mind, Helen sympathizes with “the oppressed of all climes and of all times” but does her work through her own “cultivated intellect” rather than sentimentality.²⁵ She imagines parallels between her own life and those of “her forefathers,” who “had been prominent in service and suffering for the cause of human rights, and she had been nursed upon the stories of these sacrifices and these sufferings” (14). This fantasy of male “nursing” not only further confuses the proper conduct of gender’s performativity but also offers a glimpse into Helen’s perception both of the

²⁵ On nineteenth century women’s relationship to cultures of intellect and sentimentality, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*.

righteousness of her cause and of the right to thrust her morality upon others, bringing stability, she presumes, to a people otherwise engaged in potentially never-ending moral and political turmoil.

The notion of stability figures prominently in antebellum discourses of domesticity, and anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler argues that there is a long-standing connection between the presence of women and the sense of stability's achievement in colonial endeavors.²⁶ According to Stoler, much symbolic work is required of the figure of the white Western woman, as she serves both as a sign of cultural normalization and a source of communal identity and social control. The entrance of the white woman into colonial space is symbolic of imperial cultural reform having already been achieved, and Helen, a would-be reformer, is shocked upon her arrival in Cuba to discover the persistence of slavery and public displays of sexual immorality on the island. Cuba proves to be less stable and less civilized than expected, despite its economic and cultural exchanges with the United States. Helen enters into the colonial scene as an independent agent, assertive in her demeanor and critical in her assessment of the country. Though Helen may be independent, she is also, however, bound by the workings of sexism, and as Susan Meyer explains, is required, under imperialism, "to negotiate an association with 'inferior races' . . . [which] often *provoked* an interrogation of race hierarchies" (11; emphasis in original). The lack of social reform in Cuba leaves Helen out of place in her relation to culture, and though she arrived at the island seeking only intimate contact with

²⁶ Stoler claims, "The arrival of women . . . often coincided with some immediately or prior planned strategies of political stabilization. The term *stabilization* ambiguously expressed either a securing of empire or a response to its vulnerability" (33).

her friend, she finds herself engaged in a complex renegotiation of her status within the not-yet-imperialized island culture. If man is superior to woman, and white is superior to black (construed broadly), where does this leave the white woman?

In Mann's vision, the white woman becomes the moral guide and guardian for members of inferior races—perhaps best exemplified by Helen's literally becoming a foster mother for her friend's children. Like Mabel in *Free Flag*, Helen serves to encourage women simultaneously to seek forms of liberation and to police moral boundaries for less civilized Cubans whom she seeks to protect from the evils of slavery and sexual immorality. After Isabella's youngest son witnesses for the first time a slave being whipped, she and Helen engage in a passionate exchange that attempts to negotiate racial and moral boundaries as well as the line between human and inhuman:

“I cannot believe this is the only way of making human beings docile,” said Helen.

“They can hardly be called human beings,” said Isabella.

“And why should they be?” said Helen, indignantly. “Have they not been robbed of themselves, and treated like demons?”

“True; we should expect nothing of them, and we do expect nothing. They cannot be trusted. We are few against many, and must convince them of our superior power.”

“And yet you are willing to live on under such a system and bequeath it to your children,” replied Helen, with rising excitement, for she again began to take command of herself.

“Oh, be just, Helen! Am I not powerless? But I am wholly
unnerved as well as you.” (38)

For Isabella, her racial and national status are experienced as indeterminate in the presence of a native-born American white woman, even one with whom she has long been intimately acquainted. Isabella perceives her slaves as both inferior and threatening, intimating that she might in fact be closer in status (“Am I not powerless?”) to them than to the empowered Helen, and that the only things holding back slave revolt are the tenuous and artificial mechanisms of racist power and economic capital. Helen’s intervention on the part of the slaves figures as a form of what might be identified as *reverse imperialism*, in which intervention on the part of the fully Western subject comes in the form of a corrective to the transitional imperial subject, with regard to the treatment of those even further down the line—as if to say, this is how imperialism should be done. In a transference of U.S. regional conflicts over slavery onto the U.S./Cuba relationship, the synecdochic function of the bond between these two women presents Helen as the active, good imperialist and Isabella as the passive, bad imperialist, who is complicit with dehumanization and violence. It is Helen’s desire to bring everyone in line with her reform agenda, and yet, though she feels a kind of moral superiority to her friend, she also experiences a kind of queer identification with her, in which she briefly achieves the cultural or affective stability she is so clearly supposed to represent.

Though the women seem to desire Cott’s model of egalitarian peer relations between women, that ideal is surrendered to conflicting visions: Isabella’s sense that there is no outside to slave culture; Helen’s certitude that slavery is always already

outside the bounds of proper civilization. Within the power dynamics of slavery and sexism, which are parallel here, there is no possibility for the equality that seems essential to the women's achievement of queer intimacy. The conflict between the two women renders Isabella as helpless before Helen's moral rectitude as she is before her husband's economic and social dominance, reproducing something of the ideologies of slavery and sexism this romance also seeks to critique. And as is often the case with conflict between desiring subjects in these queer romances, Isabella attempts to smooth over the pain of this conflict with a proposition for intimate contact; after the quarrel, she pleads, "Let us talk no more of it to-night. I have nothing to say in defence [sic] of this wrong—only of myself. I will not leave you alone, but lie down by your side. Let us try to sleep and be strengthened for the morrow. I have given us orders not to be disturbed" (38). As was the case in *Free Flag*, scenes of female intimate contact are obscured from the purview of readers, but more importantly, from the world of men. Isabella's explicitly private chamber—the privacy of which she has sought to guarantee even from the eyes of "disturbing" servants—represents the same kind of all-female world that Pickens sought to produce in the imperial household, in which domesticity figures as a place for women to be alone together, retreating into queered domestic space to enjoy the pleasures of each others' company outside the world of men and the corrupting power hierarchies of slavery—for a while, at least.

In addition to slavery, Helen also targets what she sees to be the sexual immorality of all Cubans, though in a surprising turn of events, she reveals that "the vices that deform society are chiefly found in married life." The perversion of marriage that

she claims to witness on the island is representative of what happens when the institutions of civil society are bent to the dehumanizing and base instincts of the worst of humankind, as in slave society. “Marriage,” she tells us, “is but a nominal thing, and if these ties are violated within the circle of one’s visiting cards little opprobrium is attached to the violation. The social position is no wise altered.” Stripped of the heteronormative function of monogamy, marriage bonds cease to limit the potential for sexual behavior. Conversely, Helen is quick to note the limits placed upon the body of the single Cuban woman: “no unmarried woman must be left alone with a male friend or a relative farther removed than parent or brother” (55). This is an inversion of familiar conceptions of sexual obligation and freedom: the married are free, while the uncommitted are trapped. This perversion of married life, while libratory in certain respects, fails to undo the necessity of institutional obligation, and thus offers a vision of intimate living that some might describe as “queer,” though one that is nevertheless not permissive of minoritarian sexual practices or productive of true sexual freedom. The hypocrisy of Cuban sexual morality is what, it seems, most frustrates Helen—its incoherence furthered by the exploitation slavery enables. Indeed, the idea that slavery enables sexual exploitation is nothing new, but in Helen’s description, the promiscuity of Cuban culture is prior to the evil institution’s corrupting influence yet bound up with it. Intimate contact, she seems to say, should only be conducted within the proper bounds of society—or, more likely, hidden away from it in refashioned spaces of queer privacy, as in *Free Flag*, though those ultimately prove unsustainable in *Juanita*.

The sensuality of Cuban society, though disavowed by her, nevertheless

fascinates Helen, and despite her previous intimate ties to Isabella, no figure in the romance fascinates her more than the tragic enslaved character for which the romance is named, Juanita. “The beautiful Juanita,” Helen reveals, “had attracted her attention all day,” and she gapes as the slave woman “move[s] slowly round”: “There was not a lady in the company whose grace of motion, clearness of complexion, or dignity of mien surpassed hers.” Striking in appearance and poised in movement, Juanita is a spectacle of the tragedy of slavery for Helen, who cannot but note that the short sleeves of her muslin dress “left exposed an arm that would make a sculptor rave” and “set off her Moorish beauty, which bore no trace of the Negro” (62). Though Helen later protests that “the mere color of the skin . . . is no bar to the affections,” it is clear that she is drawn to Juanita because she is not truly “black,” as slave culture would have it, but instead belonged to a people much closer both genetically and historically to Europeans—people who were, as Juanita tells us, free upon their arrival in Cuba (201).

When Ludovico, who has come along with Helen and Juanita on their flight from Cuba to Massachusetts, professes to Helen his love for his former slave, she exclaims, “Juanita is in every way worthy of you, and you are worthy of her” (213). For the first time in the romance, equity, which has always been Mann’s ideal, seems like a potentiality. Of course, tragedy quickly befalls the couple, as Juanita flees back to Cuba in hopes of rescuing her brother; during this undertaking, Juanita is recaptured and plunged, along with her brother and twelve hundred other slaves, into a house that is set on fire by villagers outraged at the slaves’ rebelliousness (217). Though the slaves brought from Africa are thought by their Cuban owners to be primitive and savage, the

Cubans show themselves, to Helen's mind, to be much more so in a reversal of roles that calls into question certain visions of imperialism through the ambiguous racial and national identity of Cubans and the chaos that ambiguity inspires. The white woman may enter the scene as the angel of stability, but her resignation of the island to tragedy and violence signifies a frustration at the general unwillingness to reform properly to Western models of gender and imperial power. Affect that defies social convention, such as love between master and slave, can only emerge once every other facet of normative society is in place. Because slavery undermines domestic authority, it is destructive of homes and families and the women who watch over both. As the final incendiary scene represents, the corruption of Cuban slavery destroys not only the queer privacy of domestic spaces but also those spaces themselves, no to mention the women who might share intimacy within them.

This romance might best be understood in terms of failed visions of intimate life, of a narrative of desires for freedom repeatedly thwarted by the impossibility of true intimacy within systems of power that prevent the achievement of equality between subjects. While it is true that Cuban culture is permissive of and increased amount of sexual freedom for some, it never becomes truly queer, as bonds of submission and dominance still define social power within island society. Though it may be impossible for intimate bonds ever to finally get outside of power inequalities (and indeed those inequalities may be desirable in some relations), their institutionalization through social forms—especially slavery—is productive of a culture in which intimacy can never find stable ground. Helen repeatedly tries out scenarios aimed at achieving equality in

intimacy, such as her retreat into the domicile with Isabella and her escape to New England with Juanita, but each ultimately fails under the seemingly unavoidable pressures of inequitable systems of social power. And though Helen herself is sometimes a policing agent for heteronormativity, her recurrent fascinations with non-normative intimacies demonstrates a desire for something outside of that normative life narrative, even if what that might be often seems unachievable or impossible to articulate. While Poe and Pickens each sought to create contact zones of social and sexual equality for their protagonists by allowing for the maintained deterritorialization of certain spaces affected by imperial programs, Mann never envisions that such a space might be sustainable for Helen, and every time it seems one may arise in this romance, as it does when Helen and Isabella withdraw to the private bedroom, it proves ephemeral or untenable or otherwise unstable. In the end, neither Mann nor her protagonist can imagine an instance of stability or an expression of queer affect that does not meet up with the problem of inequities of power, even when the text itself seems to register dissatisfaction with such systems and desire for alternatives.

Juanita does, however, hold out one avenue for redemption for Cuba, and it is one we might anticipate: annexation. “No hope of . . . change existed,” we are told, “except in the possibility of annexation to the United States.” Hoping, in contrast to Pickens, that Cuban statehood would not be a buttress to the influence of slave states in the Union, Mann theorizes that “the progress of society would eventually destroy slavery in a land whose government was based on freedom” (201). For Mann, a government cannot proclaim itself to promote freedom and continue to allow the possession of slaves within

its own borders. And though they disagree on the issue of slavery, both Mann and Pickens imagine U.S. imperialism as a benevolent undertaking, seeking to “free” other nations from bad imperial rule and to promote the spread of American concepts of freedom throughout the globe.²⁷ In these appeals for freedom, queer freedoms are excluded, yet both Pickens and Mann demonstrate how such intimate operations are realizable through forms of sexual segregation and the deterritorialization of private space. *Juanita* ultimately reveals itself to be an experiment in sociality and intimacy undertaken within the permissive milieu (for the single middle-class white woman) of U.S. imperialism, in which she can alternately—and sometimes simultaneously—sympathize, desire, and dominate. As a liminal state subject to U.S. imperialism, Cuba, according to Helen, is best experienced as “more of a dream than a reality” (215). The imperial mindset, in which fantasy can be written onto the imperialized landscape, provides the opportunity for the expression of dreams, even ones that prove ultimately untenable, as does Helen’s dream of female intimacy within a culture outside of proper heteronormativity but immersed in other forms of cultural and sexual suppression and domination. But the need to escape New England into a land that might offer a dream of queer intimate contact represents a dissatisfaction with normative U.S. sexual culture that Mann is impelled to represent only within the imperialized space of her fictional Cuba, even if she cannot fully articulate it in her romance.

²⁷ It seems almost gratuitous, though perhaps necessary, to hear the echoes between these imperial pleas and those of the Bush administration’s approach to the Middle East—both employing the idea of spreading democracy through territorial invasion and governmental overthrow.

The queer imperialist romance is caught up in a contradiction: it must endorse ideas of cultural superiority while simultaneously seeking ways in which to undermine cultural normativity—no easy feat, to be sure. Each of the three romances under consideration here is deeply problematic with regard to the treatment of issues of race, or the promotion of manifest destiny, or the problem of slavery. Yet each also demonstrates a critique of heteronormative culture—or at least a desire that exceeds it—that, in attempts to revalue fantasy as well as to promote new “contact zones” for intimate experience, represents a theorization of sexuality much in line with contemporary queer thinking; and though Poe may lack the overwhelming sense of nationalism that pervades both Pickens and Mann’s romances, he nevertheless takes advantage of the privileges afforded him by being a citizen of a powerful nation valorized by imperialist ideologies and ambitions. Each romance makes use of a new sense of privacy enabled either by moving outside of domestic space, or seeking to redefine domestic space, or locating domestic spaces of privacy that are apart from normative national culture to begin with. The queers of the romances trade in borderlessness, either of the state or of the self (and sometimes both) in their ambition to extend both their will and their desire into the world. Selfhood may never come into question in Pickens and Mann’s romances the way it does in Poe’s, but the sense that American selves might see the entirety of the world as their province and make of it what they will (even if what they make is a space outside the bounds of heteronormativity) is pervasive in these romances. By deterritorializing spaces engaged in and affected by imperial endeavors, these authors demonstrate how the expansive nature of imperialism enabled the inclusion of queer fantasies and critiques of

normativity in texts that assert a sense of national privilege but also assume a minority position in relation to issues of desire. Rather than representing contact zones in which imperialized cultures are subsumed under the force of imperial normalization, these romances see that transitional state as producing zones for contacts that have long been desirable but were not yet possible in spaces marked as within the borders of heteronormative U.S. culture. Though far from offering ideal solutions, these texts offer visions of intimate relations that are prescient of the insights of queer theory and understand queerness as desirable, even if society requires its disavowal.

CHAPTER 3

THE FANTASTIC AMBIGUITIES OF GENITAL SIGNIFICATION:

JULIA WARD HOWE'S *THE HERMAPHRODITE*

Does the mind have a sex? In her 1790 essay “On the Equality of the Sexes,” early American feminist Judith Sargent Murray queried, for perhaps the first time in American print culture, this very issue, and her response, though oblique in certain respects, rings resoundingly in the negative. In the poem that begins the piece, Murray disparages the “stupidly dull” who seek only to satisfy the needs of the body—but even greater scorn is reserved for those who believe women to be part of this class:

Yet cannot I their sentiments imbibe
Who this distinction to sex ascribe,
As if a woman's form must needs enroll
A weak, a servile, an inferior soul;
And that the guise of man must still proclaim
Greatness of mind, and him, to be the same. (783, 25-30)

For Murray, the sex-gender system of early national culture made a synecdochic link between the form of the body and the parts of that body that were to be viewed as the locus of being—men were their minds while women were all body. But Murray pronounces this anatomical-intellectual association a fallacy, declaring gender and sex part of a cultural mind-body problem that has become naturalized but that even basic

empirical observation demonstrates to be spurious.¹ She ends her poem with the following:

Though erudition all their thoughts inspires,
 Yet nature with *equality* imparts,
 Meantime we [women] emulate their manly fires,
 And *noble passions*, swell e'en *female hearts*. (784, 43-46; emphasis in original)

The mental faculties of women are equal to those of men, Murray argues, as evinced by instances of generally recognized female behavior that demonstrates use of the four “intellectual powers” she defines—imagination, reason, memory, and judgment (784). Women (some women, that is) seem to be men’s intellectual inferiors only because they are denied access to education, and as one “can only reason from what we know, and if an opportunity of acquiring knowledge hath been denied to us, the inferiority of our sex cannot fairly be deduced from thence.” Cultural norms, not biological imperatives, shape the differences in men and women’s minds, since, “As their years increase, the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science. Grant that their minds are by nature equal, yet who shall wonder at the apparent superiority, if indeed custom becomes *second nature*; nay if it taketh the place of nature, and that it doth the experience of each day will evince” (785; emphasis in

¹ Murray published some of her early fiction and essays, including “On the Equality of the Sexes,” under the pen name “Constantia”—a name audiences would have assumed to be fictional and therefore would not give away her true gender identity. She more frequently used the *nom de plume* “Mr. Vigilus.” It was not until her works were collected and published as *The Gleaner* that she came out to the public as a woman, and up until that time she was one of a handful of American writers to make a living off of that work.

original). With respect to sex and intellect, the nature-nurture question is already settled to Murray's mind.

While Murray never argues for specific changes in the daily lives of men and women (in fact, she argues that women can undertake intellectual labor while performing domestic duties, as "every requisite in female economy is easily attained; and, with truth, I can add that when once attained they require no further *mental attention*" [786; emphasis in original]), she nevertheless seeks to demonstrate that the human mind is sexless, despite the various forms the body may take. Theorizing a materialist feminism, she refuses biological determinism to enable a productive disassociation between the sexed body and the Human Mind, writ large. In her recent attempt to establish a feminist account of evolutionary neuroscience, Elizabeth Wilson concludes, "Bodily forms are the product of a widespread commerce among groups, and bodies continue to instantiate and participate in these richly divergent evolutionary relations" (95); the evolutionary nature of the body means that there cannot be a singular account of the relationship of the body to the mind, that being a male or female human (or being otherwise) cannot reveal any substantial truth about one's mind, as bodily forms are dynamic rather than stable. While Murray writes in a pre-Darwinian age, her argument prefigures Wilson's in its insistence that the body and mind are not identical and that sex cannot properly serve as an index for mental aptitude. In other words, the human body and brain have developed through a socio-biological history of diverse species interaction and dynamic biological development, and this history has not come to its end: anatomy is *not* destiny, in more ways than one.

But in a culture in which it must repeatedly and fervently be insisted that the state of one's mind is not written on the body—or by one's body—for women's intellect to be taken seriously, what can be made of the minds of those individuals whose bodies are not intelligible within a cultural system that only acknowledges sexual binarism? This is the question from which Julia Ward Howe's only recently published fragmentary romance *The Hermaphrodite* departs. What I want to present here is an argument about the making of *The Hermaphrodite*: about the congruency of the form and function of the romance and the body at its center. At its heart, this romance is a broken narrative comprised of a series of conflicts arising from the incongruity of an object—the genitals—with an affect—love. The problem for the hermaphrodite of this romance is significantly one of signification, of trying to make sense of how a body can mean when it offers no solid links within the system of bodily signs—a system which authorizes only forms of affect that meet normative standards of genital complementariness.² I want to argue that Howe writes her romance thinking very much along the lines of feminist interpretations of the mind-body problem, such as Murray's, but extends that thought into

² The period of *The Hermaphrodite*'s writing precedes the period historian Alice Dreger names “The Age of Gonads” (1870-1915) during which, “scientific and medical men, faced with and frustrated by case after case of ‘doubtful sex,’ came to an agreement that everybody’s ‘true’ sex was marked by one thing and one thing only: the anatomical nature of the gonadal tissue as either ovarian or testicular” (29). Dreger notes a number of cases recorded in medical journals from this period in which individuals who have lived their entire life as one sex are coerced, often through the threat of criminal prosecution, to change their gender identity and sexual status—even to annul marriages that would, with this change, be perceived as “homosexual.” This avoidance of same-sex sexual contact mattered significantly to nineteenth-century Americans, as John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman note that even the most sex-radical groups in the U.S., including some of the utopian socialists, condemned same-sex sexual encounters, despite the fact that forms of intimacy such as romantic friendships—which may or may not be sexual—flourished during this same period (121). Howe’s hermaphrodite lacks the sense of gonadal determinism Dreger describes but mirrors the anxieties of medical authorities in his sense that society will only accept properly gendered bodies, though his choice to identify as male does not prohibit fluidity in terms of sexual desire and gender performance.

a narrative fantasy in which being un-sexed (or improperly sexed) can be idealized on an intellectual level even while the realities of heteronormative culture continue to debase such a being. She explores the hermaphrodite's body as a site of knowledge (or lack thereof) and ambivalence, wrestles with the question of how those outside of normative sex can love and be loved, and grasps at questions of meaning in relation to a body that must be sacrificed at the altar of a pervasive cultural heteronormativity. Howe wrestles with questions of non-normative sex and sexual identity and theorizes a detachment between genital morphology and the formation of desire to produce a romance that represents the life of the non-normative sexual subject as ideal yet unsustainable. The manuscript was not published in Howe's lifetime and was most likely not read by anyone other than herself and perhaps her sister and confidante, Louisa (who may have been the anonymous intended recipient of this letter). The manuscript exists only in a fragmentary state among Howe's papers in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, and a number of key pieces of the text, including the first page and several key transitional passages in the narrative, are missing; we know this because Howe numbered the pages of what must have been a complete (or nearly so) draft of the manuscript.³

To his mind, the malformation of Laurence's own body leads to the distortion of

³ On the state of the manuscript, see Gary Williams, *Hungry Heart* and "Speaking with the Voices of Others." Serving as editor of the modern edition, Williams ascribed the name *The Hermaphrodite* to the previously unnamed text. The manuscript is also discussed in recent biographies of Howe by Mary Grant (*Public Woman, Private Person*) and Valerie Ziegler (*Diva Julia*), though neither devotes the kind of attention to the manuscript or sees the centrality of it to Howe's art and life that Williams does. Grant refers to the manuscript as *Eva and Raphael*, which is the name of a short story that likely preceded the romance and is incorporated into it, whereas Ziegler simply calls it the "Laurence novel." Both Grant and Ziegler read the story of Laurence as a parallel to Howe's vexed relationship to her husband, and while Williams has some sympathy with that position, he takes the Howes' marriage as source material for a much more complicated exploration of sex and gender, including Julia Howe's anxiety about her husband's sexuality.

Emma's, even though his body remains unseen; even Emma, who declares to Laurence, "If I sought you not I died of longing," never gets so much as a peak beneath the gendered veil Laurence has created, instead inferring his condition from his protestations that their relationship can never become a physical one (17). Her "frenzied" mind pushes beyond the ambiguities of Laurence's body, literally rendering him invisible and perverting the earlier compliment upon his beauty. In what is perhaps the text's most pronounced moment of ambivalence, Emma transfers the effect of the comparison to Villa Borghese's hermaphrodite, which had initially caused Laurence to become possessed of "a deadly faintness over my heart," into an unbridled mockery of Laurence that brings on what will ultimately prove to be a fatal "faintness" upon her own heart.

Just as the question of knowledge about the physiology came to fascinate, confound, and inspire artists, scientists, and general readers throughout the course of the nineteenth century, the issue of knowledge about Laurence's own body comes to represent a problem within the narrative of *The Hermaphrodite*. A pervasive ambivalence about hermaphrodites served to animate their representations in the period, and the issues of who gains knowledge about Laurence's body and of how Laurence chooses to (mis)represent his body to those who would seek to know it drive the plot of the narrative—thereby enabling a story that is, at its core, about the impossible nature of normative life narratives. Laurence's anatomy is never itself represented in the text and therefore cannot serve as a symbol within the network of signs that is the text, and yet the absence signified by his anatomical ambiguity (which is referenced frequently though never described) is central to the symbolic workings of the text. Laurence's

overdetermined-yet-absent body is both obstacle and opportunity, as the disruption it incites provides the grounds for fantasy that are essential to the work of the romance. The semiological and cultural impossibilities of the hermaphrodite's body as viewed from within normative culture mirrors the impossibility of the romance cohering as a life narrative: an impossible sign for an impossible story. Yet unreal as Laurence's body may be, it has effects both good and bad in the "real" world in which he lives, inspiring both reverence and repulsion. The admiration of strangers and the desire of Emma are both converted quickly into negative somatic effects, though, as my next section makes clear, even within the ambivalent structure of the text, such veneration does not always have toxic consequences. Within the text, it may lead to loathing, even self-loathing; sometimes, however, it leads to love.

At the end of the first book,⁴ Laurence plans to flee the adoring Ronald so as not to condemn him to a life outside of normative culture, which Laurence believes their relationship must necessarily be if pursued. In a fit of what Laurence tries to dismiss as youthful lust, Ronald acknowledges a kind of injury done to him by his love, but his desire and affection for Laurence have grown so great that he is willing to try out any stratagem to gain both his love and a life:

Yes, for a cursed, a damned lie, for the cruel deception of which I am the victim, and to which you have sacrificed the peace of my heart, the hope of my life. You begin to tremble? it needs not now, I have made it true to

⁴ Williams sorts the text into three books with several appendices that seem to follow divisions Howe had in mind, though large sections of the text are usually missing at the beginning and end of these books.

others—that lie, would you as what it is?—your manhood. . . . Yes, you are that lie, and I am your victim, but you can cancel the wrong, oh angel-fiend. You can change my torment to raptures of heaven. You shall be a man to all the world, if you will, but a woman, sweet, warm, living woman to me—you must love me, Laurence. (86)

Disguising lies within lies, Ronald tries to develop a schizophrenic, truly in-between sense of gender for Laurence, in which his maleness will be affirmed publicly but he will exist as a woman, as Ronald's wife, in private. The truth of the mutuality of Laurence and Ronald's love cannot overcome the fact of Laurence's in-betweenness and runs counter to the often-restated fact of Laurence's feeling of psychic maleness. But love runs up against both men's senses of self, leaving their desires outside the realm of the heteronormative and their bodies positioned awkwardly within the sex-gender system of Western culture.

Indeed, questions of Laurence's "being" take multiple forms in the romance: early on, Laurence laments "the doubtful question of my being," a question we must read as both anatomical and existential (4); and even on his deathbed, his friends question both his sex and his humanity, describing him as "the poetic dream of an ancient sculptor, more beautiful, though less human, than either man or woman" (194). The form of Laurence's body seems tied directly to the meaning of his personhood, though the failure of his body to figure properly within a larger symbolic system means that the un-sexed body exists as an empty signifier, one that may not be assigned a proper meaning but which also opens up new possibilities for meaning. After the examining doctor

announces “I cannot pronounce Laurent either man or woman . . . but I shall speak most justly if I say that he is rather both than neither,” Briseida—the Italian woman who has known Laurence only in his female persona, Cecilia—declares Laurence “a heavenly superhuman mystery, one undivided, integral soul, needing not to seek on earth its other moiety, needing only to adore God above it, and to labour for its brethren around it” (195-96). The now-spectral Laurence remarks admiringly upon Briseida’s reading of Swedenborg, which leads to her idealization of Laurence’s hermaphroditic state, though the end of the narrative—that is, what we have of an ending—calls into question Swedenborgian notions of bodily unity as ideal.

Knowledge and Ambivalence

Julia Ward Howe likely wrote most of *The Hermaphrodite* by 1847, when she references it in a letter to her sister, though she seems to have been thinking about it as early as 1843, according to a letter drafted in her journal of that year. In that letter, written around the time of her unhappy marriage to Samuel Girdley Howe, she describes her thwarted desire to write the romance that would become *The Hermaphrodite*:

Yet my pen has been unusually busy during the last year—it has brought me some happy inspirations, and though the golden tide is now at its ebb, I live in the hope that it may rise again in time to float off the stranded wreck of a novel, or rather story, in which I have been deeply engaged for three months past. It is not, understand me, a moral and fashionable work, destined to be published in three volumes, but the history of a strange

being, written as truly as I knew how to write it. Whether it will ever be published, I cannot tell. (qtd. in Williams “Speaking” xi)

In some regards, the current fragmentary nature of the manuscript seems serendipitous, in that its incomplete state impels readers to fantasize about narrative possibilities for the romance in much the same way Howe fantasizes about the possibilities of the morphologically “incomplete” body of her narrator and protagonist, Laurence—the “strange being” of her letter. This is true from the very beginning of the text, as the modern edition lacks the first page, and the manuscript begins in the middle of a sentence—in fact, in the middle of a word—which should read, I believe, as follows: “[After much consider]ation on the part of my parents, it was resolved to invest me with the dignity and insignia of manhood, which would at least permit me to choose my own terms in associating with the world, and secure to me an independence of position most desirable for one who could never hope to become the half of another” (3). Howe’s language of signs here indicates an understanding that masculinity, if not anatomical maleness, may be written upon the body through the deployment of specific sets of symbols, such as dress and behavior. An early feminist thinker, one who would become one of the nation’s most prominent activists for the causes of women’s education and suffrage in the later decades of the nineteenth century,⁵ Howe recognizes the benefits to those who acquire masculine privilege and reckons that, even though Laurence can never be “whole,” men are taken to be more complete individuals, and their lives are bestowed

⁵ On Howe’s political activism in the last half of the nineteenth century, see Grant, *Public Woman, Private Person*; Ziegler, *Diva Julia*; and Florence Howe Hall, *Julia Ward Howe and the Woman’s Suffrage Movement*.

more of a sense of wholeness in themselves; thus, raising a hermaphrodite child as a man seems the only reasonable option—for women, like hermaphrodites, are deemed always already incomplete.⁶ And the lack of the manuscript's first page, which likely included some anatomical description of Laurence's body (at least his infant body) means that his genitals have been entirely excised from the text, offering no opportunity for them to signify for readers.

The romance begins instead with the external inscription of maleness upon Laurence's body and upon the text.⁷ Laurence explains, "I was baptized therefore by a masculine name, destined to a masculine profession, and sent to a boarding school for boys, that I might become robust and manly, and haply learn to seem that which I could never be" (3). Living as a man might earn Laurence success in business or politics, but not in love, which seems to be his strongest desire, as his body can be neither complete in itself nor complementary to another under the regime of genital normativity. For Howe, however, taking a hermaphrodite as the subject for a romance represents exactly the extension of possibility, with the short-circuiting of signification inherent in the body of the hermaphrodite providing the opportunity for fantasies of new forms of intimacy, for

⁶ Therese Dykeman reads the theme of "halfness" as recurrent in Howe's later political philosophical writings. She contends that, for Howe, this sense of an inherent human "halfness" "means that human action extends itself toward others to gain other halves. So her definition of the individual in terms of 'halfness' also defines the individual as social, and human activity as social activity" (19). In line with Murray, Howe argues that it is education that will make individuals whole, and "wholeness" "means not only the development of talent in the individual but also the development of the individual as a social being in the world" (20). One might read a kind of implicit heteronormativity in this figuration of Howe's theory of the human, as psychosocial and sexual being in need of complementarity—perhaps genital complementarity. But I would contend that *The Hermaphrodite* instead works as a critique of such a logic, in that Laurence's sense of intellectual and social "wholeness" is thwarted, not out of necessity, but instead as a result of an arbitrary and cruel system of genital signification that reads his body as incomplete and therefore denies him the affective connection that he longs for but feels he must deny himself.

⁷ Though a hermaphrodite, Laurence unambiguously identifies as male, even while living as woman, and so I refer to him in the masculine throughout—though that can be, at time, problematic.

the kind of “world-making” gestures that queer theorists champion.⁸ Howe wrote this romance, not to imagine the real life of a hermaphrodite, but to use the hermaphrodite as a vehicle for her own fantasies—perhaps, as Gary Williams argues, to cope with her husband’s seeming preference of his romantic friendship with another man over his marriage, but also to find a means of expressing the deep dissatisfaction she herself felt with the roles of woman and wife. Through the figure of the hermaphrodite, Howe can forget the body, as Laurence longs to do—or, more accurately, forget the limitations placed upon the body by antebellum society, which Howe critiques for participating in structural heteronormativity even as she seeks to deal with her own anxieties about love and sexuality. The romance of the hermaphrodite allows her to follow Nathaniel Hawthorne’s imperative that romances pursue “the truth of the human heart” over any sort of narrative realism, and Howe disregards both social propriety and narrative logic when, to her mind, the truths of human intimacy and affection defy those restraints as well. Her hermaphrodite is a product of imagination (the foremost intellectual power, according to Murray), such that Laurence’s body and mind are the products of his literary creator’s sense of affective truth rather than scientific knowledge.

Indeed, *The Hermaphrodite* was written in the early days of modern medicine, before Americans—or any other Westerners, for that matter—had gained much scientific knowledge about human hermaphroditism. The binary system of genital signification as we have inherited it today, in fact, was a relatively new invention in the course of human history in the West. That “sex” is a discursive rather than a “natural” category Judith

⁸ On the importance of queer “world-making,” see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public.”

Butler makes clear in her declaration that “‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls” (*Bodies* 1); that only two sexes exist, and that human bodies must conform to that standard, is something to which we are acculturated, not something we learn through empirical observation. We see and acknowledge only two sexes, and understand that to be part of Nature, because it is what has been taken as the norm—it could be otherwise. Historian Thomas Laqueur, in fact, traces the ambivalent alternation of one-sex and two-sex models of Western conceptions of the human body from Antiquity forward, noting, “Sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented. The reproductive organs went from being paradigmatic sites for displaying hierarchy, resonant throughout the cosmos, to being the foundation of incommensurable difference” (149). The rise of scientific and medical practitioners as authoritative sources of knowledge about the human within the rise of modern science in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries led to a rhetorical construction of the dyadic model of sex.⁹

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, relatively little was known—or discussed in public—of the subject of human hermaphroditism; American medical journals, not to mention more generally circulated periodicals, by and large shied away from the subject of hermaphroditism, using the word “hermaphrodite” primarily in

⁹ See Dreger, *Hermaphrodites*; Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality*, esp. 237-40; and Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, esp. 36-41.

reference to art and animals.¹⁰ With the exception of a few cases (such as that of Levi Suydam, with which Howe's modern editor suggests she might have been familiar),¹¹ most references to human hermaphroditism appeared in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when an explosion of research into human hermaphrodites roughly coincided with the development of sexology and the birth of the modern nomenclature of sexuality. While this research was performed primarily in Europe, accounts of hermaphrodites' bodies (especially autopsy reports) were frequently translated and printed (and reprinted) in the American press in the later decades of the nineteenth century.¹² The details of hermaphroditic morphology were seemingly of interest because of the spectacular difference they were imagined to represent, not as objects of scientific inquiry or analysis. The earliest American source on the subject I have uncovered, an 1808 article in *The Medical Repository*, recounts the examination of a twenty-eight-year-old Portuguese hermaphrodite by a "Dr. Wm. Handy, of New York"; he reports, "Having been informed that there was an Hermaphrodite of the human species in this place, I

¹⁰ Some in the nineteenth century may also have been familiar with the "hermaphrodite brig" from maritime usage. This variety of ship is double-masted, with fore-and-aft rigged sails, which combines the two main varieties of sail configuration, thus "hermaphrodite."

¹¹ Suydam became the focus of scrutiny in 1843 when his gender was called into question after his vote was called into question in a tightly contested race in his native Connecticut. Under the scrutinizing eye of Dr. William Barry, it was discovered that Suydam had a penis and a testicle, and was therefore determined to be male—and thereby legitimizing his vote. Later, however, it was discovered that Suydam also menstruated regularly and displayed "feminine" behaviors that caused his sex to seem even more "doubtful." Gary Williams suggests that Howe, as a resident of New England, may have heard of this case, though an account of it was not published until 1847, as Howe was finishing or had completed *The Hermaphrodite*.

¹² On the topic of hermaphroditism in American periodicals, there are a variety of sources and origins from across the globe. Articles reprinted from British sources: "An Hermaphrodite"; Buchanan, George, "Case of a Hermaphrodite." Articles translated in English from European sources: Mayer, "Anatomical Description of an Hermaphrodite" (reprinted three times in translation); Lawrie, W. John, "Case of Hermaphrodite." Accounts by Americans abroad: Handy, Wm. "Account of an Hermaphrodite"; "Our Berlin Letter." And accounts of American hermaphrodites: Avery, Henry N., "A Genuine Hermaphrodite"; Tillotson, D.J., "Case of a Hermaphrodite."

eagerly embraced the opportunity of visiting and examining so rare a phenomenon.” He recalls that he, “in common with many others,” had suspected that “an animal, uniting the sexes distinctly, had no existence in nature,” that more than likely what appeared to be hermaphroditism was in fact the result of clitoral enlargement resulting from “lascivious unnatural excitement.” Other than this initial spurious speculation, the article offers no attempt to discern the cause of this genital formation. Despite Dr. Handy’s exclamation of his excitement at this opportunity, he opts for a detailed clinical description of the hermaphrodite’s physical appearance, noting the “tall and slender, but masculine figure” with the same indifference with which he describes the presence of both a “penis, and testicles . . . in their usual situation” alongside “female parts [that] do not differ from those of the more perfect sex” (81). The body of the hermaphrodite seems cause for excitement but is rendered merely as spectacle, not as cause for analysis.

The search for cause and meaning in relation to the hermaphrodite’s body seems in the above case, as in many others, to be thwarted by the body under scrutiny itself. Alice Dreger explains, “Hermaphroditism causes a great deal of confusion, more than one might at first appreciate, because . . . the discovery of a ‘hermaphroditic’ body raises doubts not just about the particular body in question, but about all bodies. The questioned body forces us to ask what exactly it is—if anything—that makes the rest of us unquestionable” (6). The search for answers with regard to the issue of hermaphroditism have, critics have demonstrated, occupied artists and scholars

throughout much of Western history¹³—and some scientists, particularly those studying animals, came close to a biological explanation. An 1834 article “Hermaphrodites or Hereditary Deformity” in the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* explains that controlled breeding practices have led to the production of hermaphroditic foals that prove to be superior racing horses and attributes this to genetics, “proving that this, as well as all other deformities, are frequently hereditary, as well as many diseases common to the horse, viz:--stringhalt, ringbone and spavin, for which the most incontestable proof can be given” (67). The “incontestable proof” of the genetic basis for physiological anomalies in animals, however, does little to alleviate the anxieties the hermaphroditic body produces within the social realms of Western humanity. By unsettling the “unquestionable” status of sex, the sexually (and semiologically) ambiguous or indeterminate body subverts the linkage between the proper operation of the sex-gender system and the acknowledgement of one’s status as human.

Indeed, Dreger argues that “through the handling of difficult problems such as human hermaphroditism, scientists and medical doctors came to be the accepted and sought-after authorities in matters of sex and, more generally, the accepted and sought-after authorities in nearly all matters concerning anatomies and identities” in the late nineteenth century (10). As Dreger demonstrates, the anxiety produced by these anomalous bodies was so great that it played a crucial role in the establishment of men of

¹³ On representations of hermaphrodites from throughout Western history, see A.J.L. Busst, “The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century”; Marie Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite*; Ann Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*; Michel Foucault, Introduction to *Herculine Barbin*; Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Third Sex, Third Gender*; Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, “Fetishizing Gender: Constructing the Hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe”; Geertje Mak, “‘So we must go behind even what the microscope can reveal’: The Hermaphrodite’s ‘Self’ in Medical Discourse at the Start of the Twentieth Century”; Jenny C. Mann, “How to Look at a Hermaphrodite in Early Modern England.”

science as cultural authorities as well as medical ones. But it is not the case that earlier thinkers did not attempt to cope with or reason through the “problem” of the hermaphrodite. In his authoritative study of nineteenth-century representations of “the androgyne” (which he believes to be synonymous with “hermaphrodite”), critic A.J.L. Busst argues that “sources of the image of the androgyne play little part in determining its meaning or value in any particular work: these depend uniquely on the preoccupations and convictions, ideals and aspirations of the individual artist or author.” According to Busst, every hermaphroditic figure is the product of a creator’s genius “conditioned by his upbringing and environment” (10). By creating a figure whose body was anatomically unrepresentable, Howe could, like Laurence, seek ways to forget the body and its politics in ways that were truly the products of her own imagination, envisioning the work of fantasy in much the same way Butler does—as the “not *yet* real,” a imaginative force with political valence that transcends normative notions of the possible in the same way the hermaphrodite’s body transcends the sex-gender system (“Force of Fantasy” 185; emphasis in original). Howe dissents from notions of bodily normativity in her insistence that, while the hermaphrodite may still be an object of fantasy, it nevertheless represents a truth about humanity and its arbitrary construction of the social in the simultaneity of the hermaphroditic body being both unimaginable and yet empirically observable, undeniably real.¹⁴ She registers her dissent through the creation of a being of universal substance and with the aspiration of universal understanding, a

¹⁴ Marie Delcourt explains that in Antiquity, “Hermaphrodite was more an idea than a person” (xi). This seemingly simple claim, however, marks the origins in the Western tradition of the cognitive dissonance cultures have had about hermaphrodites: that the existence of hermaphrodites cannot be denied and yet they cannot be acknowledged as part of the real.

hero with whom readers cannot identify but cannot *but* sympathize.

For Howe and others, the hermaphrodite's body figures as both an excess and an absence, and the figure accumulates a legacy of ambivalence throughout Western culture, figuring as an embodiment of both great beauty and great terror. The problem of genital signification for the hermaphrodite—that his body signifies simultaneously both sexes and neither—results in a sense that he is both and neither male or female, and artists and scholars both struggle with the aesthetic desirability of self-complementarity and the social reprehension that results from aberration. Busst notes “two images or conceptions” about the hermaphrodite in the nineteenth century: “one image is clearly optimistic and healthy, the other is pessimistic, unhealthy and decadent” (10). Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass describe that, in the Renaissance era, “The hermaphrodite recurs . . . as the site of fixation where there is an imperative to categorize without one single normative system by which such categorization can be made”; they continue, explaining that examining the representational history of the hermaphrodite makes clear the “establishment of gender as a fetish which misrecognizes itself, masquerading as the ‘real’” (105). *The Hermaphrodite* deploys this critique of gender-as-fetish, and yet demonstrates it to be a fetish to which even those who suffer most under it, who most feel its un-reality and are made to feel unreal by it, cannot help but cling.

Howe's romance tries to map the social geography of attitudes toward hermaphrodites, and she attempts to represent opinions that embody a similar axis of response. One observer, regarding Laurence early in the romance, declares to a friend,

“His beauty is of a more vague and undecided character—it is a face and form of strange contradictions—the eye and brow command, while the mouth persuades. . . . Do you not see a resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese?” (16).¹⁵ But shortly thereafter, following fast upon Laurence’s declaration to his beloved Emma von P. that they can only ever have “relations independent of sex, relations of pure spirit,” her “superhuman intelligence” intuits the problem of Laurence’s body, and she names him “monster!” before devolving into “a maniac” who “lay foaming and writhing on the floor at my feet” (18-19). Beautiful and monstrous, appealing and appalling: the wide array of responses the body of the hermaphrodite elicits marks an inherent ambivalence in attitudes regarding both beauty and sex that become the source material for fantasy in Howe’s romance. Emma’s perception of Laurence’s body as an instance of malformation leads to being herself reduced to a less-than-human state.

Laurence rebuffs Emma, declaring, “I am as God made me,” but that does not prove adequate consolation. Almost as soon as he makes his case for himself being created according to God’s will, Laurence rescinds any feeling of divinity, as he deems his monstrosity the cause for Emma’s fit, and in such a mindset, he decides neither fit nor body could a part of divinity: “Methought it was a night on which God had slept, and permitted the power of evil to possess even the fairest of his creatures, for her own destruction.” Though he believes both himself and his beloved to be victims of devilry,

¹⁵ Williams discusses Howe’s visit to the Villa Borghese during a sojourn in Rome (*Hungry Heart* 95-96). According to Williams, the statue is to all appearances female; as is the case with Laurence in Howe’s romance, the figure’s gender mystique comes from its context, not from empirical evidence provided in the work itself. Part of the interest for audiences in such figures—the same drive that encourages the consumption of medical literature on hermaphroditism—is to see the body itself laid bare, though neither romance nor statue deliver on their titillation.

Laurence nevertheless declares, “we were both guiltless of any crime against ourselves or God.” This sense of culpable innocence overtakes Laurence, and bizarre utterances spew forth from the writhing Emma, both reiterating the beauty of Laurence’s physical form and reinforcing his belief that his very existence will deform the world:

The curse of my nature had fallen upon another more heavily than upon myself—the shattered being before me was at once a monument of my past, and an earnest of my future: and kneeling over her, I almost prayed God to smite me with her madness. She heard me not, saw me not—a wild and frenzied smile distorted her features, and her lips were parted in incoherent ravings, of which I could only distinguish these words: “like the hermaphrodite in the Villa Borghese,” followed by a hideous laugh, after which she relapsed into broken and unintelligible mutterings. (19)

Fantasy and Sex

In his introduction to the memoirs of nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, Michel Foucault poses the question: “Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?” (vii; emphasis in original). In *The Hermaphrodite*, Howe can hardly begin to answer that query, turning to escapist fantasies of sex-gender deregulation, still unable to imagine coherently what a world or a person without a “true sex” would look like. Indeed, she seems to be asking a somewhat different question from Foucault: Do we truly need a true sex to have love? The answer is not entirely clear. Two definitions of “love” seem to be at work in this romance: private love, an intense feeling of intimacy between two desiring

subjects; and public love, the expression of affections within one's cultural milieu, seeking the approbation and sanctioning of the relationship from others. Laurence finds something like love twice—first with Emma and later with Ronald, who seems to be his fated lover in the romance—but as consummation of the relationship is impossible (whether it is indeed physically impossible for Laurence to have sex in any configuration or if he simply fears exposing his own body is not clear), neither gets beyond the expression of intense affections. While Emma falls victim to her love of Laurence, dying not long after their final encounter, Ronald returns at a number of key times in Laurence's life, always injecting fresh torment through his declarations of love. However, within the heteronormative culture in which he lives, Laurence refuses lovers for what would seem to be selfless reasons: he claims to not want his beloved to suffer the tribulations of the necessary queerness their relationship will bring. Because Laurence can never fit the "man and wife" model of intimacy, his affections will always be Other to heteronormative culture.¹⁶ Private love, according to the logic of this romance, can never become or overcome public love without conformity to heteronormativity, neither can the lack of the latter destroy the former.

In a conversation that takes place shortly after Emma's seizure, Laurence returns home and engages his father—whom he refers to only as "Paternus"—in a discussion of the nature of his condition, the most explicit of such conversations in the text. During

¹⁶ Dreger points to a number of instances of hermaphrodites whose intimate lives were uprooted by the discovery of their "true sex." These include, for instance, the case of a French hermaphrodite named Sophie, who had lived as a woman and married a man in the late nineteenth century; because her doctor determined her to in fact be a man, it was decided that "she was . . . not really married . . . because no marriage between two men was a true or legal marriage" (3). See especially pp. 1-3 and 110-38.

this exchange, his father reveals, “It was difficult to determine your sex with precision, it was in fact impossible. No time was to be lost however, and the exigency of the case decided for us. Under the circumstances we deemed it most expedient to bestow on you the name and rights of a man.” Laurence interjects, “It was expedient only because it was right” (86). In this exchange, his sense of psychic maleness, especially in his youth, is affirmed both for the reader and for himself, though the reminder of the anatomical state of his body quickly does much to undercut that sense of certainty: because Laurence cannot produce an heir, he is being written out of his father’s will so that his younger brother will become sole inheritor of the family fortune. Cut out of kinship ties, Laurence is left without affective ties and flees his familial home, seeking solitary refuge in other parts of the world now that even filial love is gone. He dreams of a day when he can

throw back in his [father’s] teeth the odious slur upon my manhood, and to distinguish myself in the eye of the world as he and his had never done— then, when I had made myself illustrious, when my favour and indulgence were become great enough to be courted, then would I meet my father, and proudly say to him: “You are welcome to the name you took from me. I have made for myself a better one.” (35)

In this quasi-Oedipal fantasy, Laurence seeks not so much revenge upon the father as a sense of an avenging justice; he has been slighted by his father through paternal misdeeds, and his retribution will come in the form, not of killing his father, but demonstrating himself to be more of a man than his father can be. Laurence longs to be a

literally self-made man.¹⁷ But fate leads elsewhere.

Disinherited and disowned by his father, deemed a “monster” by his former lover, Laurence becomes a something of a reluctant wanderer, “wearied of [his] travels ere they were well begun,” until one day he stumbles upon “the very beau-idéal of a hermitage,” the bucolic “Lodge in the Wilderness” that serves Laurence as a space of both solace and solitude (34; 36). In this private, remote locale, he can partake of the ascetic lifestyle, religious study, and transcendent reverie that he has resolved to be his only options in life given his bodily non-normativity. Laurence learns of, and comes to sympathize with, the bachelor Count who had been the previous occupant of the cottage, a man who had chosen to devote his life to theological rather than bodily and social concerns, a lifestyle choice that leads a local innkeeper to claim that the Count “settled the affairs of his soul . . . alone with the devil.” The innkeeper insists “the noble Count would have enjoyed a longer life, and would have made a more edifying death, if he had married a wife, gone to mass, and settled the affairs of his soul with a jolly confessor” (37). The critique here, of course, is that the Count failed to keep up appearances in terms of a properly gendered lifestyle and thereby opened himself up to scrutiny of his sexual habits and spiritual condition. Left without his birth-family and unable (or afraid) to start a family of friends, Laurence felt an immediate and true kinship with the bachelor Count, and taking up

¹⁷ On the problem of sex-gender normativity and the issue of justice, see Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, esp. 52-74. Written before the age when so-called “corrective” surgery became common practice for resolving genital abnormalities, Howe never presents a medical option to alter Laurence’s ambiguous genitalia. Butler, however, discusses the physical violence and implicit psychic violence done to sex-indeterminate individuals under the regime of what she calls “the knife of the norm” (53). In some regards, Butler might argue that Laurence escaped injustice by not having his anatomy altered, although she might hesitate with regard to the forced enculturation of a masculine identity for Laurence. His inability to live either successfully as a man or apart from gender regulations altogether represents a larger form of cultural injustice.

residence in his former abode, Laurence learned much from the Count's scholarly pursuits if not from his romantic ones.

At the time of *The Hermaphrodite's* writing, bachelorhood had become, if not a cause for concern, at least a source for a vast public dialogue in nineteenth-century America. The source of both admiration and admonition, the bachelor, as Vincent Bertolini explains, "was a fact of the American social scene, [though] he represented one of the worst threats to nineteenth-century bourgeois social and sexual ideology: the appearance of a codified male subject position that could respectably host non-normative sexual subjectivity and alternative erotic practice" (708). In this description, we might see an affinity between the bachelor and the hermaphrodite in that both find themselves as kinds of solitary travelers through society, travelers who may accumulate queer associations along the way but who ultimately represent, to the eyes of normative culture, an almost unimaginable solitude. This is not to say that there are not important differences between the two, foremost among them being the acceptance of bachelorhood as a way of life within human society; perhaps, as some would see it, not the best way, but a viable way nevertheless. This semi-sanctioning of the bachelor is desirable to a hermaphrodite like Laurence, who longs to find away to participate within normative society, despite the knowledge that he can never occupy a stable position within it—to be an outcast is implicitly not to occupy such a position. Importantly, too, bachelorhood was imagined to be a state that could be temporary, whereas the hermaphrodite had no real options for change in the mid-nineteenth century. But as liminal figures to heteronormative culture, the bachelor and the hermaphrodite both represent a kind of

queer potential that realizes itself in literature through the deployment of fantasy. Indeed, the episode of Laurence's occupation of the bachelor Count's cabin is among the most fantastical in the romance.

The literature of the bachelor became wildly popular at mid-century, and foremost among narratives of the bachelor were the works of Ik Marvel, nom-de-plume of Donald Grant Mitchell. His widely popular *Reveries of a Bachelor: or, a Book of the Heart* (1850) and its follow-up, *Dream Life: A Fable of the Seasons* (1851) both engage the reader through a topos of fantasy that asks the audience to understand the narratives with which they are presented as the outpourings of a representative bachelor's imagination. Both narratives involve a form cyclical story-telling that involves moving through a series of tropes metonymically linked to the episodic story: in *Reveries*, images of fire (cigar, coal, hearth); in *Dream Life*, the seasons. Each image spurs on a part of the story, each part explicitly a fantasy of a life—to paraphrase Butler—not yet lived. In both texts, Mitchell employs the second-person voice throughout, a gesture intended to invite, or coerce, readers into identification with bachelor narrative subject, a subject who cannot linguistically be separated from the reader. While both texts have a narrator subject who speaks the introduction and various interludes in the first person, the majority of the narrative is advanced by a protagonist addressed as “You.” Indeed, after providing an introductory statement and a framing narrative, Mitchell's texts slip quickly into the second person and remain there for most of the text: “You need not hurry up from the office so early at night”; “But, again, Peggy loves you” (*Reveries* 481); “You love that old garret roof; and you nestle down under its slope” (*Dream Life* 38). The effect is that

the reader is given no choice but to imagine herself within the world of the text in a narrative addressed to her, and the cohesion of the reading experience relies upon such an identification.

The question then becomes what the function of such identification might be. Two possibilities emerge: that the text is intended to serve a disciplinary function, or that it provides an alternative to mundane daily life through fantasy. The disciplinary option is easy enough to read: in *Dream Life*, the bachelor narrator's "Aunt Tabithy" declares, "You have rung so many changes on your hopes and your dreams, that you have nothing left, but to make them real—if you can" (12). The narrator, Isaac, rebuffs, "Is life so then exhausted, is hope gone out, is fancy dead? . . . No, no, Aunt Tabithy,—this life of musing does not exhaust so easily. . . . Dreamland will never be exhausted, until we enter the land of dreams; and until, in 'shuffling off this mortal coil,' thought will become fact, and all facts will be only thought" (12-13). The chiasmatic conclusion to the paragraph is representative of the kind of cognitive chiasmus at operation within the narratives: fantasy is an essential component of human life, and life choices are often informed by the workings of fantasy. This is not to align Mitchell with those who Butler's description of fantasy is intended to critique, those who would claim that fantasies, especially pornographic ones, have a transparent correlation to the way our lives are lived; rather, fantasies present us with the opportunity of trying out, in theory, a number of potentialities that we might envision playing out, and we make many of our decisions based on speculations drawn from our fantasies. *Reveries of a Bachelor* is particularly illustrative of this in its sequential presentation of reveries that reflect different choices a

bachelor might make, from rejecting marriage and family to giving oneself over to heteronormative life narratives. The bachelor narrator ultimately decides not to choose, or at least not to pursue, the dream lives of his reveries, and the text concludes in a spiral of fantasy that reiterates both the centrality of fantasy to daily human life and its inescapability in our psychic lives: “I dreamed pleasant dreams that night;—for I dreamed that my Reverie was real” (584). Ultimately, one is left with a sense of ambivalence at Mitchell’s endings, wondering whether or not the life of the bachelor or the life of the family man is desirable, since whatever we choose, we still wind up fantasizing or, as in *Dream Life*, dying.

In the same way that the protagonists of bachelor literature became objects of fantasy for antebellum readers,¹⁸ the bachelor Count and the bucolic abode he occupied become catalysts for Laurence’s fantasy and provide the source materials for some of the most fantastic passages in the romance. In the space of queer retreat, Laurence follows the Count’s mandate of spiritual investigation, reading over the library’s “collection of tracts and treatises, metaphysical and theological, of all ages and in all languages” (which, importantly, included the works of Emmanuel Swedenborg, whose importance to

¹⁸ On the role of fantasy in Mitchell’s work (especially *Reveries*), see Vincent Bertolini, “Fireside Chastity” and Katherine Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood, and the Novel*, esp. 47-63. On the reading experiences of antebellum audiences, see Lisa Spiro, “Reading with a Tender Rapture.” Spiro explains that reading was often a communal experience, especially among families and that readers both male and female found materials for their fantasies in *Reveries*: “Readers embraced *Reveries* in part because it allowed them to imagine themselves beyond the gendered spheres of work and domesticity, so that men embraced leisure, home, and feeling, while women dreamed about traveling across the ocean, engaging in a wild romance, or creating works of art” (62). While not all of these elements are pieces of the plot of *Reveries*, I think Spiro’s implicit (queer) point is that *Reveries* allowed readers to imagine that life could be otherwise than the normative domestic life many were experiencing. On the influence of *Reveries* upon a not-so-normative reader, Emily Dickinson, see Páraic Finnerty, “A Dickinson Reverie.”

The Hermaphrodite I will discuss shortly). Laurence tells us, “My habits of diet, always simple, had grown austere. . . . The curse of my existence, the cruel injustice of nature had for the time quite faded from my remembrance—my body was become a matter of such small consequence to me, that I cared little after what manner it was made” (46). Because his body *could not* be brought in line with normative life narratives, because his anatomy *could not* become a destiny, Laurence sought his own social death, an escape from what he understands as bodily error into the sublime perfection of the divine. The making of his body leads Laurence to escape the physical world into the realm of fantasy, where bodily limitations are cast aside.

The episode in the Count’s cottage is a touchstone in the text, as it is the first time in the narrative that Laurence begins to question his own masculine status—that is, his feeling of psychic maleness—and enters into a trance-like state in which the lines between imagination and reality are blurred. And though Howe’s manuscript predates the publication of Mitchell’s *Reverie*, the sequence in the cabin mirrors the fantasy-as-narrative device that that is key to the structure of Mitchell’s bachelor writings. Perhaps Howe, like Mitchell, saw the importance to potential readers of representations of the act of fantasizing as a means of both piquing reader interest in the subject of fantasy and demonstrating its importance in human psychic life. Surrendering physicality to the fantastic, Laurence becomes a transcendent being who overcomes the politics of the body—for a while, at least—and thereby opens himself up to new forms of sex-gender identity and new possibilities for love.

Laurence's confinement to the cabin begins significantly with his description of a sculpture, one of only a few sparse adornments in the austere interior, that cannot but remind one of the hermaphrodite at the Villa Borghese, to which Laurence has already been compared:

This was a bas-relief, describing the head and bust of a female figure. The forms of the neck and shoulders were delicately chiselled [sic], and the graceful hands were tenderly clasped upon the rounded bosom; but a strange caprice of art concealed the features that should [have] given the charm of soul to such perfect physical beauty. The sculptor, and his patron, had kept their secret—a marble veil covered the face, as hopeless as the grave. Beneath it was simply inscribed the name: Angela. (38)

Perhaps the statue is intended as a representation of Saint Angela, who was stricken blind on her journey to the Holy Land and was healed during her return journey, as the figures veiled face might signify blindness. But more importantly, as this description makes clear, the veil masks the facial features, “the charm of the soul,” that would confirm that “Angela” is a representation of a woman. Like the hermaphrodite of the Villa Borghese, however, as well as the missing pages that may have contained a description of Laurence's genitalia, the anatomy and, we are to understand, the sex and gender of the figure represented in the statue are obscured from our view. The implicit argument here seems to be that, in matters of sex and gender, empiricism matters; more than that—thorough empiricism matters. Laurence's anatomy, the statue of the hermaphrodite,

Angela: in all three instances, some clues are given as to the sex of the represented subject (Laurence wears the dress and exhibits the manners of a man; both statues appear female in form), but the lack of absolute certainty, the “secret” the sculptor and his patron (and Howe’s missing manuscript pages, and Laurence’s hidden body) might be keeping, is the source of both anxiety and wonder.

Turning from the Angela statue to observe closer the contents of the Count’s library, Laurence concludes, “only one thing was evident therein, and this was the fact that upon the mysterious question of the soul’s relation with God, he had studied and thought for himself.” The Count comes to figure as a representative iconoclast, reading “Papist,” “Calvinist,” and “inspired Heathen” with equal zeal and coming to his own conclusions about the relation between God and man, the physical and the divine, and the soul and the body (39). Following the Count’s mandate that occupants of his cell must live an ascetic life and “in holy study his days must pass” (40), Laurence begins on a course of reading and self-reflection that is, he explains, brought on by mourning for Emma, and this sense of lost love alters both his intellect and his identity:

Thus she who would have led me into the inner sanctuary of earthly love, still held me in her power. Death had not relaxed, had but more firmly locked her hold upon me; and as the priestess of mysteries more yet divine, and as the Genius of love that could not die, she grew to me an object of mystic reverence and wonder, devoutly shrined in my inmost soul—revered and worshipped, perhaps, all the more for being no longer

seen, for having never been possessed. Yet, as study succeeded to vague imagining, and reflection to emotion, my ideas of another life gradually lost somewhat of their personality. Truth soon became to me greater than hope or happiness, and in the pursuit of it I lost much of myself that I never found again. (43)

And so it is that Laurence's escape into his hermitage has more to do, upon reflection, with the death of Emma than with his father's abandonment and disinheritance of him. It is the broken love bond, shattered by death, that leads him to seek a meaning beyond the body and an affect beyond lust or earthly love. In the above passage, it is "imagining" that leads Laurence to "Truth," so that, in contrast to the empirical imperative of the Angela scene, Laurence, like Hawthorne, comes to see that senses of reality or realism are not the only roads to truth. In fact, in matters of affect, "reality" is often a stumbling block in the pursuit of emotion. Laurence gives up "hope" and "happiness," not because these are ultimately impossible but because they have accrued normative meaning to which he can no longer subscribe. He may have "lost much of [him]self," but as his removal from the heteronormative world will prove, he gains something for himself in exchange.

The ascetic lifestyle Laurence adopts during his residence in the Count's cottage leads to a transformation of his body and spirit—changes that result in an altered sense of identity and of the potential for human intimacy. Allowing himself little "of food and of fire," Laurence's neglect of his physical needs leads to an general unconcern for the

body: “Of my appearance, I had grown utterly forgetful—convenience had guided me to the assumption of a long, loose garment, while my neglected hair had quite outgrown all bounds, and rolled about my shoulders in its long golden waves.” This forgetting of the body removes Laurence from the aesthetics of sex and gender, and he eventually finds

by chance one day [when] I saw my face in the mirror, I was glad to observe in it a diaphanous, mortified look which seemed to assure me that the spirit was now lord absolute, and that the flesh had at last learned its place, and would keep it. If common sense sometimes ventured to expostulate with me upon my disobedience to the laws of physical well-being, I reasoned with it after this fashion. (46)

The subordination of fleshly needs has a double-effect upon Laurence: the “diaphanous, mortified” state of his body removes—pleasantly—the masculine-gendered form from his body, achieving a kind of gestalt state that his gender-transcendent beauty seemed to naturalize for him; and the physical depravation he suffers leads to the series of visions that are both the intended outcome of his study and the enabling factor in the development of his love relationship with Ronald, which develops upon his departure from the cabin.

At the conclusion of this period of soul searching and starvation, Laurence tells us “there fell upon me a sort of trance, and for a time I had no more thought or perceptions like those of other men. Whether I was awake or sleeping, I know not, but while my body was unconscious and incapable of motion, my mind seemed to penetrate with rapid

progress into regions unknown before.” In his madness, “The silence of my cell became harmonious to my ear and from every side voices of wondrous sweetness spake to me words of comfort and encouragement. . . . I thought that a shining band of them had gathered closely around me, admitting me into their fellowship and tendering me their guidance and protection.” These spirits lead Laurence to the gates of Heaven, where they disperse, and he is met by “a dark and frowning angel, bearing a flaming sword whereon was written *madness*” (48). This threatening angel is stayed, however, when Laurence, “in [his] agony,” calls upon Christ, who “motioned back the angel saying: ‘spare him for my sake— . . . child come hither no more till [sic] I call thee here.’” (49). This congress with angels and with Christ begs us to associate Laurence with their forms, and the specific ideas of human association with angels and apotheosis into angelic form, connect Laurence’s mortal form to that of the divine, an idea that Howe very likely derived from her reading of the eighteenth-century Swedish philosopher and theologian Emmanuel Swedenborg, whose complicated and, some might argue, conflicting accounts of the relationship between physical and angelic bodies, especially with regard to sex and gender, was the subject of much interest and scrutiny in the antebellum period.

Indeed, *The Hermaphrodite* seems to be much indebted to Swedenborgian thought, though the exact source(s) of that influence upon Howe is not entirely clear.¹⁹

¹⁹ American transcendentalism owed a great deal to Swedenborg, whom Emerson first learned about through Samson Reed’s popular “Oration on Genius” and whom Emerson included an essay on in his *Representative Men*; Gary Williams also notes the importance of Swedenborg to Balzac’s novel *Séraphîta*, which Howe was known to have read and whose plot shares resemblances with *The Hermaphrodite* (“Speaking” xxxiii). For a condemnation of Swedenborgian theology in American culture, as well as a comparison to that other emergent radical religious tradition within Christianity—Mormonism—see the article “Religion of Fancy.”

The only direct reference to Swedenborg does not come until the end of the romance, when an observer contemplating Laurence's seemingly dead body remarks upon him as "a heavenly superhuman mystery, one undivided, integral soul"; Laurence notes about the observer, she "had read something of Swedenborg" (195). But the influence of Swedenborg's idealization of hermaphroditism as the proper angelic form is clearly observable in Laurence's vision, and it gets to the heart of the intellectual problem of the hermaphrodite: how can the hermaphrodite be both the ideal, integral being and simultaneously represent the most egregious trespass of normative culture? Perhaps some of the confusion comes from the vagaries of Swedenborg's writing. Central to his theology is the notion that humans and human society reflect divine existence, and thus his most controversial point, that marriages exist even in heaven. But the marriage argument in Swedenborg is so lacking in clarity and cohesiveness that it becomes difficult to discern exactly the nature of the married individual in heaven:

Since heaven comes from the human race, which means that there are angels of both sexes there, and since by creation itself woman is for man and man for woman, each for the other, and since this love is inborn in both sexes, it follows that there are marriages in the heavens just as there are on earth. However, the marriages in the heavens are very different from earthly ones. . . .

. . . love finds its source in the union of two people in one mind. In heaven, this is called "living together," and they are not called "two" but

“one.” Consequently two spouses in heaven are not called two angels but one angel. (*Heaven and Hell* 294; 295)

Are angels then a single, self-contained being in which the two sexes are unified, or are they the combined natures of two distinct and sexually disparate individuals? Is the hermaphroditic angel or the heteronormative couple the ideal? As is the case with much of Swedenborg’s philosophy, it is hard to say for certain. Swedenborg’s understanding of the nature of sex finds itself caught up in the kind of one-sex model versus two-sex model of the human, an inability to decide whether the female body represented simply “a lesser version of the male’s (a one-sex model)” or “its incommensurable opposite (a two-sex model)” (viii). In his *Conjugal Love*, he is hardly able to articulate the difference between male and female, though he spends much of the text trying to do so; he claims that “there is such a distinction between the male principle and the female principle, that the one cannot be changed into the other,” and yet a few lines later, “the female principle is derived from the male” (37). Unable to keep men and women straight, arguing all the while for both their essential difference in human beings *and* the perfection of their union in a single being, Swedenborgian theology proves to be intellectually untenable while also providing fertile grounds for fantasy.

Laurence embodies the struggle Swedenborg’s theology represents: the imperative for empirical proof of one’s proper embodiment of the dyadic sex-gender system, and the simultaneous desire to unite male and female properties into a being that exceeds them both. The incomprehensibility of such a being in fleshly form plagues both

Swedenborg and Howe; as the former, however, dismisses it as impossibility, the latter tries to extrapolate a life for such a being, all the while understanding that life as essentially unlivable. Both authors associate hermaphroditic union with the supernatural or “superhuman,” and yet both assume the centrality of love of other humans to hermaphroditic existence. For Swedenborg, the hermaphroditic angel is spawned of a marriage of male and female, from which it is both distinct yet a part; for Howe, the human hermaphrodite is constantly in search of the love that will make him feel whole, all the while knowing that the impossibility of a normative sexual life for such a being will position it outside of human society. Both authors imagine an apotheosis of the human in order to achieve divine union of the sexes, but Howe cannot rest there. Her romance takes the hermaphrodite’s body as the site of divine possibility but demonstrates how the heteronormativity of Western culture makes human life unlivable for the hermaphroditic subject. In the end, because Laurence’s body cannot be brought in line with the mandates of human society, he must transcend human form—he does this to great effect in the visionary scenes in the Count’s cottage; he is less successful the second time around.

Signs and Love

When Laurence is awakened from his hunger-induced trance state in the cottage, he finds himself confronted by a being whose beauty calls his reality into question. This is his first encounter with Ronald, and before their proper introductions, he describes the boy as “one whose sex disclosed itself in a form of perfect beauty. It was of youthful

proportions, but its lightness and grace gave the promise of manly strength, even as the ingenuous features gave their earnest of steadfastness and truth of soul.” Laurence inquires, “Art thou human?” The boy replies, “If you could see yourself . . . you would think that I might far better ask the question of you” (50). Deprivation has caused Laurence’s body to lose those features that might have given his appearance a masculine quality, and his ungendered form causes his young savior to question the gaunt being’s humanity; indeed, if to be ungendered within heteronormative society is also to be inhuman, Ronald’s acknowledgement of that fact is meant in the kindest way. What frightens Laurence about his own appearance is exactly that which attracts Ronald. In his escape from Swedenborgian fantasies, Laurence emerges as an angelic vision to his young future suitor.

Ronald initially takes Laurence for a woman, addressing him as “Madam,” which leads Laurence to declare, “I am weak as a child, and as you have well said, I look nothing human, but I swear to you that I am no woman.” This reprimand follows quickly upon Laurence’s realization of the deformed state of his body; he was “terrified at my own appearance. It was not the long hair, nor the deathlike countenance, nor the wild, haggard eyes that startled me, it was that in my long robe de chambre, and with the wild profusion of locks, I looked like a woman.” The long-standing association between “male” and “human” in Laurence’s life is evident here, and though he once longed to leave bodily concerns behind, the body becomes of the utmost concern when it signifies in ways one does not desire. Laurence immediately asks for Ronald’s aid in cutting his overgrown hair, but Ronald refuses, declaring “Do not, do not cut it off! . . . it is the most

beautiful hair that I ever saw. I can aid you in concealing it, but I will not suffer you to cut it off" (51).²⁰ The sign of a sexual crossing linked to bodily transcendence, Laurence's long hair is the first bodily attribute to be taken as a sign of sex in the romance, though, to be sure, it is a malleable and unreliable one. Nevertheless, the fear of femininity embodied by this sign in this scene, a scene which in part seems to represent Laurence as fundamentally questioning women's status as human, also marks the formation of the profoundly queer bond between Laurence and Ronald—a bond that will defy gender, geography, and generation.

In the romance, true love, as embodied by the bond between Laurence and Ronald, figures as a feeling outside of time (Ronald describes it as "a past without a reckoning—a present without a future" [88]), and thus the hermaphrodite must feel apart from normative structures of time, as his body is (mis)understood and evaluated through exclusionary histories of sexuality and of signification, an infertile fluke of fate. Ambivalently stranded both between and outside the binary sex-gender system that had solidly taken hold in Western culture by the mid-nineteenth century, the hermaphrodite could never have assimilation as an option—at least not an easy one. Because the hermaphrodite's body literally does not fit within the normative paradigm of heterosexuality, he is left, so it seems, with two alternatives: a life of solitude apart from the heteronormativity of his contemporary American culture, or a life of reinvention, in which private renegotiations of sex roles and behaviors are concealed within the veil of

²⁰ Ronald's fascination with Laurence's hair recurs later in the text. When the two reunite after a long period apart, during which Laurence has continued to grow his hair, Ronald, who has developed into a strapping man, lets down his lover's hair and "marvel[s] at the abundance and beauty" (81).

normative public personas: that is, the hermaphrodite might find a partner willing to live a secret queer existence hidden by the appearance of normative heterosexuality. But to Julia Ward Howe—who wrote her romance of the hermaphrodite during the early years of her unhappy marriage to Samuel Girdley Howe, who may have also been lovers with Charles Sumner (a man who, according to her husband’s correspondence, Julia frequently declared “ought to have been a woman & you to have married her” [xxi])—to Howe, her hermaphrodite, Laurence, represents potential, not limitation. If the hermaphrodite is bound to failure in the realm of intimacy, it is not an inevitability of the subject himself but of the shortcomings of heteronormative culture and the unnatural (though naturalized) limits placed upon desire by systems of sexual signification intended to restrict intimate possibilities.

When they are reunited in Italy, Laurence again refuses Ronald’s advances and the young man decides, because of Laurence’s inability (or unwillingness) to couple, that he must leave Laurence behind forever: the rejection “awoke in me [Laurence] a consciousness of shame . . . shame was swallowed up in agony . . . and the beautiful monster sat as before on the heap of stones, in the ancient forum, himself as mute and dead as any thing [sic.] there”; this, again, is a comparison of Laurence to the statue of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite in the Villa Borghese, to which his beauty has been compared throughout the romance (193). Slipping into a catatonic state which is mistaken for death, Laurence seems to ascend his physical body, and he becomes like a phantom lurking about his body, observing his own post-mortem medical examination and even his own funeral—though he is not in fact dead (and this can be a point of

confusion). He seems to have died of a broken heart, and if love, as Ronald suggests earlier in the narrative, removes one from the normative flow of time, then Laurence withdraws from human temporality altogether. In such a state, Laurence is finally able, for a while, to truly forget his body, though at that same moment, his anatomy finally becomes subject to the scrutinizing eye of a physician, who initiates a debate between his Italian hosts over the true sex-gender of Laurence's being.

If the form of his body meant that Laurence could only live a half-life in a social sense beforehand, his catatonic state leaves him literally less than half alive—not breathing, not moving, but with a brain nevertheless capable of “becoming excited to a vivid consciousness.” His senses still sharp despite his somatic shutdown, Laurence is able to perceive “the horror of [his] fate”: that he is about to be buried alive. Longing “earnestly for the power of averting it by giving some token of life,” Laurence recognizes the cadence of Roanld's footsteps approaching, as the two cursed lovers are once again reunited at the scene of Laurence's transition from one bodily state to another; they met initially while Laurence was engulfed in his unsexed reverie in the cabin; again at the moment that Laurence decides to stop living as Cecilia; and finally at the scene of his early burial. In an unintended textual symmetry, the modern version of the romance ends as it began—in mid-sentence: “Silence, dead silence from all—oh that he could have spoken, that I might but hear his voice once more! He knelt for” (198). Another opportunity for intimacy is lost in the silence of Laurence's grave, as again the anomalies of his body, still incomprehensible within normative culture, drive a wedge between the two lovers. The broken state of the text leaves no chance for reunion or even resolution,

though clearly the story of Laurence goes on. And because the text ends in longing, in a provocation of fantasy—because we cannot help but dream our own queer ending to this romance which ends queerly—we must understand that the ambiguities and ambivalences of signification in the text may not always lead to a world remade, but insofar as they do call us to see the need for critique and revision of the symbolic order of heteronormative culture, which this romance demands we interrogate, our sympathy for Laurence slowly transforms into identification.

Conclusion: Dissatisfaction

A mystery story “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman” was published anonymously in *The Knickerbocker* in 1857, almost a decade after Howe likely completed the manuscript of *The Hermaphrodite*. The plot deals with the courtship and married life of one Japhet Colbones, described in the first sentence as “a very odd individual” and later as simply “the oddity” (599; 608). Conceived as a kind of tragicomedy, the story deals primarily with a series of thefts of articles of clothing, jewelry, and various other items from Japhet’s wife, Tiddy, and her sister, Drusy, who conspire to seek out the criminal only to discover, while investigating strange noises coming from downstairs, their odd but beloved Japhet “arrayed in woman’s [sic] clothes almost from head to foot, and [he] was just then pulling and straightening out the ruffles on a cap Drusy recognized as the one her mother had lost some years before.” It turns out that Japhet had been stealing garments and accessories from the women and their family for years, staying up late at night altering items sized too small and secretly

performing femininity while he suspected everyone else to be sleeping. His pursuers react with a mixture of laughter and horror as they observe while Japhet “admired himself, . . . spread out his gown, took his handkerchief in his hand, and began to walk back and forth with as much of the air and gait of a woman as he could assume” (607). Rather than confronting “the imaginary woman” (607), the women keep his secret while trying to work out a means of reclaiming their now altered possessions. But before long, the strain of his secret wears on Japhet, and Tiddy arrives home one day to discover that her husband has committed suicide, “the oddest freak yet, of the odd man. He had managed to hang himself in a sitting posture, and his face was calm and placid” (609). In the bag in his hand, a note was discovered that reads thus:

I think I am a woman. I have been seven years making me a perfect suit of garments appropriate for my sex. As I have passed so long, falsely, for a man, I am ashamed to show myself in my true colors; therefore, I hang myself. The property all to go to the woman I have called my wife. It is now twelve o'clock. I have prepared every thing [sic] for the funeral, and desire that I may be laid out in the clothes I have on. (609)

The story depends on our understanding of two central facts about Japhet, facts that would have been unspeakable in the antebellum era: that Japhet was transgender, and that given his transgender status, his marriage must be invalid—he can only “call” Tiddy his wife, as two women cannot be married. The narrative ties up in what is intended to be read as comedic fashion, with Tiddy and her sisters moving into property inherited from Japhet, and the Colbones family continuing on in their oddities.

I introduce “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman” here at the end of my discussion of *The Hermaphrodite* because reading the short story against the romance demonstrates the latter’s status as the exception that proves the rule when it comes to antebellum attitudes toward non-normative sexual identities. Appearing in a popular literary magazine, “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman” makes obvious to modern readers what was acceptable in the discourse of gender non-normativity—that those who find themselves outside the binary sex-gender system are odd or freakish and worthy of our ridicule; as the humorous tone of the story indicates, they are a laughing matter, as is their suffering. Though modern readers might find it difficult not to feel sympathy with Japhet, the story is clear that antebellum readers were to disidentify with him and disdain his feelings and actions. The work of *The Hermaphrodite* is entirely the opposite. Whereas sexual non-normativity is literally a dead end in “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman,” it is the beginning of the story of *The Hermaphrodite*. Assuming a pervasive queerness in the desires of all of humanity, Howe’s hermaphrodite is starting point, a gestalt figure for human desire, and while Laurence ultimately suffers from shame and scorn, he also represents possibility. The fantasies played out in the romance represent potentialities—Butler’s “not yet real”—rather than a dismissal as mere escape from reality.

In all of these texts, the body represents a problem for the mind in its accumulation of signs in culture. Howe, Sargent, and the author of “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman” all understand that the policing of sex and gender operates through systems of signs, and how well one is able to conform or appropriate those signs

is the result of successful public performances of gender. So Laurence, Japhet, and the narrator of Sargent's essay all attempt to put on an acceptably-gendered public face, though they find themselves always feeling that status to be a sham, or privately amassing signs of their true feeling, or pleading for reforms, all the while claiming that they change nothing. Read together, these texts seem to belie the idea that heteronormativity was in any way the truth of human desire, instead demonstrating a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with norm, even though most felt powerless to do much about it. The heteronormativity pervading antebellum culture is countered by thinkers like Howe and Sargent, who argue for an integrity of personhood, of subjectivity, that is independent of the cultural approbation normative gender performance affords one. The romance, however, is the ideal genre for writing dissent, and *The Hermaphrodite* does a kind of fantasy work that is intended to engage author and reader in speculation about the possible, a kind of visionary work that reimagines the present, even if the present cannot be changed *at present*.

CHAPTER 4

“THAT DARKER, THOUGH TRUER ASPECT OF THINGS”:

THE END(S) OF ROMANCE IN MELVILLE’S *PIERRE*

In one of the later chapters of Herman Melville’s romance *Pierre, or The Ambiguities* (1852), the main plot (so much as there is one) is interrupted (as it often is) by a rambling pontification from the comedic yet philosophical Charlie Millthorpe, a childhood friend of Pierre’s whom he reencounters after taking up resident at the church *cum* artists’ and intellectuals’ colony of the Apostles; after reminding himself that Pierre is living as a married man (he is in fact only feigning marriage to his newly-discovered presumed half-sister, Isabel), Charlie offers the following insights:

Well, I suppose it [marriage] is wise after all. It settles, centralizes, and confirms a man, I have heard.—No, I didn’t; it is a random thought of my own, that!—Yes, it makes the world definite to him; It removes his morbid *subjectiveness*, and makes all things *objective*; nine small children, for instance, may be considered *objective*. Marriage, hey!—A fine thing, no doubt, no doubt:—domestic—pretty—nice, all round. But I owe something to the world, my boy! By marriage, I might contribute to the population of men, but not to the census of the mind. The great men are all bachelors, you know. Their family is the universe: I should say the

planet Saturn was their eldest son; and Plato their uncle. (281)¹

Marriage, Charlie seems to suggest, is a distraction from the work that really matters—or at least the work that really matters to him: the life of the mind. Like most of the inhabitants of the Apostles, Charlie seeks to distinguish himself as a scholar and philosopher, not unlike Pierre. And though Pierre clearly regards Charlie's as an amusing though ultimately inferior intellect, it is nevertheless true that Charlie understands something about the nature of family life that eludes Pierre: that participation in marriage and family life mark discontinuities in one's life that require alterations not only of one's living arrangements but also of one's manhood.² Charlie's distinction between the "subjective" bachelor and the "objective" husband and father gets at the problems of selfhood and of relationality that propel *Pierre* toward its tragic ending and its simultaneous—and I will argue deliberate—failure as a romance.

In the early years of the 1850s, especially during his brief but passionate friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne,³ Melville published *Pierre* amid a period of great productivity, if not great commercial success, in which he composed a number of well-known romances both brief and lengthy, including *Moby-Dick* (1851), "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855). While disparate in content and form, all of these romances, including *Pierre*, share a

¹ For the sake of clarity, throughout the remainder of this introductory section, I follow Charlie Millthorpe's (that is to say, Melville's) use of the universal masculine, with an awareness of its anachronism and sexism. That said, it is safe to say that though Melville was thinking in universalizing terms, he was almost certainly thinking of the male as the universal, whether because of the conventions of the day or his own sexist attitude I cannot say.

² Priscilla Wald reads *Pierre* in the context of a growing literary nationalism that emphasizes a metonymic bond between family and nation, and in such a context, "marriage will transform the romantic youth into an *American man*" (134).

³ For the most recent assessments of the nature and impact of the Hawthorne-Melville friendship, see Jana Argersinger and Leland Person's collection, *Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship*.

teleological narrative that begins with visionary optimism, key to the project of the romance, and ends in nihilistic skepticism; this is perhaps most overt in the diptych structure of “Paradise/Tartarus,” which shifts locale and tone just at the moment of ideological transition. This negative narrative trajectory, I argue, indicates Melville’s two-mindedness about the visionary project of the romance: he wanted desperately to believe in it and yet could not overcome his insurmountable skepticism. He could not truly commit himself to Hawthorne’s search for “the truth of the human heart,” as such a search seemed to him to get wrong both the inexplicable nature of human subjectivity and the bleakness of material reality (*House* 1). Though Hawthorne’s romances were often redolent with their own varieties of skepticism and gloom, he was content to let his romances end in comedy or ambiguity for the sake of their visionary work; Melville’s narratives could only end in obliteration. Hawthorne could value the moment of the vision in itself, whereas Melville was committed to and conscripted by a system of valuation dependent upon practicality and practicability. Melville sees the project of the romance as not sustainable but cannot help himself from attempting such a literary feat over and over. His texts assume a meta-critical position against themselves—romances rightly named as such that nevertheless foresee their own failure. This does not make him a Realist (at least not yet), though it does make him a realist.

Many of Melville’s characters are in search of solutions to the problems of the human condition in the now not-so-new nation, and while he seems to want desperately to cleave to fantasy-as-resolution, he cannot but transmute his romances into critiques of romanticism. The “subjectivity/objectivity problem” Charlie Millthorpe points out in

Pierre is key to understanding the form of Melville's failed romances, for the question of delineating where one's fantasy life ends and where the outer world begins—or, more accurately, of realizing exactly how little control one has over social and material realities—is at the center of all Melvillean romances. The “morbid *subjective*” man is the author of the romance, who allows, as Hawthorne puts it, “the creatures of his brain [to] play their phantasmagorical antics,” but that man is always condemned, to Melville's mind, to live in his own unreality (*Blithedale* 2). Though the bachelor's mind might flourish in the absence of familial obligation, his contribution to the material progress of humanity—a real contribution “to the population of men” in this materialist logic—is zero sum. The “*objective*” man, however, is to borrow a Jesuitical phrase, “a self for others,” one who turns the focus from his intellectual inner life to the maintenance of home and hearth and who lives in a largely *reactive* state, being operated upon by the world rather than serving as an agent in it. The subjective man believes he can change the world, but he “morbidly” has no place in it, demonstrating the life of the mind to always be a kind of afterlife; the objective man most assuredly has his place in the world, but that place is always circumscribed by normative life narratives and material needs of both self and family that, as far as Melville can see, override any alternative aspirations he might have. Caught between a life lived away from the general fellowship of humankind or capitulation to what Russ Castronovo calls “necro citizenship,” the subject of the Melvillean romance narrative finds himself inevitably in a

double bind.⁴

Unable to commit to a life of visionary pursuits and unhappy with existence in the status quo, the subjects of these narratives find themselves seeking, futilely, to resist what I call the *tyranny of facts* in Melville's romances, a force that undoes in the second portion of the text the progressivist optimism of the first and leads the subject inevitably toward a state of unlivability. Noting similarities between Melville's literary career and that of his creation Pierre Glendinning, Priscilla Wald explains, "Like the rebellious Pierre, Melville *feels moved* to write against the grain, but, as he shows in Pierre, we are *moved* by the same forces we think we oppose" (155; emphasis in original). For instance, to return to the highly-esteemed (at least in the community of the Apostles) figure of the bachelor, Katherine Snyder reminds us that bachelors "were often seen by their contemporaries as disruptive to domestic life or merely extraneous to it," and yet bachelors "were a necessary resource for the domestic institution of marriage" (3). Snyder's analysis describes a relation of the bachelor to the larger social world that describes exactly the bind in which Pierre (and presumably Melville himself) are caught: desirous of a life of their own making outside of the strictures of normative culture yet nevertheless fodder for the culture machine. The material world of society draws the visionary back from his mental precipice, as the inevitable interdependency of human lives and the needs of the human body make it impossible for the intellectual to live in fact merely inside his head. For the visionary artist, facts are problems, and they get in the way of our trying to envision *what might be* by constantly reminding us of *what is*.

⁴ Castronovo defines "necro citizenship" as the commitment of "an acquiescent and passive citizenry" to forms of social governance, such that "it becomes hard to distinguish between actual and figurative death" (xii).

Artists and intellectuals, try as they may, cannot live outside of the world that is, even while trying to envision a better one.

Melvillean Materialism

Pierre is certainly no easy read; neither is *Moby-Dick*.⁵ Ironically, however, both have plots that are not, if one were to attempt to summarize them, overly complex. What makes them both difficult reads and bulky texts is the constant narrative interruptions that disrupt the story and distract the reader. These textual interjections are, of course, intentional on the part of Melville and serve the larger purpose of rendering his fiction more than mere narrative, making the romance itself a quest for intellectual provocation rather than a search for narrative satisfaction. And often these interruptions in Melville's romances take the form of fact, casting new light on the psychology of his characters or illustrating or allegorizing the fictional but fact-based material conditions in which the narratives unfold. When not relaying on fact, Melville's narrative diversions may also take the form of flights of fancy, though these fantasies are always closely tethered to reality and generally end with some terrible realization or intrusion that causes the dreamer to snap back into reality. Like the romances themselves, Melville's characters never wander too far into the realm of the fantastic before being drawn back by material concerns or anxieties.

⁵ For Ann Douglas, Melville's difficulty is a virtue, as he writes in a culture that fails to value properly intellectualism and reason. Regarding *Pierre*, she declares, "Melville allows his readers no real way into the novel; the story is an insult, not a dare" (309). She reads *Pierre* in the context of antebellum domestic fiction, and explains, "Melville makes the sentimental domestic romance into a cage in which he deliberately confines his main character—and himself—both to define the limits of the form and to test the possibility of breaking out and destroying it" (312). Though Melville and *Pierre* never escape the domestic cage—at least not alive—their struggle is provocative nevertheless.

Two familiar examples from *Moby-Dick* illustrate these dueling forms of materialist consciousness in Melville's romances. While it may be argued that *Moby-Dick* is a more coherent book than *Pierre* in terms of plot, it is also the case that the several digressions into scientific discourse relating to whaling do, it would seem, remove the reader further from the world of the romance than the fictional histories and topical metaphysical meditations that disrupt the later romance. In *Moby-Dick*, the most disruptive narrative removal into factual discourse is the "Cetology" chapter, the first of a number of chapters punctuating the text with discourses relating to whale biology and anatomy. One of the longest chapters in the romance, this general introduction to whale science contains a disparate array of data and analysis that ranges from a list of those scholars and artists who have written about whales (beginning, of course, with "The Authors of the Bible") to a brief etymological history of the inaccurately-named sperm whale, whose "spermaceti" is in fact a body oil and not actual semen (135, 138). Samuel Otter argues that *Moby-Dick's* anatomy chapters "bear an intimate and substantial, rather than tangential, digressive, or parodic, relation to the narrative," and embody the narrative topos of the "quest for knowledge anchored in bodies" (133). While I think Otter's larger point about the thematic use of the anatomy chapters is right, I think his characterization of these chapters as non-digressive misses Melville's strategic use of digression or interruption as part of his critique of the fantasy element of romance. It is no coincidence, I contend, that "Cetology" arrives as part of a trio of chapters in a peak-valley-plain structure of textual realism that begins with "Queen Mab," a very short chapter in which Stubb recounts his "queer dream" that begins with Stubb kicking off

Ahab's prosthetic leg and ends with an encounter with a sympathetic merman (131), and ends with "The Specksnyder," an even briefer chapter that contextualizes the structure of rank on the whaling vessel and ultimately reveals Ishmael's deep devotion to his captain, before leading back into the main narrative in "The Cabin-Table."

Juxtaposing Stubb's visionary fantasy, the scientism of "Cetology," and the relatively germane factual content of "The Specksnyder," Melville not only contrasts genres of writing but also displays what counts as epistemologically useful to Melville's mind: fantasy can illuminate or extrapolate, but its usefulness is defined by its non-reciprocal dependency on fact.⁶

If "Cetology" is the height of the intrusion of fact into *Moby-Dick*, "A Squeeze of the Hand" might be read as the unsustainable height of romance, conceived in the narrator Ishmael's mind as a moment of revolutionary potential, an ephemeral apex of intimate contact in the hard life of sea-faring labor. Appearing at the helm of the last third of the book, "A Squeeze" embodies in short exactly the point-counterpoint methodology that Melville has established throughout the text with regard to fantasy and fact. In a scene of male-male physical and emotional intimacy echoing Ishmael's earlier formation of "a cosy, [sic] loving pair" with Queequeg (52), Ishmael transforms the labor

⁶ Christopher Castiglia makes a different argument in relation to the "Cetology" chapter and romance, claiming that Melville "ridicules" the belief that cataloguing the "interior traits will produce a clear taxonomy of whales." He continues, "Revealing not identity but variety, not compliance but deviation, interior states for Melville are intrinsically *queer* places, in the nineteenth-century sense of unpredictable, unusual, and unconventional" (14). I find much appealing and accurate in this characterization of Melville, though I would add the caveat that even though "Cetology" seems rife with a sense of Ishmael's fantastical whimsy, and though his genealogy of whales is, as Castiglia notes, subversive, the trajectory of the chapter both in itself and in the larger romance leads to a decidedly un-romantic consignment to fact, or at least to the suppression of fantasy. The fact that the fantastical appeal of whales leads Ishmael inevitably to scientism, even if his own queer version of it, betrays something of Melville's skepticism toward fantasy. While there is hope for subversion here, it is hope that proves unsustainable.

of removing oil from the rapidly crystallizing spermaceti of a recently slaughtered whale's body into a sexually-charged flat allegory of masturbation and mutual masturbation:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborer's hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (416)

Perhaps the most explicitly homoerotic scene in all of Melville's works—indeed, possibly the most homoerotic in the nineteenth-century canon—the thin veil of metaphor causes the scene to read almost as euphemism, and the melting of self and other into a kind of universal fluid of positive affect and action marks the height of Melville's utopianism. If for Ishmael and Queequeg, “there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends,” the whaling ship serves a parallel locale for intimate contact that exceeds the couple form. And whereas the first couple of *Moby-Dick* finds their parallel in the normative bonds of “man and wife” and “some old couples,” the

bonding of the sperm-squeezers is without parallel (52).⁷ In the early portions of this chapter, queer potential seems, like the globules of spermaceti, ripe to bursting.

But this visionary scene declines into a scene of pragmatism and, finally, another factual digression. About this scene, Robert K. Martin asks, “Is there any better example of the transformation of erotic energy into cash?,” and while Martin does not read the declension that takes place within the scene itself, he notes that, over the next several chapters, Melville “demonstrates the impossibility of sustaining the vision of a harmonious world of mutual sexuality” (81, 83). It should come as no surprise that the “universal squeezing” is immediately followed by reconciliation to material fact:

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! [sic] For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. (416)

One might well ask about this declaration, is there any better example of Melville’s materialism? Remarkable not just because it follows fast upon the utopian homoeroticism of the sperm squeezing, Ishmael’s retrospective remarks upon a man’s

⁷ While the bond between Ishmael and Queequeg is by no means one that I would describe as “normative,” the language Ishmael uses to describe it certainly is, perhaps because he, like Pierre, can conceive of no other means of describing it. The couple’s queerness is rendered most visible in the cross-cultural nature of their relationship, as loving Queequeg forces Ishmael to realize “how elastic our stiff prejudices grow when loves once comes to bend them” (54). Robert K. Martin rightly describes their love as “an act of social transgression” (78). Again, read as a flat allegory, Ishmael’s overcoming his own xenophobia demonstrates an analogy between racial prejudice and heteronormativity.

“attainable felicity,” or what is truly possible for a life, display a reduction of living to the acquisition of material objects and, it cannot be denied, the objectification of heterosexual love-partners and familial love partners as mere necessities.⁸ Indeed, read against Charlie Millthrope’s remarks about great men, it seems that the pragmatist Ishmael might count the intellectual bachelor’s life of the mind as no life at all. In truth, the sperm squeezers must come at the end of their labor to the realization that their subjectivity is always independent, that there is no universal “milk and sperm of kindness,” that the national ideal of the great individual also means that everyone’s life is inevitably a life lived in some form of solitude. And it is no surprise that the movement from the romantic to the practical leads to transition in the chapter from narrative utopianism to the further conveyance of facts about the work of acquiring and processing whale oil. The most visionary passage in this romance is not sustainable, not even for a full chapter.

The fantasy-fact juxtaposition is a formative device that Melville utilizes throughout *Moby-Dick* and, as we will soon see, *Pierre*, but there is perhaps no more deliberate or obvious rendering of the submission of fantasy to fact in the Melville canon than his short romance “The Paradise of Bachelor and the Tartarus of Maids.” Adopting a diptych structure he employed in earlier stories such as “The Two Temples” and “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” Melville concocts a narrative meant to explore

⁸ In her description of “sentimental materialism,” Lori Merish explains how “sentimental discourses of consumption . . . instated a particular form of liberal ‘political subjectivity’ and an identificatory logic interior to that subject”; while Merish does not read any of Melville’s works in her book, it is clear that a similar logic of normative subjecthood is present there (2). While this might be most obvious with *Pierre*, which Melville purportedly conceived as a sentimental novel (though it is at best, and to all accounts, a sentimental novel gone awry), it is clear that Ishmael links sentiment and consumption in his materialistic conception of the subject—a subject that exists in the world apart from the sometimes queer utopia of the whaling ship. See also Peter Coviello’s reading of the scene in *Intimacy in America*, pp. 121-23.

a utopia that exactly follows Charlie Millthorpe's idea of the bachelor as the great man as well as the dark underside of physical labor that makes the scholar and artist's intellectual labor possible. Written several years after both *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, "Paradise and Tartarus" is written with a kind of double-vision, one that sees labor as incitement to both joy and suffering, that picks up on the visionary variety of labor Ishmael imagines when he recounts "thoughts of the visions of the night" in which he "saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti" (416). The "Paradise" section is intended to represent a scene of intellectual labor not unlike that of Ishmael's dream and directly descended, no doubt, from the residence of the Apostle's described in *Pierre*; "Tartarus" is, not surprisingly, its dark double. By creating a central narrative division within the text, Melville seeks to demonstrate a range of emotive states in opposition—ecstasy and agony, pleasure and suffering, love and pain—demonstrating a point both deconstructive and materialist: that the pleasurable intellectual labor of the bachelors is entirely dependent upon the exploitative, dehumanizing labor of the maids. Melville divides the portions of the narrative both thematically and geographically but makes it impossible to understand one without reading it through the lens of the other.

The "Paradise" section is not so much a plot-driven narrative as it is a tour through the scenic London "cloisters" of the bachelors. The story is narrated in the second-person, inducing the reader to identify as the subject of the narrative, inviting the reader to "pace the cloisters; take your pleasure, sip your leisure, in the garden wateryard; go linger in the ancient library; go worship in the sculptured chapel; but," the narrator tells us, "little have you seen, just nothing do you know, not the sweet kernel have you

tasted, till you dine among the banded Bachelors, and see their convivial eyes and glasses sparkle. Not dine in bustling commons, during term-time, in the hall; but tranquilly, by private hint, at a private table; some fine Templar's hospitably invited guest" (202-03). Not far off the grim, dirty streets of the city, just around some "mystic corner," the bachelors' urban Paradise is a physical utopia as well as a social one (202). It stokes romantic ideals of communion with an idyllic version of urbanized natural beauty and incites comparisons between the contemporary bachelors, most of whom are lawyers, and the knights of Arthur's court, producing a geography romanticized in both its landscape and its populace. After inviting us to imagine ourselves guests of a "Templar," the narrator remarks, "Templar? That's a romantic name," but soon after it is made clear that "the genuine Templar is long since departed," that it is not the case that "the sworn knight-bachelors grew to be but hypocrites and rakes" (203). But this perhaps not-so-mild critique of the modern bachelors does little to undermine the narrator's fervor for the bachelor lifestyle, as he whimsically narrates the pleasures of an evening spent among the single men, who have formed among themselves a queer community that Michael Warner might identify as a "counterpublic," with its own systems of publicity, governance, and communication.⁹

The Temple's shady, multi-layered architecture, private rooms, and singly-gendered occupants make it an ideal setting for intimate engagement, as public and

⁹ Warner explains, "A counterpublic . . . enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like" (56-57). Also important here, as most of the members of the Paradise community are white middle-class men, is Warner's clarification that "counterpublics are often called 'subaltern counterpublics,' but it is not clear that all counterpublics are composed of people *otherwise* dominated as subalterns" (57).

private space are separable, yet exist side-by-side. While the Temple is surely a homosocial space, it seems nearly impossible not also to read it as a homoerotic space, in particular when the narrator describes the post-dinner activities of the bachelors:

One by one the bachelors took their hats, and two by two, and arm-in-arm they descended, still conversing, to the flagging of the court; some going to their neighboring chambers to turn over the Decameron ere retiring for the night; some to smoke a cigar, promenading in the garden on the cool river-side; some to make for the street, call a hack, and be driven snugly to their distant lodgings. (210)

In this portrayal, the Temple transforms from a place of intellectual labor into a space for the bachelors to delight in dirty stories, to cruise, and to retreat to bed, alone or together. Existing apart from the blinding lights of the mass public and the scrutinizing eyes of more traditional domestic companions, the Temple is a secluded retreat that makes possible exactly the kind of “squeezing into each other” that Ishmael so idealized. The last phrase of the “Paradise” section is a declaration from the narrator to his host that “this is the very Paradise of the Bachelors!,” a statement that makes clear a kind of sexual politics easily passed over in the all-male world of *Moby-Dick*: utopia, to Melville, must always be homosocial and male, such that all ideal forms of intimacy and sexuality are necessarily associated with male homosexuality. In this regard, male homosexuality itself becomes associated with the romance, not only because only under those conditions can Melville conceive of visionary fantasy but also because he considers homosexuality, like visionary fantasy, impossible as a way of life.

The “Tartarus” section of the narrative gives us a clue to its grim contents in its very first sentence when we are told that this Tartarus “lies not far from Woedolor Mountain,” a name derived from a combination of “woe” and “*dolor*,” the Spanish word for “pain” or “ache”; and indeed, the New England landscape the narrator traverses in the early part of this section appears to ache and seems intended to bring on pain. The Temple of the “Paradise” section stands in stark contrast to the Devil’s Dungeon that is the location of the paper mill that is the narrator’s destination in “The Tartarus of Maids.” Driving through the snowy landscape, through the “Dantean gateway” of the factory, the narrator quickly realizes, “This is the very counterpart of the Paradise of Bachelors” (211, 214); his comment is more telling than he acknowledges. Whereas “The Paradise of Bachelors” is largely narrated in a familiar second-person voice—and this is the case because it is a place with which the narrator identifies—“The Tartarus of Maids” is the narrative of a journey through an unknown landscape, something like a quest tale—though, to be sure, one filled with sorrow and disappointment. Whereas “The Paradise of Bachelors” focuses primarily on describing the psychic experiences of intimacy of the narrator, “The Tartarus of Maids” is psychically detached, hinging on observation and symbolism to do much of the work of setting the scene.

It is also the case that the blissful world of the bachelors is enabled by the painful labor of the maids. While observing the manufacturing of the paper, the narrator comments, “All sorts of writings would be writ on those now vacant things—sermons, lawyer’s briefs, physician’s prescriptions, love-letters, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of birth, death-warrants, and so on, without end” (220). The world of

white-collar labor and middle-class life would not be possible without the toil of the poor, miserable maids; note how many of the uses of paper that spring to the narrator's mind have to do with either legal practice or heteronormativity, or both. The absence of women in the first half is enabling of the freedom of bachelorhood, whereas maidenhood figures in the second half as a form of sexual oppression; absenting from marriage makes men experience a more ideal version of manhood, while single women are rendered merely "blank girls," "steady workers" who, unlike married women, are not "apt to be off-and-on too much" (221, 222). And the machines the maids use are themselves powered by symbols of neglected femininity; flowing through the factory, providing power for the machinery is "Blood River," a "turbid brick-colored stream, boiling through a flume among enormous boulders" (214, 211). The association with menstruation is clear, as the river makes possible the women's productivity. However, it also symbolizes the end of fertility, such that the blood that represents the end of menstrual cycle also signals the end of biological fertility, which is replaced by the physical labor that seems a more valuable use of the female body, in the narrator's purview. The blood-stained landscape represents a shift in the valuation of female labor, from biological to economic futurity, leaving the women drained of color either way; yet both forms of female productivity come at a cost to the woman's body, placing her in the way of harm from either hazardous machinery and work environments or from the pains of giving birth and—it would seem—facing the wrath of an angry, dissatisfied husband.

The association between women and material culture suggested in "A Squeeze of the Hand" finds fruition in "Tartarus," and that association becomes key to reading both

gender and materialism in Melville's romances. Contact between the sexes not only removes one from homosocial fantasy spaces but produces a metonymic association between women and capitalism that renders heterosexual praxes nothing more than another form of labor necessitated in Western culture.¹⁰ Elizabeth Renker has traced out the biographical links between "Tartarus" and Melville's personal history, explaining that the tale reflects much of the enmity that Melville felt toward his wife, Elizabeth, and toward women generally; she reads the story as the product of the mind of a "wife-beater," and it is true that the threat of violence and death looms large in the text. The sharp and perpetually moving machinery of the factory poses endless dangers for workers, and the constant haze of pollutants in the air make the very environment a health hazard. But marriage to women also promises the death of bachelorhood and the fully realized male mind that state makes possible, so that the economic imprisonment of women seems necessary for male intellectual liberation. While no one—not even Melville's Bachelors—would argue in favor of human exploitation and subjection, the confusion the bachelor narrator experiences in the cold cruel world of "Tartarus" is understandable, as he is struck with the realization that his own pleasure comes at a dear cost to others, individuals who have, it seems, been evacuated of their very humanity and reduced to mere machinery. As is often the case, Melville's protagonist finds himself caught between the fantasy life he would love to pursue and the harsh circumstances of life in what he understands to be the "real world."

Like *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre* is a text full of narrative interruptions, and with a plot

¹⁰ On the relationship between normative love lives and capitalist labor practices, see Laura Kipnis, *Against Love*.

concerned even less with coherence or forward movement, the later romance suffered from considerably greater public disdain than any of Melville's previous works, perhaps especially because it imagines itself to be a kind of book that it is not.¹¹ After the popular disappointment that *Moby-Dick* had been, Melville purported to consign himself to the reality of popular literary tastes and to produce a book much more in line with the sentimental fiction of the day; that is not the kind of book *Pierre* turned out to be. If the general theme of Melville's romances is that of fact negating fantasy, then *Pierre* turns that nihilism into a form of perversion, in which the eponymous character longs to carve out a semblance of normative existence for himself, despite all evidence that such a life would be unsatisfactory at best for a queer subject like Pierre.¹² Indeed, normativity is something of a fetish for the young hero, but his normative strivings run up against his own unwillingness to surrender the subversive affects he harbors within his idealized body and mind. Pierre begins the text as a youth of nineteen, engaged to be married to the fair Lucy Tartan, and his idyllic beauty and innocence, along with his bucolic upbringing, meant that he "had never yet become so thoroughly initiated into that darker, though truer aspect of things" (69). Having little life experience and still spotless in mind

¹¹ The authoritative account of the publication and reception history of *Pierre* is Perry Miller's *The Raven and the Whale*, which details not only the intricacies of the book's publication but contextualizes it within the New York literary scene of its age. See also Andrew Delbanco's *Melville: His World and Work*, esp. pp. 178-80 and 205-08.

¹² Wynn Kelley notes a distinction between *Pierre* and Melville's earlier New York fiction (a little less than half of the romance takes place in New York), and that distinction has everything to do with realism: "Whereas *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* examine the mysteries and miseries of the urban and oppressed poor, exposing as they do the mysterious operations of power, *Pierre* seems remote from real people and real suffering" (146). This statement might be read as a claim for identifying *Pierre* as a romance, as it is, to be sure, uncommitted to narrative realism. I want to be sure, however, that I do not believe Kelley's argument contradicts my claims about the status of the fact in Melville's romances; fact is disruptive of fantasy in *Pierre* and the other romances, but those disruptions are not necessarily returns to representational realism. *Pierre* is a fantasy work, but one cognizant of its status as such and thematically incorporates that awareness into the text.

and body, Pierre's life prior to the narrative's inception had been something of a romance of its own—an idealized vision of a perfect adolescence, unmarred by the recognition of its own unsustainability. It is the introduction of the dark-hued Isabel, proclaiming herself his much longed-for sister, which disrupts the respectable (though one might say “queerly heteronormative”) world Pierre and his mother have made for themselves. Abandoning the emphatically “docile” life his mother desires for him, Pierre leaves home to pursue a life of pseudo-marriage to his alleged sister, a life he hopes will allow both the sibling intimacy he lacks and the freedom and respect granted (ostensibly) married heterosexual couples. Like all protagonists of romance, Pierre tries to envision an alternative life narrative for himself, but his conflicting desires for both societal respectability and affective satisfaction result in a life undone by contradictions.

One irony of the text that is not revealed until very late, however, is that Pierre should know better than to hope for a positive outcome from his affective iconoclasm. Very late in the narrative, Pierre recalls a “strange story of real life,” known to both himself and Lucy, that offers an instructive example of an affective triangle that recalls the one encompassing himself, Isabel, and Lucy. He recounts the story of “a youth . . . all but affianced to a beautiful girl,” who “became somehow casually and momentarily betrayed into an imprudent manifested tenderness toward a second lady”; his “tenderness toward her . . . had [not] failed to exert its natural effect on her,” and “this second lady drooped and drooped, and came nigh to dying, all the while raving of the cruel infidelity of her supposed lover.” The desperate appeals of this second lady

at last so moved the youth, that—morbidly disregarding of the fact, that

inasmuch as two ladies claimed him, the prior lady had the best title to his hand—his conscience insanely upbraided him concerning the second lady; he thought that eternal woe would surely overtake him both here and hereafter if he did not renounce his first love—terrible as the effort would be both to him and her—and wed the second lady; which he accordingly did.

Unwilling to risk betraying his motivations for shunning the first love, the youth kept his true feelings a secret and lived out the rest of his life with the guilt of his betrayal compounded by the guilt of dishonesty. And the weight of the betrayal weighed heavy on the heart of the first love: “in her complete ignorance, she believed that he was willfully and heartlessly false to her; and so came to a lunatic’s death on his account” (316). Pierre’s “willful falseness” toward Lucy mirrors that of the youth described above, and one must assume that Lucy was willing to return to Pierre because she learned something of the potential complexity of motivations for betrayal from this story. While Pierre’s decision to live life as man and wife with Isabel has much more to do with her fulfilling an emotional need for him than vice versa, the emotional duplicity required by the amorous youth who is, for the most part, trying to do the right thing embodies the “darker aspect of truth” from which both Pierre and the naïve youth had thus far been shielded.

While the interjection of what might accurately be described as gossip into this romance might not resound with fact in the same way as the hard scientism of “Cetology” or the cold materialism of “A Squeeze of the Hand” and “Paradise/Tartarus,” it is

nevertheless clear that this seemingly factual account of events from the fictional history of the world of the romance have a similarly disruptive effect. If the harsh realities of labor snap Ishmael and the worldly bachelor out of their utopian visions, this fable of the real consequences of dishonesty in what was referred to in the nineteenth century as “amativeness” has a similar effect.¹³ Remembering how the two had discussed this story and its lessons a number of times, Pierre speculates upon Lucy’s current interpretation given the parallels to their current situation, but rather than the abandoned first love going mad, it is Pierre, worried about accusations of hypocrisy (and the accuracy of those accusations), who begins to slip. Mulling over the story and the use Lucy might make of it, “he knew not what to think; hardly what to dream” (316-17). The interjected story disrupts not only the romance narrative itself but also the romantic mind at its core and leaves both Pierre and this romance bereft of vision. Lucy’s mind, however, remains inscrutable both to Pierre and to the reader, though like Pierre we hope that “her own virgin heart remain[s] transparently immaculate, without shadow of flaw or vein” (317). Her heart not yet “blackened”—as did Pierre’s hand after attempting to rescue the face from the portrait of his father that he believes reveals his paternity of Isabel and has thus cast into a fire (198)—Lucy remains a romantic figure capable of visionary invention up to the moment of her death, when she learns the secret of Pierre and Isabel’s kinship (360).

Whether a slow decline or a rapid dissolution, fact has fatal consequences for

¹³ “Amativeness” is a term roughly describing romantic love between a man and a woman and that is adopted from the language of phrenology, a nineteenth-century pseudo-science in which one’s psychological composition was thought to be legible by the shape of one’s skull. On phrenology and its relationship to Melville’s depiction of sexuality in *Pierre*, see Delbanco, esp. 200-01.

fantasy in Melville's epistemology. Though he seemed unable to stop himself from writing texts that partake in the visionary project of romance, Melville could not rest there and sought to thematize the inevitable refutation of romantic vision he believed was necessitated by life in the real world. With regard to authorial ambitions, it seems that Pierre might well serve as Melville's textual proxy, as the thwarted desires of the one reflect those of the other, both seemingly unsatisfied with love and literary ambitions: Pierre unable to complete his book; Melville unable to produce the kind of book he sets out to write. Perhaps because material conditions frustrated his own personal desire, Melville's romances were themselves frustrated with materialist interruptions of their visionary work. This is not to say that Melville conceded the superiority of normative living so much as that he saw no practicable way around it.

Heterodoxical Melancholy

With the notable exception of Walt Whitman, no other author of the antebellum period has so often had his sexuality scrutinized as Herman Melville. Thinking through the homoerotic elements of his fiction *contra* his biographical materials, Andrew Delbanco remarks, "Whether Melville availed himself of male partners, or relieved himself in as much privacy as he could find aboard ship, or waited for the next contact with island women, no one can say" (201). What does seem certain is that Melville's romances embody a kind of longing, a depth of unsatisfied desires, that should surprise no one when it becomes a crucible for romantic vision. As an author, Melville abhors a vacuum of desire, and he seeks to fill it with all manner of objects, ideas, and persons.

Ahab's famous "monomania" for revenge upon the whale Moby Dick is perhaps the most obvious example, but no consideration of unfulfilled desire in Melville's oeuvre is as thoroughgoing as *Pierre*. Whereas Ishmael's unflagging naïveté keeps from feeling the sting of the text's materialist turn too harshly, Pierre's narrative is flush with a pervasive melancholy that leaves one perpetually asking, what does Pierre want?

One response, though not an answer, is that even Pierre himself seems not to know. The romance begins with a magisterial depiction of Pierre's upbringing, ideal in every way excepting his lack of a sister:

So perfect to Pierre had long seemed the illuminated scroll of his life thus far, that only one hiatus was discoverable by him in that sweetly-writ manuscript. A sister had been omitted from the text. He mourned that so delicious a feeling as fraternal love had been denied him. . . . This emotion was most natural; and the full cause and reason of it Pierre did not at the time entirely appreciate. For surely a gentle sister is the second best gift to a man; and it is first in its point of occurrence; for the wife comes after. He who is sisterless is a bachelor before his time. For much that goes into the deliciousness of a wife, already lies in the sister. (7)

The narrator's metaphor of life-as-text is fitting for the Melvillean romance, for the text of Pierre's life, like the form of the romance, will go wildly off-track when confronted with the dueling forces of desire and social respectability. But in this passage, the single flaw of Pierre's generally perfect youth—his lack of sibling love, specifically sister love—colors a melancholy cast over the entirety of his existence. However, the

relationship that Pierre imagines between brother and sister is not the kind of chaste fraternity one might typically imagine siblings of different sexes to share. In this description brother-sister love seems to border dangerously on romantic love that partners in a marriage might share, as he imagines love of a sister to be a gateway affect for love of a wife. This has two possible interpretations: either Pierre dreams of an ostensibly incestuous relationship with a sister or an overly chaste one with his wife. Though a number of critics have argued for a reading of incest in this romance, I would contend that what actually takes place is the latter, in which Pierre engages all women, including the one to whom he is betrothed, in an equally non-sexual manner.¹⁴ This eccentric iteration of heterosexual intimacy has, I contend, enabled other critics to read *Pierre* as primarily a homosexual text, though no sexual contact between men is represented, nor much male-male interaction of any sort.¹⁵

Despite his relative disinterest in heterosexuality, Pierre is obsessed with heteronormativity; in particular, with heteronormative constructions of masculinity. He declares, “Oh, had my father but a daughter! . . . some one whom I might love, and protect, and fight for, if need be. It must be a glorious thing to engage in a mortal quarrel on a sweet sister’s behalf! Now, of all things, would to heaven, I had a sister!” (7). Even though the relationship between himself and his (at this point) merely hypothetical sister

¹⁴ For example, Gillian Brown argues, “Incest . . . enables Pierre’s renovation of family for the establishment of his literary economy,” meaning that his escape to the city with Isabel means that he can remake the family unit according to his own desires to advance his career as a writer. While that is true to some extent, the relationship between Pierre and Isabel, rather than being incestuous, is an admixture of affective passion, built upon years of melancholy longing for that relation, and a non-sexual desire to be together. I struggle to believe that a man incapable of imagining forms of relation that do not look exactly like other familiar forms of familial bonding could conceive for even a moment of breaking the incest taboo—not to mention the larger sexual indifference Pierre seems to display toward all women.

¹⁵ These critics include James Creech, Andrew Delbanco, and Robert K. Martin.

is entirely non-sexual, it nevertheless serves to reinforce his sense of masculine self-worth, as he assumes a husband-like role in relation to preserving his sister's reputation and chastity even unto death. Indeed, like Mabel Royal in Lucy Holcombe Pickens's romance *The Free Flag of Cuba*, Pierre imagines there being no higher aspiration for man's life than to encounter mortal peril while defending a beloved woman.¹⁶ As was the case in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," an explicitly binary logic of gender is employed here, making masculine and feminine existences both incongruous and interdependent; unlike the sexual segregation of that text, according to *Pierre*, a man's value is based on his ability to defend and to love (platonically) women against whom he defines himself. Melville's sea novels may have produced worlds without women, but Pierre seems unable to imagine life without them, and in fact declares his fictional sister to be the offspring of his father only, as if a daughter could spring Athena-like from his head. (Pierre of course does not at this point know that he does have a sister belonging only to his father.) Her female selfhood can only be defined in contrast to her father's and brother's masculinity, and vice versa. In Pierre's declaration of desire for a sister, he seems to place filial and fraternal love above that of heterosexual intimacy, as if the priority of the sister in one's life produces a parallel primacy of that relationship as well.

The sense that the sisterless man is "a bachelor before his time," however, misses something of the truth of Pierre's relationship to his mother, whom he addresses as his "sister" and treats as a lover. His mother is clearly no substitute for a sister, though he

¹⁶ Mabel actually longs to see her beloved die in a battle defending the freedom of the nation, for which she bears a metonymic relation in the text, but the parallel to *Pierre* remains.

tries desperately to make her one; excised from the first quotation from *Pierre* above is the following admission: “Nor could the fictitious title [of sister], which he so often lavished upon his mother, at all supply the absent reality” (7). Try as they may, Pierre and his mother can never make siblings of each other, despite the fact that they refer to each other as “brother” and “sister” almost twenty times in the first chapter alone. This is in no small part due to “the courteous lover-like adoration” Pierre showers upon his mother, causing a troubling imbalance in their relationship, especially with regard to issues of power.¹⁷

Pierre’s mother, the widowed Mary Glendinning, was possessed of a beauty that “still eclipsed far younger charms,” and the narrator declares that “had she chosen to encourage them, [she] would have been followed by a train of infatuated suitors, little less young than her own son Pierre” (4-5). “But a reverential and devoted son seemed lover enough for this widow Bloom,” we are told, “and besides all this, Pierre when namelessly annoyed, and sometimes even jealously transported by the too ardent admiration of the handsome youths, who now and then, caught in unintended snares, seemed to entertain some insane hopes of wedding this unattainable being”; he even threatened to murder the man who would dare to propose marriage to his mother. Imagining himself as brother, lover, and son, “This filial love of Pierre seemed fully returned by the triumphant maternal pride of the widow.” The uneven exchange of affections and tortuous navigation required to traverse these intermingled forms of normative relationality make an ultimately unstable grounding for a relationship. Pierre

¹⁷ Christopher Castiglia rightly notes that in every case, Pierre tries to reimagine a relationship built on inequality as one of equality (271).

tries to make his mother everything to him, the “unattainable” object of his every unfulfilled desire, though his desire is not shared by the mother he longs to make an Other, since she, “in the clear-cut lineaments and noble air of the son, saw her own graces strangely translated into the opposite sex” (5). Where Pierre seeks reciprocity, his mother seeks domination, as she confesses, “I am glad I sent him not to college. A noble boy, and docile. A fine, proud, loving, docile, vigorous boy. Pray God, he never becomes otherwise to me” (19-20). The seemingly unconditional love between Pierre and his mother is in fact entirely dependent on Pierre’s continued docility, which she praises effusively, and when she recognizes the incongruity between the “inheritance” of a military man’s determination, passed down from his father’s line, she resolutely exclaims, “So shall he remain all docility to me, and yet prove a haughty hero to the world!” (20).

Far from a “haughty hero,” however, Pierre is a melancholy hero, and he sees parallels between his own life and the familiar literary examples of Hamlet and of Dante in *The Inferno*. At the moment before his resolution to abandon Saddle Meadows, the only home he had ever known, and to head off to New York with Isabel under the ruse of being newlyweds, Pierre observes how he “had always been an admiring reader of Hamlet; but neither his age nor his mental experience thus far, had qualified him either to catch initiating glimpses into the hopeless gloom of its interior meaning, or to draw from the general story those superficial and purely incidental lessons, wherein the painstaking moralist so complacently expatiates” (169); that is, until he felt his melancholy to be equal to that of Shakespeare’s tragic hero, he was never able even to glimpse the true

nature of the play's tragedy. Ghostly commanding father and vain but loving mother aside, Pierre had suffered the "slings and arrows" of normative culture, and chose to pursue the love of his sister, even if it meant absconding from the life he knew and beginning again in the harsh world of the city.

I have indicated that I believe Melville intends for his readers to understand Pierre's melancholy to be motivated by desire, and I find Judith Butler's theory of "melancholy gender" to be particularly useful in understanding this desire-driven version of an affect, especially given the queer forms of relationality it produces in this romance. Butler builds upon Freud's revision of his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" in his *The Ego and the Id*, in which he resolves that the incorporation of lost attachments into the process of identification may be necessary for one to "let go" of an object or person; this makes his earlier distinction between mourning and melancholy one of bad faith. Reading heteronormative sexual cultures through such a lens, Butler argues,

If the assumption of femininity and the assumption of masculinity proceed through the accomplishment of an always tenuous heterosexuality, we might understand the force of this accomplishment as mandating the abandonment of homosexual attachment or, perhaps more trenchantly, *preempting* the possibility of homosexual attachment, a foreclosure of possibility which produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss. This heterosexuality is produced not only through implementing the prohibition of incest but, prior to that, by enforcing the prohibition on homosexuality. (135; emphasis in

original)

Especially germane for understanding *Pierre* is her remark, “The oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been *accomplished*, that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced (a distinction which, after all, has no necessity); in this sense, the prohibition on incest presupposes the prohibition on homosexuality, for it presumes the heterosexualization of desire” (135; emphasis in original). “Gender is achieved and stabilized,” she contends, “through heterosexual positioning, and where threats to heterosexuality become threats to gender itself” (135).

Butler’s description of heterosexual melancholy is significant in its relegation of the role of choice and desire to secondary positions, as the system of cultural privilege that gives power to heteronormativity cares little for actual desires and more for self-perpetuation. When it comes to sexuality, we are given no choices, no options to accommodate our wants, and this is perhaps the reason that, as Priscilla Wald puts it, “Pierre is never really a willing rebel,” since his pursuit of desire simultaneously breaks from the expectations of normative culture yet is conducted within the terms that culture sets; if the world wants a married heterosexual couple, that is what he and Isabel shall be (133). Mourning doubtless shapes sexuality in *Pierre*, but what precisely is mourned? As *Pierre* gives no account of the early life of its characters, it is impossible to watch the exact process of melancholic incorporation Butler describes unfold, but what we do see, over and over again, are sexual subjects scarred by losses of attachment, mournful individuals seeking to fill an impossible void. Discussing *Pierre*’s work as an author in the romance—work that, like almost everything else, frustrates and exhausts him—Wald

explains, “Pierre lacks the language in which to tell his story, and he lacks a readership for it. But mostly he lacks an appropriate analysis of it” (153); this is all also precisely true for the larger romance itself.

But Butler’s description of normative sexuality’s melancholy does not, however, map easily onto the sexuality of *Pierre*. Despite having both a dead father and a mother-lover, Pierre is not by any means a traditional Oedipal tale. Perhaps having a father already dead before he could fully remember him meant that Pierre never suffered through the oedipal struggle and as such never made much of an investment in taking the name of the father for himself (even though he already has his father’s name). Though committed whole-heartedly to the terms of normative relations—that is, to the language and form of heteronormativity—Pierre actually invests little emotional energy into truly traditional relations; assuming the role of his mother’s lover, He never imagines that he might supplant his father, as he is also simultaneously his mother’s brother. His fast and loose play with the terms of normative sexual culture runs counter to his absolute commitment to those terms, though he never seems fully to grasp what they represent. Mourning a sister who would be his complement, he is also a reflection of his mother, as she notes, and Isabel is a fleshly recreation of the portrait of his father. Like his father, Pierre may be of manly form and inherit a heroic family legacy, but Pierre never achieves the “heterosexual positioning” that Butler describes as essential to the formation of normative gender and never enters the phase of heterosexual melancholy. Because Pierre never conforms to a narrative of normative sexuality, he never really becomes a heterosexual nor, despite his manly attributes, a man. His sexuality and gender

threatened by the heteronormativity he fetishizes, Pierre's melancholy might be described in a number of ways (naïve, misguided, narcissistic) but not heterosexual.

Every attachment in *Pierre* is felt as a supplement for the mourning of some other attachment, unnamed or unnamable. Mourning is ubiquitous, and its product is a what I call a "heterodoxical melancholy," a series of melancholies felt from disparate and unidentifiable sources that might realize themselves in diverse and startling iterations, if not for the impoverished language of attachment Pierre has inherited. His visionary work in this romance is to seek out a life in which he can experience the affective bonds he so readily feels, though his vision falls short in its resignation to the conscripting terms of heteronormativity. Pierre mourns a sister he has never had, yet incorporates sister-status into virtually every relation he has with women; Mrs. Glendinning mourns a husband she has supplemented with his portrait and his son, yet the meaning of both inevitably eludes her control; Isabel mourns a father she never really knew by committing to living as man and wife with a brother she has only recently met and does not understand by any means; Lucy mourns a fiancé who loved her but rejected her for the blood relative he always desired but never knew he already had. In every case—and this list is not exhaustive—the mourning subjects of these heterodoxical melancholies has had an early form of relationality "preempted," to use Butler's term, by another relationship and has thereafter sought to replace or supplement that initial loss by attempting to reincorporate that attachment into a new, often ill-fitting relational paradigm. A mother becomes a sister; a son, a lover; a brother, a husband; a lover, a cousin. This relational logic proves doubly confounding because these relationships did not work within one

form of normative intimacy and have therefore been pigeonholed into another.

Rather than recognizing the shortcomings of the system, the characters of this romance try to rework the system to fulfill the double aim of both the satisfaction of desire and the maintenance of social respectability. In the end, *Pierre* offers another take on the cyclical relationship between mourning, sexuality, and gender, as its hero never fully achieves heterosexual normativity but is also unable or unwilling to work outside the system.

The melancholies of *Pierre* are justifiably described as “heterodoxical,” in a nod to Butler’s notion of “heterosexual melancholy,” in that these feelings derive from various causes and have varying effect upon those who experience them—though one constant remains: the holes that mourning represents must be plugged. No feeling of intimate loss can remain. For every loss, there must be a supplement, though what the romance demonstrates is that in the end no substitute can replace an original attachment or, and this is inextricably related, no two attachments are the same. I argue against reading *Pierre* as an incest plot, as I believe the threat of actual sex of *any* kind is so far removed from this text, despite the libidinal drives that motivate many of its characters, that even those relationships where we might reasonably expect sex to occur, such as between Pierre and Lucy, it does not. Despite the emphasis in the romance on the formation of intimate bonds between men and women, Pierre and Lucy remain virgins to their death, and even Lucy’s brother Fred, who had earlier attacked Pierre alongside Pierre’s vengeful cousin Glen, remarks that Pierre’s dead, pallid face betrays a “scornful innocence” (362). Indeed, Pierre scorns the world, for no matter how he tries to remake his relations to suit what he believes will be acceptable to the world, every attempt is a

failure; no matter how he tries to position intimacies along the associative chain of normative sexuality, he finds that position untenable. He can never satisfactorily remake a mother as a sister, a sister as a wife, and so on. The maintenance of his manhood, he believes, depends upon the successful accomplishment of heterosexual relationships he never truly seems to desire and can only successfully supplement with the love of women ill-suited to have such a relationship with him.

What kind of relationship does Pierre want? The sister-love he seems so desperately to want at the beginning of the narrative does not find full satisfaction in his bond with Isabel, likely because he accepts her claims to sisterhood on relatively spurious evidence: he notices some physical similarities between Isabel and a portrait of his father that he keeps hidden from his mother, but he mostly just takes her word for it. If the failure of fantasy is the ultimate theme of Melville's romance, Pierre's failure of imagination is the cause of his specific failure in this romance. His inability to rethink affective bonds in any terms other than those dictated by heteronormativity serves as his undoing, despite his own compulsion to rename constantly the nature of his affective bonds with friends and family.¹⁸ James Creech notes, "Pierre lives in a world which acts as if there were no choice to be made," and Pierre's persistence in seeking out new iterations of traditional normative relations demonstrates this to be at least superficially true (128). The question of whether or not it is Pierre or his culture that places these limitations on his vision of life is not one that Pierre is himself able to answer, though it

¹⁸ Castiglia also makes note of a number of intimacies "made in response to historical need from . . . ephemeral materials" (275). These include Pierre's grandfather's attachment to his horse, Ralph Winwood's portraits of his friends, and, most significantly, Isabel's guitar, which she uses as a primary vehicle for self-expression.

is clear to readers that his irrepressible drive to live out some version of *the truth of his human heart* is at odds with his commitment to the structures of normative institutions of society, such as marriage and family. The narrator explains, “men there are, who having quite done with the world, all its mere worldly contents are become so far indifferent, that they care little of what mere worldly imprudence they may be guilty” (223); despite his own awareness that the path of the prudent is not working out for him, Pierre cannot deviate from it. If all great men are bachelors, Pierre never joins their ranks due to his refusal to be ever “merely” a bachelor, and he dies caught between the two women he has loved most, married to neither, and with an unfinished manuscript on the human condition stuck somewhere between his brain and the page.

Writing the Book of Truth

Pierre is a romance of self-expression, and a rather long-winded one, in which, ironically, almost no attempt at such expression is successful. The failure of language that creates a poverty of truth in relationality performs double-duty by making impossible the expression of truth of *any* variety. Caught up in conventions, Pierre can be nothing but conventional, both affectively and aesthetically—no matter how much that pains him. Secrets are kept; relationships are misidentified and misnamed; Pierre’s attempt to write a book of truth is in vain. This last is perhaps because “two tremendous motives unitedly impelled [him];—the burning desire to deliver what he thought to be new, or at least miserably neglected Truth to the world; and the prospective menace of being absolutely penniless, unless by the sale of his book, he could realize money.” Here again, Melville’s

materialism reasserts itself alongside visionary work and proving to be ultimately disruptive to it. His “mind bent on producing some thoughtful thing of absolute truth,” Pierre winds up frustrated and in fear that his work will be merely a tautology (283). His writing becomes so difficult and tiresome for all parties in the little *ménage* Pierre establishes for himself at the Apostles that Lucy comes to refer to his project as “that vile book!” and is overjoyed when she (wrongfully) believes Pierre has completed it. The failure of Pierre’s own authorial endeavor and the deep skepticism with which it fills him parallel the romance itself, which follows the Melvillean trajectory from visionary aspiration to pragmatic disappointment. In writing as in life, Pierre is never able to get at the things that he desires, and desire remains as utterly inscrutable throughout as it ever was.

Bearing this failure of expression in mind, we might read *Pierre* alongside another of Melville’s romances, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” which also deals with the inscrutability of desire. The eponymous character finds employment as a copyist (or scrivener) in a lawyer’s office, and though he begins his employment as an expedient and hard-working employee, he slowly becomes strangely removed both from the social milieu of the office and from his work. He begins refusing all labor and society with the oft-repeated phrase, “I would prefer not to.” Though both were initially calm, Bartleby becomes increasingly queer, in the sense of strange or surprising, to the lawyer, who explains that, despite his mounting frustration, “there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me” (21). Though he almost immediately feels a kind of intimacy with Bartleby, the

lawyer knows little and understands less of personal history and motivations of this young man, “the strangest scrivener I ever saw or heard of”:

While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him. (13; emphasis in original)

Unclear of either his origins or the meanings of his actions—or inaction—the lawyer is helpless to watch Bartleby slowly waste away, dying from starvation in a jailhouse after being removed from the lawyer’s office by the landlord. Queer to the world even in death, Bartleby was “strangely huddled at the base of a wall,” being so still in life as in death that the prison workers failed to even realize he had died (44). In his conclusion, the lawyer warns his readers, “if this little narrative had sufficiently interested him, to awaken curiosity as to who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator’s making his acquaintance, I can only reply, that in such curiosity I fully share, but am wholly unable to gratify it” (45). Unable to explain, the lawyer can only observe, and in this regard he is not unlike the readers and narrator of *Pierre*, both of whom are frustrated by their capacity only to observe and never to comprehend the psychology behind the often ambiguous (to use a favorite word from *Pierre*) actions of the romance. *Pierre* is as much kin to Bartleby as to Ishmael: *Pierre* would, like Ishmael,

speak in the positive with regard to desire, but he finds himself thwarted in the effort and is left just as misunderstood as Bartleby. But unlike Pierre, Bartleby allows his non-normative desires to be made apparent, though the consequences for him are as dire as they are for Pierre. Damned if you do, damned if you don't: the heroes of Melville's romances wind up unsatisfied or alone, left alone in a world that could never understand or contain their vision.

It is not the case, however, that true expressions of desire are impossible in Melville's romances—even in *Pierre* some examples show themselves, although these examples are almost entirely non-verbal, as if the difficulty of expression resides in the ambiguities of language itself and can be transcended through avoidance of that medium. Foremost among these expressions is Isabel's guitar playing, which "sing[s] . . . the sequel of [her] story; for not in words can it be spoken" (126). "The room swarmed with the unintelligible but delicious sounds," and Pierre is "filled . . . with such wonderings" that he can hardly wait until their second interview, in which he hopes more of the "mystery of Isabel" will be unraveled (126; 127). Whereas public intelligibility and consumption are key to the creative project in which Pierre is engaged, Isabel feels free to allow her art to be as queer as her feelings, and if her music is not a transparent expression, at least it is a true one. And Isabel's musicianship reverses the trend away from fantasy that shapes Melville's romances; she leaves her listeners as much enraptured in mystery at her song's conclusion as when she began, though Pierre clearly sees some form of potentiality in whatever truths were revealed in the girl's performance.

Throughout *Pierre* it is art that most often provides a vehicle for truth; indeed, the

“truth” of Isabel’s paternity is, to borrow a famous phrase from the romance, “published in a portrait,” a small “chair-portrait” of his father that Pierre keeps hidden in his closet, one which shows his father wearing an ambiguous but suggestive smile (79). This “clever and cheerful painting,” bestowed upon Pierre by his spinster Aunt Dorothea after his father’s death, was detestable to his mother, who preferred the more accurate and presentable portrait that hangs in the drawing room to display for all both his manly form and majestic presence, exactly the kind of man Mrs. Glendinning always wanted her husband to be. Aunt Dorothea supplies Pierre with some gossip regarding the painting: that his father did not want to sit for their Cousin Ralph, who painted the picture by “stealing” the opportunity to paint whenever the elder Pierre visited him; that at the time of its painting, Pierre’s father was having an affair with a young French girl, who Pierre believes to be Isabel’s mother; that the reason for resisting sitting for the portrait was that Pierre’s father feared Ralph might capture something of the affair in his visage, as Ralph was also an expert on physiognomy, the study of facial features to uncover the true traits of an individual’s character. More than simply revealing his father to be a perhaps more promiscuous man than Pierre had believed him to be, the resemblance of his chair-portrait to Isabel and the congruence of Aunt Dorothea’s story of the portrait’s origins with the mystery of Isabel’s birth strike Pierre as such an uncanny coincidence that he must pause to remind himself, “It is not the portrait of Isabel, it is my father’s portrait” (139). When Pierre resolves to leave Saddle Meadows to pursue life with his new sister-wife in the city, he tosses the portrait into the fire, as if to renounce its ambiguities now that he has determined a path for himself, though he cannot resist saving the face from

the flames (198). In that face—that is, in its representation—lay some profound truth about Pierre's family history that he cannot accept at face value but cannot let go.

The expression of desire is not limited representations, it is true, and even in *Pierre* a single moment of desirous expression through action shines through. After arriving in New York and depositing Isabel and her maid Delly at the local police station, Pierre sets off to find his estranged urban cousin, Glen. When he returns to the station after Glen's rejection, he finds the women caught up in a scene of bacchanalia that is at once terrifying and arousing:

The sights and sounds which met the eye of Pierre on re-entering the watch-house, filled him with inexpressible horror and fury. The before decent, drowsy place, now fairly reeked with all things unseemly. Hardly possible was it to tell what conceivable cause or occasion had, in the comparatively short absence of Pierre, collected such a base congregation. In indescribable disorder, frantic, diseased-looking men and women of all colors, in all imaginable flaunting, immodest, grotesque and shattered dresses, were leaping, yelling, and cursing around him. The torn Madras handkerchiefs of negresses, and red gowns of yellow girls, hanging in tatters from their naked bosoms, mixed with the rent dresses of deep-rouged white women, and the split coats, checkered vests, and protruding shirts of pale, or whiskered, or haggard, or mustached fellows of all nations, some of whom seemed scared from their beds, and other seemingly arrested in the midst of some crazy and wanton dance. On all

sides, were heard drunken male and female voices, in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, interlarded now and then, with the foulest of all human lingo, that dialect of sin and death, known as the Cant language, or the Flash. (240)

For the first and only time in a romance about a young man who tries repeatedly to envision different intimacies with various individuals do we actually encounter something like a space of freedom from the rule of heteronormativity—ironically found in that locus of institutional authority, the police station. Indeed the scene at the police station might well be described as a Foucaultian “heterotopia,” in which the diverse congeries of bodies, races, languages, and sensations combine to produce the one true space of freedom in the novel, a kind of urban counterpart to the all-male utopia of the whaling vessel.¹⁹ The police station acts as a space of both liberation and containment, cordoning off the very deviant activities inspired by bringing together such a disparate assemblage of misfits. It is of course not arguable that the heterotopia emerged *because of Pierre’s* absence from the station, though it is significant that it *does* happen in his absence; as Pierre is the foremost enthusiast of normative structuring in the romance, it is not surprising that intimate liberties are taken in his absence and that, once underway, he is entirely unable to control or at all quell the scene. In a romance full of longings for expression, the police station scene represents the kind of volcanic desires lying dormant under the policing forces of heteronormativity, and those who have gotten over their

¹⁹ Foucault describes heterotopias as “places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable” (178).

normative anxieties relish being swept up in the eruption.

So entranced by and entrenched in the structural logic of normative society, Pierre is a failure in his creative endeavor: “He did not see that there is no such thing as a standard for the creative spirit; that no one great book must ever be separately regarded, and permitted to domineer with its own uniqueness upon the creative mind; but that all existing great works must be federated in the fancy; and so regarded as a miscellaneous and Pantheistic whole” (284). The literary world, it seems, is a heterotopia of sorts, and Pierre finds himself just as out of place there as at the police station. Wald explains that, “Pierre, like most of his generation, is unquestionably more prepared to read than to write” (128), and this is particularly evident in his ambition to write a work that will demonstrate “a varied scope of reading, little suspected by his friends” (283). In his affective life, Pierre cannot imagine any original form of intimacy that would enable a true expression of his feelings and desires; in his literary life, he cannot get beyond his ambition to be a reader of great literature and to become a producer of it. Pierre’s fixations on structure and precedent make his life ultimately unlivable, and his dependence on literary source material makes the pursuit of original truth in his writing impossible. He will never be able to write or see truth while his cathectic relationship to prior recognizable intimacies and texts persists.²⁰

For all my discussion and description of people and actions as “queer” or “non-

²⁰ Wai-chee Dimock parallels Pierre’s struggle for originality as an author with his struggles in family life: “To be original is to be ‘without father or mother,’ to be outside the province of kinship. A truly original author is related to nobody else and like nobody else” (141). Pierre seems unable to achieve the recognition that he would be best off not to struggle to maintain either familial or literary kinships when such systems work against satisfaction and productivity.

normative,” I have yet to say much about homosexuality or other forms of sexual “deviance” in *Pierre*. This is in no small part due to the relative lack of homoeroticism in this romance as compared to, for example, *Moby-Dick*; while Pierre shares intimate bonds with a number of men in the romance, none can equal the erotic intensity of the “coupling” of Ishmael and Queequeg. Even taking up residence in the Apostles, clearly an analogue to the Paradise of Bachelors, Pierre never finds the “world without women” that makes possible homosocial attachments without censure, as women not only live in and maintain the domestic spaces of the colony but may in fact constitute an even larger portion of the actual population, if the number of women living with Pierre is any indication. Without a space of freedom to enact it, queer sexuality is rendered unrealizable even to those who would desire it, such that their necessary engagement in heteronormative culture is always already defined by melancholy. Melville imagined resistances to heteronormativity everywhere, as he presumed that no intimacy could be adequately defined and no desire satisfied within the predetermined limits such a system sets forth; thus, though *Pierre* is perhaps the least explicitly homoerotic of Melville’s romances, it is the one that best represents his perspective on not specifically what we might identify as queer sexuality and intimacy but the very queerness of sexuality and intimacy in themselves.

Pierre never makes a very good heterosexual (or homosexual) as such. James Creech conjectures, “In *Pierre*, homosexuality is explored from the perverse perspective of its impossible place, and thus its closeted space, within the still-sacred configurations of the family” (120). And Robert K. Martin speculates that the unrealizable incestuous

relationship between Pierre and Isabel “may represent the displacement of a homosexuality perceived with ambivalence”; he contends that the love between Pierre and Glen is the true seat of sexual desire in the romance, and, as Butler indicates, the sense of a homosexual incest taboo as always already unnecessary makes the possibility of desire between male cousins even more appealing as a subversive reading, since such desire would be entirely illegible to the heteronormative world.²¹ The “much more than cousinly attachment” Pierre and Glen shared in their early life is foundational in Pierre’s sense of self, as it was an “empyrean of a love which only comes short, by one degree, of the sweetest sentiment between the sexes” (216). Though Pierre suffers a rebuke by Glen and ultimately kills him, the relationship between the two represents the height of male friendship in the romance, and the seemingly nonsensical alterations in Glen’s sentiment toward Pierre represents the kind of inscrutable absence of reason in which we might imagine a disavowal of queer sexuality taking place. If we understand the cousins as queers, Glen might shun Pierre because his cousin has shamed the family in his abandonment of an engagement, or because he is jealous of the engagement, or because he wants Lucy for himself: not because of any sexual appeal she might offer but because of the social approbation such a match might bring, especially now that Glen has become the sole heir of the Glendinning family. Whereas Melville’s thematic destruction of the visionary project of romance means that queer intimacies must always be shut down, that

²¹ This interpretation correlates with Creech’s discussion of “camp reading”: a form of subcultural intelligibility. “The wink of homosexuality” involves forms of recognition based on “secret knowledge” that “changes and evolves,” such that only those who are “in” on the joke can appreciate it, or even recognize it as such (95). While *Pierre* never becomes an explicitly homosexual text, it does, Creech argues, lend itself to be read as such by those in the know, even though it orients its relationships with recognizable forms and language.

does not mean that queer readers must stop reading queer desire in the spaces the text leaves open—especially in a book subtitled “The Ambiguities.”

Whatever the characters’ motivations in Melville’s romances, whether he imagined them to be subjects of queer sexual longings or not, two facts remain: that these characters always feel some sort of queer affect, and that materialist concerns will bring an end to romantic vision every time. I will reiterate here my claim that Melville, like his characters, felt a compulsion to pursue a visionary path that would finally lead outside the domain of heteronormativity, but that path would inevitably meet up against the roadblock of material culture, which Melville perceives to be the ineluctable double of sexually normative culture. And it is likely no coincidence that, as the innovator to thematize the decline of romantic vision, that Melville would be the last author of the antebellum period to pursue the project of the romance as theorized by his some-time intimate acquaintance, Nathaniel Hawthorne. What Hawthorne constructed, Melville disassembles. Though Melville may see that romance as a doomed endeavor in ways that Hawthorne never did, it is nevertheless the case that both men saw the writing of romance as an opportunity to explore new visions of sociality and intimacy that could not have been incorporated into the realist novel, and even if the texts themselves are not always optimistic about the practicability of putting into place any transformation of the institutionalized systems of family and friendship, the visionary fantasies they long to see fulfilled provide fodder for the imagination of the reader.

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