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Source: *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*, Fall 2006, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 13-22

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44695461

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Joseph Church

> This so frequent abortion of man's dearest projects must be taken as proof that the deeds of earth, however etherealized by piety or genius, are without value, except as exercises and manifestations of the spirit.
>
> Hawthorne, "The Artist of the Beautiful"

Married in July 1842, the Hawthornes were enjoying an extended, blissful honeymoon at the Old Manse well into February when the now pregnant Sophia, walking with Nathaniel, fell on ice and miscarried.[1] Suffering much grief, both wife and husband strained to view their loss as but a temporary setback in a larger, spiritual unfoldment. A hopeful Sophia tells her mother that in the end she did not lose her "spirits at all" when her "own little Hawthorne flower . . . passed unfolded again into the Paradise of God."[2] And Hawthorne writes, "We do not feel as if our promised child were taken from us forever; but only as if his coming had been delayed for a season; and that, by-and-by, we shall welcome that very same little stranger, whom we had expected to gladden our home at an earlier period. . . . God will surely crown our union with children, because it fulfills the highest condition of marriage."[3] Since the Hawthornes clearly associate procreation with spirituality, they evidently, despite their confident declarations, experienced some anxiety and guilt over the miscarriage and its spiritual meaning. Could it have been a sign of God's disfavor with their sensual bliss?

Hawthorne had thought of the two of them as the new "Adam and Eve of a virgin earth," and thus, says one of his biographers, "after the marriage the Manse at Concord became the Eden of Adam and Eve."[4] Describing their first months there, Sophia had said the same: "It's a perfect Eden round us . . . . We are Adam and Eve."[5] Now they, too, suffer a grievous fall. Immediately after the miscarriage, Sophia expressed

her uneasiness by having the "bedroom cleaned and repainted" so "that no trace remained of 'sad scenes enacted there'"; moreover, she "did not recuperate as expected" but instead intermittently convalesced for months.[6] Hawthorne revealed his own anxiety, I think, when in the passage above he insisted that, if their marriage be sufficiently holy, their aborted infant would return as their first born, "that very same little stranger." In other words, by ever more carefully consecrating their intimacy, they will reclaim their lost infant, thereby absolve themselves of debilitating guilt and restore Eden. Consequently, like some of his protagonists—life imitating art—Hawthorne himself had now to find a way to more successfully integrate not only sexuality and spirituality but art-making as well, for he not infrequently spoke of his writings as his children and once, in "The Devil in Manuscript," of his miscarried works as the "unborn children of my mind."[7] When in the following March Sophia gave birth to Una, he several days later began to compose one of his most enigmatic tales, "The Artist of the Beautiful," a story in which, I propose, the author gives dramatic form—sometimes plaintive, sometimes comical—to his reflections on the difficult mingling of sanctity, eros, and his life as artist.

Most know the events in the story. Owen Warland, an ingenious if frail young artisan, gifted in his understanding of delicate mechanisms (natural and artificial) and filled with a love of, and an ability to represent, the ethereally beautiful, determines to create an exquisite, lifelike butterfly. He finds inspiration in Annie, the young woman he loves, but when he learns she has married Danforth, the blacksmith, he ceases work. In seclusion, he finally returns to and slowly completes his task, only to learn that the couple now have a son. Nonetheless, Owen presents the magnificent mechanical butterfly to the woman as a bridal gift. Its beautiful appearance and actions entrance Annie and even charm Danforth and their boy, but suddenly the infant, in that childlike way, snatches at the marvel and reduces it to a "small heap of glittering fragments, whence the mystery of beauty had fled forever."[8] To the surprise of all, the sensitive Owen remains unmoved by the destruction, the narrator explaining that when the "artist rose high enough to achieve the Beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes, while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the Reality" (475).

In his magisterial *Home as Found: Authority and Genealogy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Eric J. Sundquist several times reminds us of "Hawthorne's remarkable penchant for representing portions of his own personality in the most diverse and seemingly opposed characters."[9] I hold that in "The Artist of the Beautiful" Hawthorne does in fact divide his pressing sexual, spiritual, and aesthetic interests between Warland (the name itself indicating inner conflict) and Danforth. Muscular, "comely" (448), and genial, the blacksmith represents the physical component of eros, and in the author's scarcely disguised sexual symbolism he exults in his prowess. With humor Hawthorne affiliates the "iron laborer" with the "stiff and regular processes of ordinary machinery" (450), and has him playfully laying "his vast hand beside the delicate one of Owen" (452–53), advising the little man that "so far as a downright blow of hammer upon an anvil will answer the purpose, I'm your man" (453). And of course the virile Danforth wins the maiden and soon has a child with her. Hawthorne depicts the blacksmith as a joyous embodiment of earthly eros—a capacity the author himself evidently shares—but he makes it clear that in his own thinking sexuality without spirituality lacks ultimate meaningfulness and fulfillment. Danforth's marital love has in fact "transformed" the hitherto airy Annie "into a matron, with much of her husband's plain and sturdy nature" (468), and furthermore has produced an infant who incarnates elements of Annie's father, an unimaginative, mocking materialist: Owen "fancied that the old [father] was compressed into this baby shape, and looking out of those baby eyes, and repeating, as he now did, the malicious question: 'The Beautiful, Owen! . . . Have you succeeded in creating the Beautiful?'" (469). The author self-reflexively implies that adhering to merely physical eros results in an engrossing earthly materiality—Annie transformed into a version of Danforth, the baby into a genetic replication of his grandfather.[10] It is to the point that the blacksmith jokingly calls his son "the little monkey" (474), a term likely denoting animalistic reproduction.[11]

By contrast, in Owen Warland Hawthorne presents the interests but also the excesses of the side of himself that would sanctify eros. Even as a little boy witnessing procreation in nature, Owen seeks to sublimate and thereby elevate mundane sexual generation into something artfully beautiful and thus blessed: "From the time that his little fingers could

grasp a pen-knife, Owen had been remarkable for a delicate ingenuity, which sometimes produced pretty shapes in wood, principally figures of flowers and birds, and sometimes seemed to aim at the hidden mysteries of mechanism. . . . [Owen] was attempting to imitate the beautiful movements of Nature, as exemplified in the . . . activity of little animals" (449–50). Unsatisfied with nature's comparatively unelevated creatures and their ways, Owen determines to create in his artificial butterfly a "spiritualized mechanism" (469) symbolizing transcendent beauty and its capacity to inspire us heavenward. In his quest to embody the beautiful, he apparently seeks to sanctify his own mechanism—his erotic body—for in moments of frustration he several times discloses a tendency toward sensualism.[12] For example, when at work he hears Annie's voice, he experiences a mounting passion ordinarily subsumed in his task: "Oh, throbbing heart, be quiet! If my labor be thus thwarted, there will come vague and unsatisfied dreams, which will leave me spiritless tomorrow" (452). And when he later watches as she mischievously thrusts her needle into his mechanism (the sexual symbolism obvious), he briefly regresses to an otherwise hidden sensuality, taking up a life of drink, "bliss," and "riot" (461). But Owen finally returns to and completes his work, and in developing the beautiful entity he has transformed himself, sublimating, we may say "spiritualizing," the body's erotic mechanism. Owen allegorizes this subsuming transfiguration in his carving on the butterfly's gift box: it "represent[ed] a boy in pursuit of a butterfly, which, elsewhere, had become a winged spirit, and was flying heavenward; while the boy, or youth, had found such efficacy in his strong desire, that he ascended from earth to cloud, and from cloud to celestial atmosphere, to win the Beautiful" (469–70).[13]

But just as Hawthorne indicates the serious insufficiency of Danforth's earthly sexuality—in its materialism it threatens merely to reproduce the more or less meaningless animal life, hence, the monkey—so he emphasizes the inadequacy of Owen's overly spiritualized ardor. If Danforth forgoes spirit for body, Owen does the reverse, giving up the body altogether. On the carved box, he represents his physical presence as disappearing as he ascends toward the heavens. But even from early on in his life, in seeking transcendent sublimation, he seems to have too rigorously ignored or denied his body, and now as a man he appears especially diminutive, "like a child" (457), and "small and slender" (465).

Herein Hawthorne suggests that in the "spiritual" projects of one such as Owen—and himself—there may exist from the first a secret longing to eliminate man's sexual body, a kind of self-castration.[14] Toward that end Owen in some ways remains an "infant" (465) and in other ways converts himself into a symbolical female, specifically a mother, in a "convulsive pain" (466) and "big with inspiration" (467), parthenogenetically laboring to give birth to his own conception.[15] Late in the tale, he maternally and narcissistically exults to Annie that his creation "may well be said to possess life, for it has absorbed my own being into itself; and in the secret of that butterfly, and in its beauty—which is not merely outward, but deep as its whole system—is represented the intellect, the imagination, the sensibility, the soul, of an Artist of the Beautiful! Yes, I created it" (471). In this declaration Hawthorne expresses his own impulses, hinting that the artist necessarily, if symbolically, castrates himself to produce his work—makes of himself a matrix (the etymon of which is mater/mother)—but runs the risk of serving only egotistical ends—a narcissistic desire to objectify himself as transcendent beauty and thereby translate himself out of the anxiety of bodily eros and the finitude of time and space.[16]

Of course Owen has ostensibly initiated his undertaking for Annie. Thinking of her, he says, "if I strive to put the very spirit of Beauty into form, and give it motion, it is for thy sake alone" (452). Given his understanding of the butterfly's meaning—that it inspires sublimation and ethereal ascent—he must have in mind not simply Annie's satisfaction in his own aesthetic beauty (himself a conflation of marvelous butterfly and mother-infant) but crucially the spiritualization of her and her erotic body. In other tales, Hawthorne's technical male artisans attempt to create a supposedly ideal, which is to say a non-sexual, woman by working directly upon her person. Thus in "Rappaccini's Daughter," the doctor chemically translates his Beatrice into a kind of new sexless being. And in "The Birth-mark," the anxious newlywed Aylmer has "administered agents powerful enough to do aught except to change [his wife's] entire physical system."[17] For his part, Owen strives to engender in his butterfly not an ideal human but that which humankind, especially the young, find transformative, lifting them out of the engrossing mundane and into something higher and more spiritual. Evidently Owen hopes that his butterfly will so attract Annie that she will perforce etherealize

herself, or, more to the point, her body. In short, he would desexualize her. As a man, he still can be "seen to steal gently up, wherever a butterfly has alighted, and lose himself in contemplation of it. When it took flight, his eyes followed the winged vision, as if its airy track would show the path to heaven" (462). Owen must want the same for Annie, whom he evidently holds to be assertively erotic. Hawthorne almost teasingly intimates that likelihood when he has Annie come to Owen flirtatiously asking that he work upon her thimble. When she hears him declare that he would do anything for her—even try to "work at Robert Danforth's forge"—she suggestively laughs at the prospect while "glancing with imperceptible slightness at the artist's small and slender frame" (459). Annie then impishly pushes her needle into the young man's precious mechanism. In another bit of ribaldry, the author has all the main characters musing about "Perpetual Motion" (453), and has Annie finally prefer Danforth, the man who can and does phallically stand forth.

Hawthorne clearly satirizes Owen's obsessive effort to induce Annie to sublimate her erotic desire, but he himself may have been thinking similar though less excessive thoughts about Sophia. If he and she are to transcend the potential guilt incurred in the miscarriage—if their aborted infant is to return as their first born, "that very same little stranger"—both husband and wife must consecrate their physical intimacy. Several of the Hawthornes' biographers claim that as a newlywed Sophia not only playfully and unreservedly asserted herself in matters of conjugal intimacy but often occupied the more forceful position. In *Salem is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Miller describes Hawthorne's efforts to come to terms with Sophia's being both ideally angelic and sexually forward, "naughty": "And so he decided to have an ethereal being who was also a sexual being, which he accomplished by dividing her in unspecified proportions into a Dove and a human called quite simply Sophie Hawthorne. He apparently stumbled upon this dualism quite accidentally one day when he began a letter, 'Belovedest little wife—sweetest Sophie Hawthorne.' He was as happy as a child with his invention [like Owen?], for Sophie, unlike the Dove, could be naughty. 'And now if my Dove were here,' he wrote, 'she and that naughty Sophie Hawthorne, how happy we all three—two—one—(how many are there of us?)—how happy we might be!'"[18] In *Dearest Beloved: The Hawthornes and the Makings of the Middle-Class Family*, T. Walter Herbert

speaks of a representative incident in which the "emotional pattern of [Sophia and Nathaniel's] lovemaking when it flowered as harmless play [reveals] paradoxes of dominance and submission [that] now appear in a complex minuet: Sophia's impudent assumption of leadership is framed so as to court her husband's need to yield himself up to her; yet the scene overtly acknowledges his authority, which is deified, asserted, and relaxed only in fun."[19] But in her *Sophia Peabody Hawthorne*, Patricia Dunlavy Valenti goes further, arguing that because Herbert assumes man's supposed natural superiority in matters of intimacy, he fails to recognize the degree of Sophia's sexual "leadership," especially during the couple's lengthy honeymoon at the Old Manse: "Herbert interprets Sophia's gesture as momentary and finally supportive of her husband's authority. I believe that the weight of evidence, of which this incident is an example, demonstrates that Sophia's comfort with both elements of nature and her own sexuality signaled a fundamental imbalance in this couple's expected gender roles, that she did indeed take the lead sexually and in other matters normally ascribed to males in mid-nineteenth-century America."[20] Indeed, Valenti points out that in the first months of the marriage Hawthorne himself characterizes his bride as a kind of Salome: "the 'relief' Sophia had derived from [quack medicine for her headaches]," says Valenti, "may now have been provided by conjugal intimacy, for immediately upon arriving at the Manse, she declared herself to be completely free from headaches. . . . Describing her great health and happiness, Sophia exclaimed [in a letter], 'Dancing days have returned' . . . . As if to underscore the sexually charged nature of her dance, she noted Nathaniel's remark that it merited 'John the Baptist's head.'"[21]

It is my argument that in "The Artist of the Beautiful" Owen's sad and funny efforts to spiritualize (read: desexualize) his beloved express Hawthorne's own musings on more serious matters: how he and his wife—perpetual newlyweds—might so (re)consecrate their intimacy that they please Heaven and Art and thereby end guilty misgivings over the miscarried infant by together reconceiving "that very same little stranger." As the artist says to the wife, "it is as we go onward in life, when objects begin to lose their freshness of hue, and our souls their delicacy of perception, that the spirit of Beauty is most needed. If—forgive me, Annie—if you know how to value this gift, it can never come too

late!" (469). In his butterfly, Owen also sought and brought about the creation of a heavenly creature: "It is impossible to express by words," the narrator observes, "the glory, the splendor, the delicate gorgeousness, which were softened into the beauty of this object. Nature's ideal butterfly was here realized in all its perfection; not in the pattern of such faded insects as flit among earthly flowers, but of those which hover across the meads of Paradise, for child-angels and the spirits of departed infants to disport themselves with" (470). Hawthorne the passionate Artist can conceive a creaturely companion of the aborted child-angel—one of the "departed infants"—but consecrated Husband and Wife can (re)create the infant himself, or herself. One year after the miscarriage, they welcome Una (says Hawthorne, "I think I prefer a daughter to a son; there is something so especially piquant in having helped to create a future woman") and the author begins to write "The Artist of the Beautiful."[22] He concludes the tale with both sides of himself and his wife gaining much: the physical Danforths have a child but have been lifted into higher thoughts, and Owen, in possession of the spiritually transcendent Idea but thereby now "steeped in such depth of thought that it was almost sadness" (469), wisely realizes, as Hawthorne knows, that on Earth, at any rate, a beautiful life must be embodied.

Notes

[1] In *Salem is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), Edwin Haviland Miller writes, "The pregnancy proceeded normally until February 1843 when she fell while walking with Hawthorne on the frozen river. . . . [On] February 22 Sophia informed her mother that she had aborted . . ." (227).

[2] Patricia Dunlavy Valenti, *Sophia Peabody Hawthorne: A Life, Volume 1, 1809–1847* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 189.

[3] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*, in *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, eds. William Charvat et al., 23 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962–1993), 8:366.

[4] Miller, 178.

[5] Miller, 206.

[6] Miller, 227; Valenti, 189. Three weeks after the miscarriage Hawthorne continued to express "some anxiety" to Sophia about the "whole of thy little person" (*Nathaniel*

Hawthorne, The Letters, 1813–1843, eds. Thomas Woodson et al., vol. 15 of *The Centenary Edition,* 674).

[7] "The Devil in Manuscript," in *The Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales*, ed. J . Donald Crowley, vol. 11 of *The Centenary Edition*, 177.

[8] "The Artist of the Beautiful," in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, ed. J. Donald Crowley, vol. 10 of *The Centenary Edition*, 475. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

[9] Eric J. Sundquist, *Home as Found: Authority and Genealogy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 93.

[10] One thinks here of Hawthorne's anxiety about genetical and genealogical links to his ancestor William Hathorne, who had a Quaker woman lashed, which receives attention in "The Custom-House" and in "Young Goodman Brown."

[11] In *The House of the Seven Gables,* ed. William Charvat et al., vol. 2 of *The Centenary Edition,* Hawthorne makes much of a lewd monkey and its phallic tail "curling out into preposterous prolixity from beneath his tartans" (163–64).

[12] In *The Marble Faun,* ed. William Charvat et al., vol. 4 of *The Centenary Edition*, the narrator describes Hilda as an "exquisitely effective piece of mechanism" (59).

[13] As many have noted, Owen's allegory resembles the path of erotic transcendence urged by Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. A number of Hawthorne's younger characters chase after a butterfly as a parable of their longing for ever-youthful transcendent beauty. Thus is the case with his eponymous Daffydowndilly and also with the boy in "The Intelligence Office" pursuing a "butterfly, which had got astray amid the barren sunshine of the city. . . . The golden butterfly glistened through the shadowy apartment, and brushed its wings against the *Book of Wishes*, and fluttered forth again with the child still in pursuit" (10:334–35). The youth in "Chippings with a Chisel," rejecting the general pessimism of elders, declares that "our thoughts should soar upward with the butterfly" (in *Twice-told Tales*, ed J. Donald Crowley, vol. 9 of *The Centenary Edition*, 418).

[14] In "'The Artist of the Beautiful': Narcissus and the Thimble," *American Literature* 18 (1961): 35–44, William Bysshe Stein discusses Owen's symbolic self-castration and concludes that his butterfly functions as his "winged phallus" (42).

[15] Several have noted Owen's maternal character. See, for examples, Rudolph Von Abele, "Baby and Butterfly," *Kenyon Review* 15 (1953): 287–88; Leland S. Person Jr., "Hawthorne's Bliss of Paternity: Sophia's Absence from 'The Old Manse,'" *Studies in the Novel* 23 (1991), 56; and Dean Wentworth Bethea, "Heat, Light, and the Darkening World: Hawthorne's 'The Artist of the Beautiful,'" *South Atlantic Review* 56, no. 4 (1991), 29.

[16] Hawthorne esteems the butterfly because of its association with summer, for him the time of real, timeless being. He writes to Sophia, "Mine own, wilt thou sail away with me to discover some summer island?—dost thou think that God has reserved

one for us, ever since the beginning of the world? . . . then we are Adam and Eve of a virgin earth" (Miller, 177). The artistic youth in "The Journal of a Solitary Man" calls himself a "butterfly" (11:317).

[17] "The Birth-mark" (10:475).

[18] Miller, 52.

[19] T. Walter Herbert, *Dearest Beloved: The Hawthornes and the Makings of the Middle-Class Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 138–39.

[20] Valenti, 275n6.

[21] Valenti, 196.

[22] Miller, 230.