THE SCARLET LETTER'S ROMANTIC MEDICINE

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Sin, like disease, is a vital process. . . . Spiritual pathology is a proper subject for direct observation and analysis.
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

Henry James, in his early evaluation of The Scarlet Letter, astutely noted that the novel's dramatic center lay not with the chastened Hester Prynne—who "becomes, really, after the first scene, an accessory figure"—but with the two men who had shared her bed: "The story," James observed, "goes on for the most part between the lover and the husband." James's emphasis on the intensity of the men's bond, and his description of the doubleness of Roger Chillingworth's attentiveness to Arthur Dimmesdale, calls attention to the novelty of Hawthorne's portrayal, in which Chillingworth appears (in James's words) "to minister to his [Dimmesdale's] hidden ailment and to sympathise with his pain" while "revel[ing] in his unsuspected knowledge of these things and stimulat[ing] them by malignant arts."¹ The ersatz physician does not merely attend to his patient's symptoms but also reads them, testing and modulating his evolving interpretation of their significance by eliciting from the preacher telltale spasms and wincing. Dimmesdale, in short, offers up to his observant companion a literal body of evidence, a set of physiological and affective traces of actions past. As historian Henri Ellenberger has observed, Chillingworth's corporeal epistemology is predicated on eliciting his patient's "pathogenic secret," that which the sufferer will not, or cannot, express, but which is the hidden source of his bodily ills.² In the words of one late-nineteenth-century surgeon, a canny physician knows that the involuntary motion of the body—such as a patient's pulse—"tells its own tale."³

A number of twentieth-century readers have, like James, discerned that the imbrication of medicine and detective work in the elaborate, evocative interactions of The Scarlet Letter's fictional doctor and patient was indeed one of "the highly original elements in the situation that Hawthorne so ingeniously treats."⁴ Yet there has been an instructive discrepancy in the critical interpretation of Chillingworth's hermeneutic practice. For the psychoanalytic critic Frederick Crews, Chillingworth's pursuit of somatic clues cast him as "the psychoana-
lyst *manqué.* ⁵ Chillingworth, in Crews's psychoanalytic account, is alert to the symbolic significance of his patient's symptoms, a reading that modulates the character's malevolence. The psychoanalyst is attentive to the body's gothic eloquence, as an astonished Sigmund Freud discovered when the "painful legs" of his early patient Fraulein Elisabeth von. R. "began to 'join in the conversation' during our analysis." ⁶ From a psychoanalytic perspective, even as Chillingworth exacerbates his patient's pain he nonetheless prods the minister toward the cathartic acknowledgement of his pathogenic secret that marks the end—in the dual sense of goal and conclusion—of a psychoanalytic encounter. Chillingworth anticipates the twinned interpretive and therapeutic force of the method Freud would develop a half century later: as Freud wrote of his patients' quirks and odd comments, "it is difficult to attribute too much sense . . . to these details." ⁷

For the historicist critic Stephanie Browner, however, the attentions of Chillingworth possess neither therapeutic potential nor hermeneutic density. Rather, in Browner's account, Hester's husband fixes the object of his scrutiny with the "blank, unassuming, and yet knowing gaze of the new [scientific] medicine." ⁸ Browner argues that Chillingworth, embodying what Michel Foucault has termed the "clinical gaze," reduces the dynamic intricacy of his patient's distress to a singular source—an act of adultery—just as modernizing medicine at mid-nineteenth century was challenging an earlier holistic paradigm of illness by affirming a materialistic, lesion-based account of health and disease. Whereas Crews discerned in the relationship between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale the (admittedly twisted) elements of a dynamic therapeutic encounter, Browner suggests that "the obviously demonic figure" in essence performs a premature autopsy on the agonized minister. In the psychoanalytic account, the human body is understood to speak multivalent, nuanced, potentially therapeutic truths elusive to both doctor and patient and discernible only through collaborative acts of imagination and interpretation; by contrast, in the biomedical account the body provides a univocal, symbolically inert register of forensic fact, which merely awaits the excavation of the quasi-omniscient scientist.

This critical impasse speaks to a central rift in modern psychology, which is, as the anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann has pointed out, "Of Two Minds" (the title of her study) about the epistemological pertinence of the encounter between doctor and patient, and the appropriate ways to treat human anguish and anxiety. In her study of psychiatric training at the close of the twentieth century, Luhrmann describes in telling detail the distinctions between thinking "psycho-
dynamically” and thinking “biomedically.” “Psychodynamic thinking,” she writes,

is a curious and highly distinctive manner of thought: . . . It is notoriously difficult to characterize. Psychotherapists produce an array of metaphors to describe the therapeutic encounter—it is a dance, a duel, a drama, an attempt to listen with a different ear, to listen for what is under the surface or behind the words; it is peeling the onion, unraveling the psyche, piercing the armor of the character.9

The scientific model of “biomedical psychiatry” engenders a different approach, one in which “the patient has become the enemy,” an obstacle to accurate diagnosis and treatment: “This is a model of disease in which the body is unmindful, in which human intention and personality disappear from the body like figures from a photograph bleached by the sun.” Biomedical psychiatry, Luhrmann argues, “is about doing something, about acting and intervening, the way doctors are supposed to do.”10

The Scarlet Letter, set during the historical preeminence of Puritan theology yet centrally concerned with the terrestrial relationship between a sick minister and his medical attendant, provides a prehistory of a central tension in modern psychiatric theory about how to interpret and to treat humanity’s often inchoate ills. At the time Hawthorne was writing, psychology had not yet emerged as a discrete field of study; as historian Edward S. Reed has written, “Early in the century, psychology was considered to be a science of the soul. By the end of the century, psychology had more or less abandoned the soul and replaced it with the mind.”11 Writing from within the earlier medical paradigm of traditional therapeutics, and searching for a mode in which “science” or secular knowledge might provide insight into the complex depths of human experience, Hawthorne placed the human body at the center of his romantic symptomology: “To symbolize moral or spiritual disease by disease of the body;—thus, when a person committed any sin, it might cause a sore to appear on the body;—this to be wrought out.”12 The idea that a transcendent truth might be expressed on and through the physical body was, of course, not a novel one, for the witch-hunters of Cotton Mather’s time often found a blemish on the skin of a putative witch to confirm the suspect’s demonic affiliation. Indeed, natural occurrences of all sorts were interpreted by Puritan divines as messages from a communicative deity, leading William Bradford, for instance, to discern God’s displeasure with a coterie of malcontents in “a great and fearful earthquake” that rocked the colony
in 1638. As the historian David Hall has written, “The people of seventeenth-century New England lived in an enchanted universe.”

For Hawthorne’s Puritans, however, living in an enchanted universe meant that the connection between spiritual sin and the physical body was unproblematic; in Hall’s words, “Always portents reaffirmed the rightness of a moral order.” Because they were taken as revealed truth, material signs did not require a diagnostic epistemology as Hawthorne understood it. Stanley Fish has written of the way that a certain kind of theological thinking forestalls interpretation. In his “Normal Circumstances and Other Special Cases” Fish offers the case of a born-again baseball player who “literally sees everything as a function of his religious existence”:

[I]t is not that he allegorizes events after they have been normally perceived but that his normal perception is of events as the evidence of supernatural forces. [Baltimore Oriole] Kelly played on May 1st only because the regular right fielder came down with conjunctivitis, and “even that,” [Baltimore Sun reporter] Janofsky exclaims, “he interpreted as divine intervention.” “Interpreted” is not quite right because it suggests an imposition upon raw data of meaning not inherent in them, but for Kelly the meaning is prior to the data which will always have the same preread shape.

For Fish’s ballplayer and Hawthorne’s Puritan, divine significance is immanent in the world, even in quotidian corporeal complaints such as an eye infection. It is precisely to the point, then, that the face of an elderly Puritan woman, Dimmesdale’s devoted parishioner, expresses “divine gratitude and ecstasy” when he whispers possibly irreverent words in her ear. The factual question—did he actually offer an “unanswerable argument against the immortality of the human soul”?—matters not at all. Precisely because a religious meaning preceded and shaped the encounter, the devoted widow could only hear confirmation of her sense that the minister was the incarnation of the holy.

In this essay I argue that Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter dramatizes the movement from a theological framework, in which the world is saturated with significance and there is a presumptive correspondence between emblem and meaning, body and spirit, to a secular perspective in which questions of epistemology and interpretation become central. This process takes shape most centrally in the figure of Dimmesdale, who watches with dismay coupled with relief that nothing he expresses—either in words or on the surface of his body—can unsettle his parishioners’ veneration of him. Posing a challenge to the self-affirming system of the theological is the figure of Chillingworth
with his determination to read contingent human meanings from the
evidence of the flesh. Only the medical attendant who attaches him-
self to the afflicted minister conceives that Dimmesdale’s body pre-
sents a conundrum that might be resolved by worldly investigation.
And while critics have tended to align Chillingworth solely with a mu-
derous empiricism in his attempt to diagnose his patient, I instead ex-
amine how the figure of the doctor, in supplying a non-theological
account of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual in
the case of the minister, also opens up the rich interpretive space that
for Hawthorne is the defining feature of romance. Psychology, rather
than sin, will set down roots in the fertile discrepancy between mean-
ing and emblem, spirit and body. Elaborate, ambiguous, and often con-
flicting human narratives come to mediate between a symptom—for
example, Dimmesdale’s chest pain—and its source or significance.

Illness in *The Scarlet Letter* tells a particular human story about
the afflicted individual, one that evolves over time and must be un-
covered by a set of interpretive procedures. There is, moreover, a deep
compatibility between Hawthorne’s secularizing of corporeal emblems
once thought to express divine truth and the conceptual premise of
medicine in the United States for the first half of the nineteenth cen-
tury. Practitioners of traditional therapeutics did not think that health
and disease had a singular source (whether divine or naturalistic). In-
stead, nineteenth-century doctors conceived of the human body in
humoral terms. Good health indicated a dynamic equilibrium of the
body’s vital fluids, while symptoms of disease indicated that the hu-
mors were out of balance. Factors that might influence this delicate
balance included a person’s innate constitution, moral influences, so-
cial context, hereditary predispositions, physical environment, and
habits of hygiene. Disease was an exceedingly complex human condi-
tion, rather than a specific entity. Further, this conceptual framework
meant that doctors did not perceive strong distinctions between the
psychological and the physiological, or states of mind and states of
body.

The details of Chillingworth’s treatment of Dimmesdale in fact
conform neatly to contemporary therapeutic methods, for at the time
Hawthorne composed his most powerful fiction there existed a para-
doxical holism undergirding the sometimes invasive treatments of nine-
teenth-century doctors. As historian Charles Rosenberg has argued,
doctors believed that illness might derive from anything that disrupted
the balance of humors—anxiety or debauchery as much as exposure
to filth or malnutrition: “No one doubted the causal relationship be-
tween situational stress and disease etiology, and, in particular, the
dangers of emotions unchecked. . . . Every clinician had to be something of a psychiatrist and family therapist. . . . Experienced physicians saw their regular patients over a period of years and in a particular emotional and social setting.”19 Chillingworth’s initial approach to health and disease in the story not only places him as a practitioner of traditional therapeutics; his mode of analysis is also remarkably harmonious with Hawthorne’s own interpretive methods. Accordingly, I examine Chillingworth’s arrival on the scene as an immanent critique of the Puritan tendency to attribute divine or transcendent significance to human events. In their protracted conversations, Chillingworth both draws out the minister and seeks to replace Dimmesdale’s own theological account of his affliction with the physician’s—and Hawthorne’s—secular sense that, mediated by the interpretative filter of the attentive doctor, the body might be understood to express the soul’s truth. This insistence on the correspondence between the somatic and the spiritual nudges the minister away from his self-confirming system of immanent meanings and into the physico-spiritual space that, in the course of the text, will come to be designated as the psychological.

As the tale proceeds, however, the minister’s attendant moves away from the provisional epistemology of traditional medicine and increasingly asserts a rigid correspondence between symptom and referent that apes the theological, so that Dimmesdale’s physical condition can, for the cuckolded husband, only bespeak his guilty paternity. Chillingworth abandons the more flexible narrative accounts of traditional therapeutics that, with their complex corporeal symbology and interpolation of physical complaints and spiritual concerns, Hawthorne had aligned with his own romance technique. For finally, Chillingworth actually tries to replicate the theological—albeit in secular terms—in his attempt to make Dimmesdale’s sleeping body speak a mute, transparent, singular truth that would eradicate the need for interpretation. In this, we can see an epistemological orientation that will lend itself to the biomedical psychiatry: the physician inherits an extreme form of scientific medicine that was for Hawthorne finally commensurate with a brutal, objectivist realism.

Hawthorne’s achievement in The Scarlet Letter is to include and yet disallow such univocal readings by mobilizing the meaning-making power of the romance itself. As he wrote in his notebook, “Words—so innocent and powerless as they are, standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become, in the hands of one who knows how to combine them!”20 The notion that story telling is itself an epistemology with therapeutic potential animates the conclusion of The
scarlet letter, in which hawthorne prompts his readers to collaborate in telling the story. it is, finally, the text itself, rather than the particular figure of chillingworth, that engages the reader in a strenuous interpretive activity that luhrmann isolates as essential to "psychodynamic thinking": the "attempt to listen with a different ear, to listen for what is under the surface or behind the words."

the doctor as romancer

throughout his fiction, hawthorne critiques a ponderous materialism that would reduce the world to matter emptied of spiritual purpose or higher meaning, and to a large extent he equates this position with men of science and medicine. as the critic eric stoehr has written, "hawthorne is the chief practitioner of science fiction in our literature, and his crazy doctors and villainous alchemists stalk through the imagination like no others." writing in the scarlet letter of the relative absence of doctors in the puritan community, hawthorne speculates, "in their researches into the human frame, it may be that the higher and more subtle faculties of such men were materialized, and that they lost the spiritual view of existence amid the intricacies of that wondrous mechanism, which seemed to involve art enough to comprise all of life within itself" (88).

in light of this anti-doctor pronouncement, it is easy to overlook the fact that chillingworth is not technically a doctor, but merely presents himself as one. as the narrator recounts with some irony, the "health of the good town of boston" had, until the arrival of hester's husband, been entrusted to two men, one a razor-toting surgeon who attended all-too heroically to the physical body, the other a deacon who substituted piety for medical knowledge (88). as a scholar, chillingworth, while knowledgeable about "the medical science of the day" (88), is in fact aligned with the abstract realm of books and ideas rather than the material sphere of the human body. upon his appearance at hester's public shaming, her husband is described as a person "to whom external matters are of little value and import, unless they bear relation to something within his mind" (48). such is his imaginative power over the raw matter of life that chillingworth looks like someone "who had so cultivated his mental part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself, and become manifest by unmistakable tokens" (48). while captive with the indians, however, "he had gained much knowledge of the properties of native herbs and roots; nor did he conceal from his patients, that these simple medicines, nature's
boon to the untutored savage, had quite as large a share of his own confidence as the European pharmacopoeia" (88). Combining the life of the mind with empirical knowledge of the world, Chillingworth is initially presented as a mediator between the alternately ineffectual and lethal medical pairing of the deacon and the surgeon.

Chillingworth is in fact described in terms that might as likely be applied to an artist (or romancer), one who takes the material of the world and transforms it through his artistic imagination into something powerful. His cleverness with herbs resembles Hester's adroitness with a needle: like Hester's riotous, polychromatic creations, "every remedy [Chillingworth brewed] contained a multitude of far-fetched and heterogeneous ingredients, as elaborately compounded as if the proposed result had been the Elixir of Life" (88). His concoctions indeed prove efficacious, perhaps even life-saving, in his encounters with Hester in the prison, where he proffers a therapeutic draught that calms the distraught baby and abates the mother's suicidal mania.22 Moreover, Chillingworth's desire to seek out Hester's paramour is cast not in the empirical terminology of the detective, but in the subliming rhetoric of the romancer. "I shall seek this man," he tells Hester, "as I have sought truth in books; as I have sought gold in alchemy. There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him" (58). The conceptual movement aligned with Chillingworth, from raw matter to refined essence via the "diffus[i]on of thought and imagination" (32), is for Hawthorne analogous to the operation of the artist.23 Casting back in "The Custom-House" over his own foiled attempts to write a romance, Hawthorne surmises that he needs to adopt the technique of the alchemist: to take "a few scattered fragments and broken paragraphs, and write them down, and find the letters turn to gold upon the page" (32).

Hawthorne analyzes the distinction between the romantic and the theological in epistemological terms; in *The Scarlet Letter* he presents romance as sharing a hermeneutic interest with traditional therapeutics, for both romance and medicine conceived that deeper meanings reside in the manifestations of the physical body. Indeed, whereas conventional romances employed supernatural elements, Hawthorne avoids them in *The Scarlet Letter*, where he provides a naturalist explanation for all strange occurrences. While advancing his own romantic epistemology ("To symbolize moral or spiritual disease by disease of the body"), Hawthorne examines the power of the theological to subsume even a materialist account of the world to its own sacralized vision. The town's initial reaction to Chillingworth and his ministrations to their beloved young minister offers an illumi-
nating case study. Noting the convergence of two phenomena—the doctor’s arrival and the minister’s ill health—the Puritan community understands cause and effect in divine or even supernatural terms. The rumor circulates “that Heaven had wrought an absolute miracle, by transporting an eminent Doctor of Physic, from a German university, bodily through the air, and setting him down at the door of Mr. Dimmesdale’s study!” (90). At the time Hawthorne was writing, European universities were the destination for American medical students intent on infusing scientific learning into their clinical studies.24 Such physicians would indeed count as examples of those who had “lost the spiritual view of existence” and concentrated instead on the health of the physical body as a mechanism, albeit wondrous and complex. The rumor that heaven might, in essence, make house calls in the form of Chillingworth expresses how the religious account absorbs into itself all competing accounts, so that healing directed at the physical body (as embodied by the German university) can be understood to be mobilized by supernatural directive. So even if the good minister were to be cured by an imported German doctor, it would not signal the triumph of materialism but reveal the workings of Providence.

Hawthorne’s interest in the townspeople’s reaction to Chillingworth, then, is crucially epistemological. Even milder versions of the Bostonians’ faith-based reasoning, which take vivid form in the image of Chillingworth flying through the air, understand the physician’s arrival in religious terms: “Individuals of wiser faith, indeed, who knew that Heaven promotes its purposes without aiming at the stage-effect of what is called miraculous interposition, were inclined to see a providential hand in Roger Chillingworth’s so opportune arrival” (90). As the historical example of Jonathan Edwards would indicate, with his empirical investigations into natural phenomena and experimentation with the smallpox vaccine, the power of the divine account of natural occurrences is made manifest in its capacity both to account for physical phenomena and unproblematically to digest alternate theories that, from the perspective of later observers such as Hawthorne, would come to seem at mortal odds with a divine or supernatural interpretation.25 And just as, for the devout Puritan, there was no element of human experience that was too vulgar or terrestrial (an infected eye, say) to be assimilated to the spiritual point of view, so for a medical practitioner during Hawthorne’s time there was no element of human life that was too incorporeal or intangible (a vague dread, say) to be laden with physiological significance.

But whereas his colleagues see no problem or danger in assimilat-
ing the material to the spiritual, and indeed do so reflexively, it is
Dimmesdale himself who sets the material and the spiritual at odds
when he asserts that the two realms are utterly divergent. Ironically,
then, it is the young minister and not the aging scholar who makes
the initial appeal to dualism, a conception at the philosophical heart
of scientific medicine. This dualism holds that the material of the world
has an existence separable from the apprehension of it by conscious-
ness, a philosophical stance that engenders the scientific value of ob-
jectivity, in which things in the world are known in and of themselves
without the adulterations of human interests and values. Having experi-
enced the danger of mixing the carnal and the spiritual in his relation-
ship with Hester, the transformed and guilt-ridden Dimmesdale brings
added force and rigidity to his belief in their separation. This dualistic
commitment subtends the minister’s protest that he needs no treat-
ment by a doctor; in this he indicates that his complaint, linked to sin
and therefore spiritual at base, has a source and a cure that was out-
side of the realm of organic illness. Dimmesdale in fact understands
his illness as a means or instrument by which the spiritual might di-
vest itself of the material once and for all: “I could be well content,
that my labors, and my sorrows, and my sins, and my pains, should
shortly end with me, and what is earthly of them be buried in my
grave, and the spiritual go with me to my eternal state” (90). Death,
from this perspective, is the ultimate distillery, extracting the valu-
able spiritual essence from the mere clay of the body.26 Members of
Dimmesdale’s congregation “best acquainted with his habits” (89) un-
derstand his dwindling physical presence in precisely these spiritual-
ized terms when they attribute his decline to “the fasts and vigils of
which he made a frequent practice, in order to keep the grossness of
this earthly state from clogging and obscuring his spiritual lamp” (89).

Dimmesdale’s fellow clerics, however, counter this equation, in
which a decrease in physical force indicates a commensurate increase
in spiritual power. They urge the young minister to accept the doctor’s
ministrations not merely as physical balm, but as holy “aid which Provi-
dence so manifestly held out” (90), and which it would be a sin to
reject. As Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. once remarked, “We do not deny
that the God of battles decides the fate of nations; but we like to have
the biggest squadrons on our side, and we are particular that our sol-
diers should not only say their prayers, but also keep their powder
dry.”27 Clear-eyed and practical, Dimmesdale’s advisors are uncon-
cerned that the drama of Providence must play itself out on the stage
of the material world.

Chillingworth, in contrast to Dimmesdale, adopts the secular out-
look of traditional therapeutics, which drew no firm line between the corporeal substance of a patient and the intangibles of thought and experience that impinged upon the body. To early nineteenth-century practitioners, sickness constituted a sort of biographical fingerprint, and Chillingworth, accordingly, "deemed it essential, it would seem, to know the man, before attempting to do him good" (92). The scientific medicine preeminent for the second half of the nineteenth century would assert that such "soft" knowledge of a patient bore no relevance to the progress, diagnosis, or treatment of diseases understood to be specific invading entities. But under the rubric of traditional therapeutics that informs *The Scarlet Letter*, no element of a person's life, character, spiritual state, or physical constitution is deemed irrelevant to his overall health and well-being. Chillingworth—and for that matter Hawthorne—wishes to cast Dimmesdale as such a patient *par excellence*: "Wherever there is a heart and an intellect, the diseases of the physical frame are tinged with the peculiarities of these. In Arthur Dimmesdale, thought and imagination were so active, and sensibility so intense, that the bodily infirmity would be likely to have its groundwork there" (92). The close proximity of Hester's husband to the minister is in fact the fantasy of traditional therapeutics: that a doctor might be able to harvest with an expert eye every detail of a patient's life, so that the nature of the affliction and the appropriate course of treatment would emerge from the welter of biographical detail. This impulse underlies Chillingworth's commitment to "bring[ing] his mind into such affinity with his patient's, that this last shall unawares have spoken what he imagines himself only to have thought" (92). Distinctions, or in fact discrepancies, that are important to the minister—between his secret thoughts and his public voice, between physical complaint and spiritual health, and even between himself and his physician—are confounded by the forceful presence of his assiduous attendant, who combines the epistemological modes of intuition and empiricism.

Chillingworth is therefore the force of *mixing* in the life of Dimmesdale, who "[i]n no state of society would ... have been what is called a man of liberal views; it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework" (91). Erudite on a wide range of topics rather than confined to those theological, cosmopolitan in thought and action where Dimmesdale's colleagues are provincial, Chillingworth not only seeks to understand how the minister sees the world, but also to offer his patient a glimpse of his own experimental epistemology. So while much has been made of the ersatz physician's
prying into the minister’s life, it has been less noted that his intimacy with Dimmesdale also provides “the occasional relief of looking at the universe through the medium of another kind of intellect” (91). Again, Hawthorne links this multiplicity of perspective with romance and with nature when he writes of the two men’s “long walks on the seashore, or in the forest; mingling various talk with the splash and murmure of the waves, and the solemn wind-anthem among the tree-tops” (91, emphasis added). The natural environment, the free-form discussions, the variety of topics—all provide a contrast with the iron theology and social forms of Puritanism. The older man draws the young minister out in talk, and in turn Dimmesdale reveals different facets of his character “when thrown amidst other moral scenery” (92) such as might be found in his home or in the forest rather than in the confining walls of the meeting house.

These wanderings are cast as both spatial and intellectual, with the presence of Chillingworth eliciting new thoughts “as if a window were thrown open, admitting a freer atmosphere into the close and stifled study, where his life was wasting itself away” (91). For while Dimmesdale inters himself in books of “monkish erudition” (93) in order to escape the world, his companion either wanders the woods looking for potent herbs or retires to “his study and laboratory . . . provided with a distilling apparatus, and the means of compounding drugs and chemicals” (93). Chillingworth exploits the investigative opportunities provided by close proximity to see how Dimmesdale reacts to a variety of different stimuli, and the young minister in turn is drawn to the older man’s cosmopolitanism and experimentalism: “these two learned persons sat themselves down, each in his own domain, yet familiarly passing from one apartment to the other, and bestowing a mutual and not incurious inspection into one another’s business” (93–94). This image of transit—of “familiarly passing from one apartment to the other”—encompasses the relationship of the two men, both of whom experiment with inhabiting the perspective of the other.

Dueling Epistemologies

Hawthorne leaves little doubt that the presence of Hester’s husband has a profound impact on the minister, but his influence is by no means one-dimensionally demonic. Chillingworth is completely frank from the start about his plan of action with respect to Hester’s lover: he will hunt him down in order to keep him alive and thereby make
him suffer the pangs of human conscience and keep him from the escape death might provide. The salutary effects of the sedative that Chillingworth dispenses to Hester and Pearl in the prison indicate his faithfulness on this point, for as Hester herself acknowledges, this moment provides an opportunity for a murderous cuckold to proffer poison. Further, one must question the cause and effect relationship between the husband’s arrival and the lover’s illness that casts the former as a “diabolical agent” with “[d]ivine permission . . . [to] plot against [Dimmesdale’s] soul” (95). This is just one view offered by the onlookers in the town, the revision of their earlier opinion that God had transported the physician bodily across the ocean to heal the minister. Hawthorne holds out an alternative to the supernatural account in the form of the minister’s close associates, who note the suicidal flavor of the sick man’s self-flagellations. If so, Dimmesdale, following his lover’s day of public ignominy, might be said to take his fleshly mortifications upon himself. As I have indicated, the minister on a philosophical or theological level certainly desires a state that unambiguously severes the spiritual from the material, the sort of metaphysical surgery that death provides. Hawthorne also depicts Chillingworth spending an inordinate amount of time collecting herbs, thereby intimating that the physician’s ministrations to Dimmesdale might include doses of digitalis and other efficacious folk remedies. (The night before his election sermon Dimmesdale says to his companion, “touching your medicine, kind Sir, in my present frame of body I need it not” [160], suggesting at least a proximate cause for his death under the strain of the following day’s events.) Hawthorne extends the option, then, that we take Chillingworth at his word when he maintains that he actually performs his duty as a doctor and works to keep the patient alive—though admittedly these remedial actions are in direct opposition to the minister’s equally express wishes to be left to die.

Indeed, one could argue that the younger man’s spasmodic wincing whenever his companion touches a psychic nerve serves as a nascent form of Freud’s cathartic method. In Freud’s early treatments, a patient was therapeutically brought to experience, in conversation with his analyst, emotions that had been left dangerously unexpressed at a past traumatic moment. (Dimmesdale himself acknowledges something like this when, dying on the scaffold, he expresses gratitude for the physician’s efforts to “keep the torture always at red-heat” [181].) On a more significant level, however, I would suggest that Chillingworth’s transforming effect on Dimmesdale is not limited to his well-timed abrasions of the minister’s guilty conscience. Instead, the older man
affects the young minister as an intellectual breath of fresh air, as one who suggests alternate ways of understanding the world, and especially of conceiving the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, or the material of the body and the stuff of the mind. Hawthorne himself indicates this when he explains that the doctor, taking his patient literally and figuratively away from his musty study lined with theological tomes, provides Dimmesdale the "freer atmosphere" of the experimentalist. "But," the narrator warns, "the air was too fresh and chill to be long breathed, with comfort. So the minister, and the physician with him, withdrew again within the limits of what their church defined as orthodox" (91).

Chillingworth, in short, offers a free-ranging secularism that recognizes multiple sources for knowledge—the study, the laboratory, the natural world, one's intuition—where "their church" understands truth to be singular, irrefutable, and transcendent. Chillingworth's contact with Dimmesdale, then, does not so much convey painful content as it forms an ongoing dialogue in which the physician-interlocutor prods the minister into testing out alternative epistemologies. And while Dimmesdale's security within the "iron framework" of his theology becomes less certain, his interlocutor, it becomes clear, is not a crude materialist. The dialogue between the two men upon Chillingworth's discovery of a new plant is a case in point. When an abstracted Dimmesdale asks his companion where he found "such a dark, flabby leaf?" (97), Chillingworth responds not with facts but with an interpretation. Growing on a dead man's grave, the plants "grew out of his heart, and typify, it may be, some hideous secret that was buried with him, and which he had done better to confess during his lifetime ... since all the powers of nature call so earnestly for the confession of sin" (97). The physician reads a natural occurrence symbolically rather than naturalistically; in this case, the weeds sprouting on the grave become a sign relevant to the life and actions of the person in whose matter they root.

Chillingworth employs a symbolic logic, however, not in a Puritan or typological sense, but as a medical device: confession is here understood not as a divine necessity, but as a therapeutic directive. Just as in the natural course of events, a flesh wound exposed to the air will begin to heal, so a psychical wound made visible through embodiment in words will make the sufferer "better" (97). Here again, Chillingworth's words—if not finally his intent—echo Hawthorne's own conclusion that one must "Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" (183). (It is one of Hawthorne's splendid ironies that Chillingworth's prescrip-
tion works at last, but not on the physician’s terms. For confession finally succeeds in killing Dimmesdale, a result that is necessarily a failure in secular medical terms, though a triumph for the minister who, radiant and purified, is confident that his soul is destined for a “better” state.) Of course, Chillingworth offers this anodyne to his patient quite certain that Dimmesdale, because of his individual constitution and his theology, will inevitably decline the physician’s secular recipe.

Indeed, Dimmesdale is immediately attentive to the heterodoxy of his companion’s interpretation: “‘That, good Sir, is but a fantasy of yours,’ replied the minister. ‘There can be, if I forebode aright, no power, short of the Divine mercy, to disclose, whether by uttered words, or by type or emblem, the secrets that may be buried with a human heart’” (97). The minister balks at the notion that one might discern a spiritual truth about a dead individual from the flora that adorn his grave, for in the Puritan account, the spirit has long since departed the remains of the interred body. Chillingworth’s interpretation creatively re-entwines the physical and the spiritual by urging that the release of a secret is a natural or even physiological event in the order of a secretion (a process that might be hastened by the strategic application of a lancet). Dimmesdale, in opposition, is clear that such revelations do not inhere in the matter of life but are rather the spiritual purview of God alone. The minister challenges the authority that the older man, in his adopted role of physician, implicitly lays claim to, an authority that extends beyond the human body into the human soul or psyche, and even beyond life into death. It should be obvious that what is appalling to the minister is not that his medical attendant is a materialist. (Instead of advancing a symbolic reading, a materialist might suggest that the plant grew where it did because decaying matter provided useful nutrients for the plant.) Rather, Dimmesdale refuses the older man’s romantic freedom of interpretation, his implicit assumption that one can read symbolically (and secularly) to discern human truths from the material world. To put this point another way: the local surgeon would never recognize his job description in Dimmesdale’s accusation that the physician usurps God’s prerogative “to disclose, whether by uttered words, or by type or emblem, the secrets that may be buried with a human heart.” On the other hand, the minister’s description applies quite nicely to Hawthorne himself, especially the romancer’s self-described project “to symbolize moral or spiritual disease by disease of the body.”

In his commitment to read the spiritual through the physical, Chillingworth, in the manner of both Hawthorne and the practitioner
of traditional therapeutics, opens up the space of the psychosomatic, in which physical illness unproblematically has its roots in the life, and not just the body, of the afflicted individual. That is, Chillingworth makes the case for somatization, an idea abhorrent to Dimmesdale for it entails the intimate communication between the physical and the spiritual. Chillingworth diagnoses Dimmesdale thus: "a sickness, a sore place, if we may so call it, in your spirit, hath immediately its appropriate manifestation in your bodily frame. Would you, therefore, that your physician heal the bodily evil? How may this be, unless you first lay open to him the wound or trouble in your soul?" (100–101). Distressed and yet aware of the logical opening his physician leaves for him, Dimmesdale retorts that he need not seek the assistance of Chillingworth, who "deal[s] not, I take it, in medicine for the soul!" (100). If the actual source of the minister's affliction lies in the realm of the spiritual, it would appear to place him beyond the help of "an earthly physician" (101): "if it be the soul's disease, then do I commit myself to the one Physician of the soul!" (101). But his companion asserts that the consanguinity of the two spheres prevents their being treated separately: "You, Sir, of all men whom I have known, are he whose body is the closest conjoined, and imbued and identified, so to speak, with the spirit whereof it is the instrument" (100). The novelty of Chillingworth's position is to assert that the young minister, a man so dedicated to the life of the spirit his very substance seems to be an afterthought, actually presents a rare and illuminating specimen of physico-spiritual interpenetration. What is heterodox for Dimmesdale, however, is the sine qua non of Hawthorne's romantic symptomology.

The apparent discrepancy, then, between the minister's physical presence and his spiritual power, manifested most strikingly in the resonance of his voice, undergoes an interpretive transformation in the course of the story. At its outset the dichotomy, or indeed the inverse relationship, between the physical and the spiritual follows for Dimmesdale the logic of divine sublimation. The less there is of his emaciated body, the minister's congregation believes, the more there is of his spiritual part; the more he approaches death, the closer he comes to a final communion with his God. But under the watchful eye of Chillingworth (and, as I have been suggesting, Hawthorne), what had once been for Dimmesdale the unproblematic and even desirable theological division between the material and the spiritual becomes an internalized gap, the discrepancy between inward truth and outward appearance. To Hester, Dimmesdale encapsulates this self-division as "the contrast between what I seem and what I am" (137–38).
Driving the process by which a philosophical relationship (spirit versus matter) becomes a psychological rift (inside versus outside) is the very religious account that once provided Dimmesdale solace, for to his Puritan followers, the ethereal man is "the mouth-piece of Heaven's messages of wisdom" (105), the personification of transcendent truth, the ultimate reality. In "The Raven," Poe's grief-maddened interlocutor gears his questions ("is there balm in Gilgal?") to what he knows to be the bird's one response ("Nevermore") as a way to ensure the maximum pain, much as Hester's lover tortures himself with dramatic irony before his congregation. In the process, he in fact learns to manipulate his followers' Puritan understanding by making oblique confessions before them, further sanctifying himself in their eyes, further alienating himself from the theological vision, while digging a still deeper interior trench between appearance (saintliness) and actuality (sin).

The minister's understanding of his diminishing substance, in other words, undergoes a transformation: instead of a slow apotheosis, it literally comes to denote nothingness, unreality: "he himself, in so far as he shows himself in a false light, becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist" (107). If Chillingworth, as his crooked body shrivels and blackens, begins to look more and more like the writing that might fill "a large black-letter volume" (101), Dimmesdale, as he vaporizes into diaphanous sound, begins to seem a mere voice without a body, or a sign divorced from its referent—or a symptom severed from a person. Having left the iron security of the theological, Dimmesdale finds himself in the realm of representation, where images can be manipulated, and "plain speech" (106) ceases to convey its content and risks dissolution into unintelligible cadences.

At the point that Chillingworth gives up the centrality of observing Dimmesdale's life, and walking and talking with him in the forest, and instead reacts with demonic glee to what he sees on the sleeping man's chest, he adopts the perspective of a scientific medicine concerned with singular causes. Historian of medicine Eric Cassell has written of the historical shift from traditional therapeutics to scientific medicine in this way: "The disease came to be regarded as more real to the doctor, while the patient, in all his or her dimensions except the biological facts of the body, came to be regarded as less real."31 As soon as Chillingworth regards a physical symptom as providing transparent access to the source of disease (in this case, adultery) he establishes a form of scientific realism. In Cassell's words, "Doctors pursue symptoms because of the belief that they are the direct manifestations of disease. Diseases are the 'real' things—the things that
count. Symptoms are a second-best access to the disease entity, the best being 'direct' views such as X rays, tissue examinations, electrocardiograms, and so on."32 Half a century before Roentgen would instrumentalize his discovery of radiation, Hawthorne establishes the logic of the X-ray, with its apparent ability to penetrate directly into the human body and locate the raw, objective, unmediated truth about a corporeal affliction.

In the absence of such technologies, however, the surface of the world presents itself like the surface of the human body, pockmarked with telling symptoms that seem to gesture toward a truth that exists beyond human grasp. Hawthorne makes clear the link between Dimmesdale’s anguish and this epistemological problematic in the central chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, entitled “The Minister’s Vigil.” Dimmesdale’s “great horror of mind” (108) as he stands alone before an unresponsive universe coincides with a remarkable natural occurrence: the appearance of a light in the sky. Hawthorne explicitly offers this as the occasion for a lesson in hermeneutics, first expressing the Puritan position:

Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances, and other natural phenomena, that occurred with less regularity than the rise and set of sun and moon, as so many revelations from a supernatural source. . . . It was, indeed, a majestic idea, that the destiny of nations should be revealed, in these awful hieroglyphics, on the cope of heaven. (113)

Once the minister loses the “iron framework” of his theology, with its premise that Providence underwrites the meaningfulness of the physical world (think of William Bradford’s earthquake), two possibilities present themselves. One is pure symbolism, in which persons are free to attribute their own solipsistic meanings to natural phenomena. However, with no criteria by which to judge any particular account as being more persuasive than another, such imaginings have no access to reality and indeed place the perceiver at the threshold of madness. It is to this that Hawthorne refers when he writes, “What shall we say, when an individual discovers a revelation, addressed to himself alone, on the same vast sheet of record!” (113). This mode leads to an epistemological nihilism, to an unbridgeable chasm between the human and the natural worlds and between any representation and its purported referent: “Not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point; . . . but with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it” (113). Here we encounter the solitary human mind battering itself against a material world it can never actually know, a dualistic realm
in which representations gesture impotently to things (a meteor, for example) they can never adequately embody.

Hawthorne, however, considers a second possibility, which understands the products of the imagination not merely as failed attempts to know or in some way capture the material world, but as symptoms. Such corporeal signs, Hawthorne suggests, might possess a significance of their own, rather than provide a "second-best access to the disease entity" (as Cassel puts it). Dimmesdale's self-referential reading of the meteor, then, might be read as a symptom, one that does not (unsuccessfully) gesture outward and away from itself, but instead points inward, to the condition of mind that produced it.

In such a case, it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul's history and fate. (113)

The products of the imagination, then, tell the truth, but a new kind, a truth that is neither underwritten by God nor validated by objective connection to the material world. As Hawthorne presents it, the secular truth that evades the treachery of representation is the human experience of pain. Suffering dissolves any meaningful distinction between the spiritual and the material, for whether the source of pain be "all in the mind" or in an obvious insult to the physical body, the suffering is itself palpably and irrefutably real. As Elaine Scarry has written, "for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiable present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty'"—a notion that Emily Dickinson surely expressed when she wrote, "I like a look of Agony / Because I know it's true." This human experience produces a correspondence in the body and spirit of Arthur Dimmesdale that, Hawthorne writes, prevents his disappearance altogether: "The only truth, that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth, was the anguish in his inmost soul, and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect. Had he once found power to smile, and wear a face of gayety, there would have been no such man!" (107). Pain is at once intimately individual—felt by the sufferer alone—and universal—something every sentient being must endure. This experience keeps Dimmesdale connected to his congregation, despite the epistemological divide that separates them, for his followers understand that the minister is suffering, whether the source of his anguish
be God or the devil, spiritual distress or physical wounds.

Chillingworth, for his part, becomes increasingly obsessed with making the spiritual line up perfectly with the material, so that one's insides are in complete alignment with one's outsides. He doggedly pursues Dimmesdale, working to make the minister's secret manifest, but succeeds primarily in effecting his own transformation. As everyone in the town begins to note, the body of the seemingly benevolent physician becomes blacker and more twisted, until finally in his clandestine meeting with Hester he permits "the whole evil within him to be written on his features," revealing his "true character" (125). Literally, Chillingworth is exactly that: not a man, but merely a character in a story, which of course has no inside at all, a truth that his transformation from seeming man into darkened emblem is meant to reveal. Critics often read Chillingworth's transition as the Puritans in the story do, which is to say typologically: his twisted blackness signifies his alignment with the forces of darkness, the Black Man, the devil. If we see Chillingworth's trajectory, however, as promoting him not into the theological realm of typology but into the terra firma of realism, we begin to understand the dire outcome of this character, who ceases to signify at all and is instead reduced to the material of which he is made. The final horror of the physician is not only the moral disaster of transgressing the sanctity of another's soul, it is for Hawthorne the execrable result of the realist epistemology that Michael Fried traces in Stephen Crane: the drive to get at the thing itself, to line up the representation with the material world, an impulse that finally disempowers writing as a meaning-bearing activity and reduces it to the attenuated material that it is—filaments of black ink.34

There is of course an explanation for Chillingworth's disintegration following Dimmesdale's death, one that employs psychological terms in an unexamined way to suggest that, bereft of his reason for living (tormenting the man who cuckolded him), the physician metaphorically "wastes away." But such readings, as I have sought to make clear, normalize the strange new epistemological terrain of Hawthorne's writing, territory that has important roots in the unproblematically psychosomatic medical thinking of his time. As Sharon Cameron has written of Hawthorne's use of allegory in his short stories, the imagery relating to the physician's physical state is too strange and graphic to be taken as mere allegory, and instead seems to demand a phenomenological interpretation.35 "All [Chillingworth's] strength and energy—all his vital and intellectual force—seemed at once to desert him; insomuch that he positively withered up, shriveled away, and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted
weed that lies wilting in the sun” (183). What the story has traced is the singular transformation of what looked something like a man into what looks more like the “unhumanized” (183) black squiggle of handwriting.36

And by contrast, what Hawthorne’s romance has itself succeeded in doing is to use writing to make its readers feel more human. Hawthorne adopts the position of true physician that Hester’s husband has abdicated. Although the figure of the doctor tries to stop telling the story in order to exist merely as letters on the page, Hawthorne insists that the story must go on. While Hawthorne’s romance writing has profound moral implications, which have been traced in literally hundreds of articles on *The Scarlet Letter*, I would suggest that for Hawthorne there are also crucial epistemological issues at stake. For it is Hawthorne, finally, who mediates between the dangers of solipsism (represented by Dimmesdale’s reading of the meteor) and the cruelties of scientific realism (figured by Chillingworth’s reading of Dimmesdale’s chest). Eric Cassell has argued that, in the clinical encounter, a physician must negotiate between the inevitably limited and subjective interpretation that a sick person derives from his symptoms and the physician’s own temptation to see symptoms as the “unmediated expression of diseases.” A physician accomplishes this feat, Cassell suggests, by conceiving of disease in narrative terms: “The story of the man with pneumonia is just that—a story, a series of events that happens to characters, in some specific place and over time in a specific period in history.”37 This is precisely the means that Hawthorne adopts, but only by offering a meta-story—a romance rather than a realist novel—that seeks to encompass rather than adjudicate between manifold possibilities.

F. O. Matthiessen once referred to the use of “multiple choice” as a staple of Hawthorne’s romance method.38 This technique is distinctly apparent in the final chapter of the story, which picks up after Dimmesdale’s death: “After many days, when time sufficed for the people to arrange their thoughts in reference to the foregoing scene, there was more than one account of what had been witnessed on the scaffold” (182). While these reports are disparate—some arguing for the presence of a scarlet letter on the minister’s breast, others asserting there was nothing there—they are unanimous in understanding Dimmesdale’s death as presenting a parable of some sort, a conclusion that a century and a half of readers have obviously shared.39 In articulating the meaning of Dimmesdale’s demise, the onlookers (including readers) participate in writing the story rather than simply reading it. The problem of referentiality is dissolved by this creative act, making
Hawthorne’s conclusion that “many morals . . . press upon us from the poor minister’s miserable experience” (183) a statement of irrefutable accuracy. Indeed, the story’s highlighted moral is a call to creative arms, a sort of requirement to represent something: “Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!” (183). Hawthorne is finally less interested in the concept of a referential truth than he is concerned with the action or state of being true.

So Chillingworth, reduced to the ink with which he is printed, does finally come to embody for Hawthorne the killing logic of a dogged scientific empiricism. And therein lies the power of The Scarlet Letter: it does its work by insisting that even Chillingworth might be recouped in the very psychological terms the story engenders (as someone so obsessed with his object that he cannot survive without it). Chillingworth as dead letter is redeemed on the secular moral terms that the story also would endorse, which locate humanity in the capacity to feel sympathy for even the most debased of subjects. This sympathetic capacity that the story works to elicit in readers is in turn mobilized by the romance writer to imbue his creations with life: “to all these shadowy beings . . . we would fain be merciful” (183). The Scarlet Letter anticipates in the figure of Chillingworth the precise workings of a particular and literal version of realism that, in its drive to make a representation identical to its referent, would dissolve the “spiritual” element of words—their meaning—and reduce writing to marks on a page. Hawthorne’s story works to disempower the literalizing operation of realism, partly by enabling a psychological account of Chillingworth’s character and demise. Primarily, however, The Scarlet Letter performs its office by helping to create the sort of reader for whom the most compromised character might become the object of a humanizing sympathy, and for whom—in good preparation for the late-century arrival of Freud—nothing ceases to signify.

The Rock of Realism

Ten years later, in the preface to The Marble Faun (1860), Hawthorne worried that the “Gentle. Kind, Benevolent, Indulgent, and most Beloved and Honoured Reader” no longer existed, and instead lay “under some mossy grave-stone, inscribed with a half-obiterated name, which I shall never recognize.”40 The Marble Faun, of all Hawthorne’s romances, includes the only Postscript, in which the writer responds to the questions of his new set of readers, who pep-
pered him with a variety of questions about what "really" was going on in the story: Was Donatello actually a faun? Where did Hilda in fact disappear to? What is Miriam’s real name? Confounded, Hawthorne in the Postscript chastises his too-literal readers:

The idea of the modern Faun . . . loses all the poetry and beauty which the Author fancied in it, and becomes nothing better than a grotesque absurdity, if we bring it into the actual light of day. He had hoped to mystify this anomalous creature between the Real and the Fantastic, in such a manner that the reader’s sympathies might be excited to a certain pleasurable degree, without compelling him to ask how Cuvier would have classified poor Donatello, or to insist upon being told, in so many words, whether he had furry ears or no. As respects all who ask such questions, the book is, to that extent, a failure. (463–44)

The figure of Donatello, in eliciting readers' taxonomical rather than sympathetic impulse, becomes the "grotesque absurdity" that Chillingworth embodied in *The Scarlet Letter*: an inhuman image, devoid of that life that the imagination of the sympathizing reader might extend to it.

The danger that a representation might become no more than the material of which it is made—a charge that Hawthorne obliquely levels against *The Marble Faun* in the passage above—is in fact the presiding concern of Hawthorne’s last romance. Sculpture, composed of matter quarried from the earth, becomes the governing figure for this possibility. In Rome, the setting for the story, statues crumble and gravestones disintegrate, while the stone from which they are made is recycled to base purpose. The bodies of persons, similarly, are reduced to raw matter after death: “Between two of the pillars . . . stands an old sarcophagus without its lid, and with all its more prominently projecting sculptures broken off; perhaps it once held famous dust, and the bony frame-work of some historic man, although now only a receptacle for the rubbish of the courtyard and a half-worn broom” (37). Devoid of animating principle, the sculptures “looked like fragments of the world, broken adrift and based on nothingness” (265). Rome is itself figured as “a long decaying corpse” (325), while the central characters in the story, Kenyon and Hilda, are cast as a “man of marble” and an unsympathizing Puritan, as if Hawthorne himself acknowledges their lifelessness (indeed, he writes at one point, “It was as if Hilda or Miriam were dead, and could no longer hold intercourse without violating a spiritual law” [207]).

Not just sculpture, but other representational media as well are
characterized as unspiritualized matter. Hawthorne describes the architecture of a "fossilized town" as utterly lacking in "life and juiciness" (302). Painting is "but a crust of paint over an emptiness" (341), and even writing, the most abstract of media, is figured as something that might become clogged with matter. As Hawthorne describes his own writing, "the very dust of Rome . . . inevitably settles on our page, and mingles with our ink" (101). Although each of the central characters is at the story's outset a practicing artist, by the end they have all given up their representational practice—a renunciation that mirrors Hawthorne's own late career, for after The Marble Faun he never completed another romance. It is perhaps fitting that the audience Hawthorne did find for this text treated it more as a guidebook to Roman art and architecture—a sort of aesthetic instruction manual—than as material that kindled their imaginations. The Marble Faun, I would like to suggest, constitutes the return of the repressed, quite literally foundering on the rock of realism; it is an elegiac text that is mournful for the vivifying attention of the sympathetic reader.

In The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne dramatizes the central need for interpretation in a desacralized world. Meaning, he asserts, is no longer immanent in the world; eye-witnesses, as the story's conclusion distinctly shows, might each draw radically different conclusions from what appears to be the exact same event—an enfeebled minister dying on the public scaffold. Hawthorne in the earlier romance eschews, however, a rigid system of correspondences, in which corporeal symbols are understood to point unambiguously to certain causes or meanings. It is precisely in the necessary obliquity of representation that Hawthorne locates the human—and healing—struggle to create significance, to produce a story that draws all the facts together into meaningful form. Dimmesdale's death indeed serves as "a parable" (182) of the sympathetic possibilities attendant on the act of interpretation itself, in which disparate bystanders might become "the people," and differing perspectives might be resolved into one "great heart . . . overflowing with tearful sympathy" (179). As Harriet Beecher Stowe proclaimed at the end of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), "There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that they feel right. . . . [T]he man or woman who feels strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race." Although the aging Hawthorne would later despair that any literary remedy could vivify the creative impulse of an increasingly literal-minded audience, for the younger man who wrote The Scarlet Letter, romance writing was the best prescription for engendering a
nation of sympathetic readers. With regard to modern psychology, which exists in an uneasy detente between those who think psycho-
dynamically and those who think biomedically, we are still waiting, in the words of historian Edward S. Reed, for “a rebirth of the Romanti-
cic dream of a science of the soul.”

Notes


2 Henri F. Ellenberger, The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 45. In his magisterial study of the origins of psychoanalytic thinking, Ellenberger—despite his focus on European sources—identifies Nathaniel Hawthorne as an important nineteenth-century popularizer of “the pathogenic secret.” Ellenberger traces the concept to an earlier Protestant practice known as the “Cure of Souls,” in which spiritually gifted ministers would “obtain the confession of a disturbing secret from dis-
tressed souls and . . . help those persons out of their difficulty” (44).


4 James, 404.


7 Breuer and Freud, 93.

8 Stephanie P. Browner, “Authorizing the Body: Scientific Medicine and The Scarlet Letter,” Literature and Medicine 12, no. 2 (Fall 1993), 143.


12 The American Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne: Based Upon the Original
Manuscripts, ed. Randall Stewart (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1932); entry for October 27, 1841.


15 Hall, 91.

16 Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), 270. While Fish’s claim in this essay is much more general than mine—he argues that the meaning of any text inheres not in the text itself but is instead determined by its context and the set of interpretive assumptions one brings to it—his example is wonderfully apt to my more limited point that a certain kind of theological thinking forecloses interpretation. Further, Fish’s conclusion that widely shared contexts make communication and agreement possible is pertinent to my analysis of The Scarlet Letter. Hawthorne in this work dramatizes the epistemological conundrum, not to mention the communication problems, that arise in a culture experiencing the dissolution of precisely such a widely shared (in this case religious) context. The alternate contexts and interpretive assumptions provided by natural science, psychology, medicine, and romance allow persons to arrive at alternate interpretations. These emerging discourses foreground the need for, and difficulties that attend, interpretation as such.


18 A few representative accounts are here instructive. Richard Harter Fogle suggests that the romance is best understood as representing the conflict “between Heart and Head”; he writes of Hester’s husband, “The demoniac Chillingworth is of the head, a cold experimenter and thinker.” Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Light and the Dark (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 107. Elizabeth Aycock Hoffman maintains that Chillingworth, representing the disciplinary penal mode of the mid-century prison system, “drains [Dimmesdale] of his own life force.” “Political Power in The Scarlet Letter,” ATQ 4, no. 1 (1990), 20. Henry James constitutes a notable exception to the critical conclusion that would construe Chillingworth and his influence in solely negative terms. Another exception, as I have discussed, is Frederick Crews, although his emphasis on a Freudian analysis obscures the way that Hawthorne’s work opens up the space of the psychological, rather than offers full-blown psychologized (and therefore psychoanalyzable) characters.


20 Hawthorne, American Notebooks, 122.

22 Post-partum hysteria, known as *puerperal mania*, was a clear and present danger during Hawthorne’s time, with physicians offering advice to worried husbands on how to spot it and how it might be mitigated.

23 Stoehr also notes the connection between Chillingworth and Hawthorne’s own artistic project. Stoehr, however, concludes that “[p]erhaps all of Hawthorne’s mad scientists and evil doctors can best be understood as projections of his own pervasive artist guilt” (116).


25 In *Jonathan Edwards*, Perry Miller writes, “He is the last great American, perhaps the last European, for whom there could be no warfare between religion and science, or between ethics and nature. He was incapable of accepting Christianity and physics on separate premises” (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 72.

26 In this, Dimmesdale participates in an activity that, according to Sharon Cameron, is central to Hawthorne’s short-story characters who “try to create a division between their own corporeal essence and the meaning of that corporeality.” *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), 79.


28 The profound interpenetration of states of mind and states of body in nineteenth-century medicine should not be confused with modern medicine’s willingness to label certain illnesses “psychosomatic.” Such a term only becomes operative once the categories of physiology and psychology have become firmly established, in order to distinguish those “unusual” instances of border crossing. In traditional therapeutics, no such term was necessary.

29 Historian of science Owsei Temkin has written of the similarities between

30 For a very interesting reading of The Scarlet Letter in its relation to the history of psychosomatic medicine, see Lilian Furst’s Idioms of Distress: Psychosomatic Disorders in Medical and Imaginative Literature (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 71–92.


32 Cassell, 104.


34 In Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), Michael Fried describes the “rejection of representation” (117) of certain characters in Crane’s short stories. These characters, Fried maintains, are faced with the uncanny situation within their textual universe of being exposed “as nothing more than an effect of certain practices of literary writing.” In the radical literary realism of Crane (and, in slightly different form, the painter Eakins) the “text’s reality as writing” (128) is something that is “simultaneously elicited and repressed” (xiv). It is elicited to conform to Crane’s stated representational desire “by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see” (119). Yet it is also repressed; for as Fried explains, were a reader only to see the reality of the ink on the paper “the writing in question would cease to be writing and would become mere mark” (xiv).

35 Cameron argues that while critics have tended to understand the graphic corporeal damage inflicted against bodies in his short stories as unproblematically allegorical, Hawthorne actually turns the very “conventions of allegory back upon themselves.” Hawthorne instead “asks about the relation between the fiction of allegory (that form of representation which self-consciously partializes its meanings, separates them from literal bodies) and the fiction of literality (that form of representation which claims to totalize its meanings, insists they be read as integral to the human body). He therefore asks: does the distinction between the allegorical and literal blur when the subject is not only the human body but the taking of the body apart?” (The Corporeal Self, 80). In the depiction of Chillingworth’s withering, I suggest, such a blurring is indeed operative. The graphically decaying body, which solicits (and, I argue, finally achieves) an allegorical reading, also offers itself in the literal terms I suggest in the text.

36 Nina Baym seems implicitly to acknowledge Chillingworth’s trajectory from character to writing when she notes, “Not only do Hester and Dimmesdale share a single sin, while Chillingworth’s is of another genre entirely; he himself is of a
different genre. . . . A character is not developed by being asserted to be growing duskier and more crooked. . . . [H]is psychology as an abused husband is not realistic. . . . All these factors tell us that Chillingworth operates on a different plane of reality from that of either Hester or Dimmesdale” (215). “Passion and Authority in The Scarlet Letter,” New England Quarterly 43 (1970), 215. Whereas Baym understands Chillingworth to be an allegorical figure, however, I argue that his reduction to shriveled blackness should be taken as bizarrely literal.


38 F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), 278. In Secrets and Sympathy: Forms of Disclosure in Hawthorne’s Novels (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988), Gordon Hutner makes a similar point when he notes that Hawthorne frequently “presents a choice between literal and metaphorical understandings where neither alone suffices” (49). I take these points further to suggest that Hawthorne, in conceiving of romance in epistemological terms, wishes to disable the opposition between the literal and the metaphorical.


42 Reed, 220.