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EMERSON, HAWTHORNE, MELVILLE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

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In the major works of the American Renaissance, one finds that a central theme concerns the attempt to establish stable relations between the unconscious and consciousness, to explore the precarious and shifting boundary between hidden powers and the light of common day. Earlier students of American literature have addressed this issue to the extent that they have explored the tendency of romance "to plunge into the underside of consciousness"; whenever they have linked frontier consciousness and depth-psychology; or as they have studied the archetypes and myths organizing much of nineteenth-century American writing.¹ At this date, it need not be established that Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville were adepts at psychological analysis, like Roger Chillingworth able to sift the gold from the dross in their examinations of the human heart. For now we have Freudian studies of these authors, and even a small minority — like Henry Murray, Edward Edinger, and Martin Bickman — who have applied the insights of Jung.²

In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams documents the familiarity of nineteenth-century writers with theories of the unconscious. Indeed, Abrams observes, German writers like Schelling and Goethe were so successful in promulgating theories of unconscious processes that, by the 1830s, "The notion of an unconscious element in the inventive process had already become almost a commonplace of English literary criticism."³ We know that such theories reached Emerson, in part, through recent works by Coleridge and Carlyle. Coleridge's assertion, in *Aids to Reflection* (1825), that "the aids of the divine spirit" are "deeper than our consciousness can reach" would not be lost for the attentive Emerson.⁴ Nor would Carlyle's more recent observation in "Characteristics" (1831) that "underneath the region of argument and conscious discourse, lies the region of meditation; here, in its quiet mysterious depths, dwells what vital force is in us; here, if aught is to be created, must the work go on."⁵ Clearly, the concept of the unconscious, as Freud himself later admitted, had a long foreground, a foreground stretching back, in American literature, at least to Emerson's discussion in his lecture on "Literature" (5 Jan. 1837) of the

"portion of ourselves" that "lies within the limits of the unconscious."⁶ That same month, we see Francis Bowen complaining in *The Christian Examiner* of Germanic distortions of the English language represented by words like the "unconscious": "Among other innovations in speech made by writers of the Transcendental school, we may instance the formation of a large class of abstract nouns from adjectives, — a peculiarity as consonant with the genius of the German language, as it is foreign to the nature of our own. Thus we now speak of the *Infinite*, the *Beautiful*, the *Unconscious*...."⁷

While — for many eighteenth-century writers — creative origins took on theological definition, in the nineteenth century we see the transformation of theology into an emerging depth-psychology. "God" as creative source was being replaced by the "unconscious," while principles of "divine grace" metamorphosed into concepts of "psychic energy." During the first stages of this transformation, the "unconscious" was defined in Idealist terms. Thus, for Coleridge, the unconscious is seen as divine in its provenance, rational in its structure, and beneficent in its operation. Similarly, in Emerson's early works, the "unconscious" embodies the authority of moral law. Indeed, it is seen as the source of the moral and religious sentiments. For example, we read in *Nature* that the individual minds of men and women "rest like fountain-pipes on the unfathomed sea of thought and virtue whereto they alone, of all organizations, are the entrances."⁸ Similarly, in Emerson's lecture series "The Philosophy of History" (delivered the winter following *Nature*), we hear how self-conscious reflection "separates for us a truth from our unconscious reason, and makes it an object of consciousness."⁹ The phrase "unconscious reason" is significant. We are dealing here — as throughout Emerson's early works — with a conception of the unconscious as an ideal source, indebted in part to Emerson's study of Platonism.

But as Emerson's career progresses, this "metaphysical" or "Neoplatonic unconscious" (if I may term it that) starts to darken its features. In later works, such as *The Conduct of Life* (1851 lectures, published 1860), Emerson's early Idealism modulates into a psychological realism. His vision of the "heart of light" moves toward what we can call the "heart of darkness" (appropriating Conrad's evocative phrase, with its self-conscious undercutting of Idealism). In the essay "Fate," the formal limitations of existence are contrasted — not to man's "Spirit" (as they had been in *Nature*) — but to his "Power."

Note the shift in terminology. The unconscious does not manifest itself here as “spirit” or “light” — but as “power” (a term much closer to later dynamic concepts, such as “libido” or “psychic energy”). “Power” is a neutral term which suggests a vision of the psyche as a dynamic system in which “spiritual” qualities have been bracketed or suspended. Throughout *The Conduct of Life*, we find this metaphysically-neutral vocabulary. We read of the mind’s “force,” its “energy,” of “electricity” — but not of “spiritual illumination.” What I would like to suggest is that we find a corresponding shift from Idealism in the contemporaneous works of Hawthorne and Melville. By the late 1840s and early 1850s, Idealist models of the psyche were being seriously challenged by new conceptions of the unconscious.

During the middle of the century, we witness the evolution from Idealist visions of divinely-inspired “Reason” to conceptions of human being as historically grounded. The emergence of psychology as a field of study both reflects this change and furthers it. Human existence is related to unseen subjective principles, rather than to a pre-existing ideal order. The center of interest starts to reside in an individual’s specific life-history as the unfolding of his unique destiny — in what Emerson terms “self-reliance.” Thus, from the beginning, we find in Emerson a conflict between his sense of unique life-history (spirit revealing itself through specific actions) and an Idealist vocabulary derived from Plato and Coleridge among others. This balance shifts from Idealism toward “existential” perspectives as individual will or development is emphasized. In this way, collective ideals give way to the concrete particularity of individual existence; rational “absolutes” start to share the stage with details of personal history.

One of the most striking examples of this evolution from Idealism is that difficult passage in *Nature* where Emerson concludes his discussion of “Idealism” with a seemingly willful affirmation of the physical lift of the body: “I own there is something ungrateful in expanding too curiously the particulars of the general proposition, that all culture tends to imbue us with idealism. I have no hostility to nature, but a child’s love to it. I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons.”¹⁰ Here, Emerson attempts to preserve the phenomenal world in his thought; at the same time, he elevates it to being a symbol of spirit. I do not read this passage as a denial of Idealism, but as an attempt — not wholly successful — to conjoin Idealism and an incipient Realism. Emerson wants to lift nature up to the level of spirit, while retaining a grasp of physical qualities. As he states his

intention: "I only wish to indicate the true position of nature in regard to man...as the ground which to attain is the object of human life, that is, of man's connexion with nature."¹¹ Central to Emerson's meaning here is the assertion that the mind is neither wholly spiritually nor wholly physical in its provenance, but a mixture of both physical and spiritual energies. Emerson must bypass the "hypothesis" of "idealism" because "the demands of the spirit" include "the existence of matter."¹² Emerson gives this bypassing of Idealism a name: he speaks of his perspective as a sense of "substantive being" or "consanguinity."¹³ What we see here is an attempt to put the mind "back into" the body — to avoid the spectre of a shadowy existence in which physical reality has been replaced by a set of abstractions.

One way of putting the mind back into the body is through conceiving of the unconscious as physical — as well as spiritual — energy. Emerson does this by focusing upon the expression of spiritual energy *through* the body — a physical form which it needs for its articulation. In this way, spiritual energy is linked with physical origins in the unconscious — a connection which is evident in Emerson's use of the familiar terminology of Romantic organicism:

spirit does not act upon us from without,...but spiritually, or through ourselves. Therefore, that spirit...does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unexhaustible fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power.¹⁴

While the ultimate source of man's power receives here an ideal definition, that power is invisible except through man's concrete existence. Here, essence and existence coexist in a mutually illuminating "correspondence." Divine pattern and personal history fit together. But what would happen if this balance were to be upset — if the divine origins of consciousness were to be called into question? We can begin to answer that question by comparing the different uses of a psychological metaphor which occurs in Emerson's "The American Scholar," Hawthorne's "The Old Manse," and Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses" — the image of cognition as a ripe fruit falling from the unconscious into consciousness.

In "The American Scholar," a divinely grounded unconscious becomes visible through interpretive distance: "The new deed is yet a part of life,—remains for a time in our unconscious life. In some

contemplative hour, it detaches itself from the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought in the mind. Instantly, it is raised, transfigured, the corruptible has put on incorruption."¹⁵ Here, the laws of the unconscious appear incorruptible and eternal, evidence of what Emerson elsewhere in this address characterizes as "the Divine Soul which...inspires all men."¹⁶ Faith in intuition uncovers the pathway to greater and greater illumination — while the unconscious energy motivating human existence is seen in ideal terms. The unconscious is imagined as a "heart of light." Both Hawthorne and Melville, as we shall see, share Emerson's Transcendentalist faith in intuition; but for each, this faith is troubled.

In Hawthorne's "The Old Manse," we find a similar figure comparing cognition to the ripening of fruit. During autumn afternoons, Hawthorne listens to "the thump of a great apple...falling without a breath of wind, from the mere necessity of perfect ripeness."¹⁷ For Hawthorne, this image suggests "the idea of an infinite generosity and exhaustless bounty on the part of our Mother Nature," a generosity which he sees carrying over into his own processes of creation. Placing himself within a rich ambiance, fertile with the vibrations of the past and cradled by a beneficent Nature, Hawthorne envisions the possibility of a perfect sublimation from unconsciousness into spiritual illumination. Flourishing out of the unconscious like that "perfect flower...springing...from the black mud over which the river sleeps,"¹⁸ artistic and spiritual fulfillment combine as the fruit of a bountiful "Providence."¹⁹ As in Emerson's early works, we find the familiar Transcendentalist strain — an image of inexhaustible and divine depths freely relinquishing their wealth to creative expression.

Elsewhere, this spiritual bounty is imagined as "treasure," "gold," "light" — in terms of traditional alchemical images of the "heart of light." If Emerson's *Nature* portrays Nature as "a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us," here Hawthorne evokes that "sunshine" which "beams through the gates of paradise and shows us glimpses far inward."²⁰ Inspired by the conversation of Ellery Channing, Hawthorne imagines "the lumps of golden thought that lay glimmering in the fountain's bed and brightened both our faces by the reflection."²¹ Inside the house, he searches among the books in the library for "any living thought which should burn like a coal of fire, or glow like an inextinguishable gem."²² Similarly, the Manse itself is projected as an image of his psyche — as a house with long-hidden, but now accessible, treasure. I "ventured to hope," Haw-

thorne writes, "that wisdom would descend upon me with the falling leaves of the avenue, and that I should light upon an intellectual treasure in the Old Manse well worth those hoards of long-hidden gold which people seek for in moss-grown houses."²³

Clearly, part of Hawthorne's sensibility responds to the spiritual promise of Transcendentalism, to the promise of riches and illumination within. But at the same time that Hawthorne flirts here with Transcendentalism, he also distinguishes himself from it. On the one hand, there is the overpowering presence of Emerson — a thinker whose inspiration threatens to suffocate Hawthorne's own originality: "it was impossible to dwell in his vicinity without inhaling more or less the mountain atmosphere of his lofty thought..."²⁴ Acknowledging Emerson's influence, Hawthorne refuses to be identified with those "who crowd so closely about an original thinker as to draw in his unuttered breath and thus become imbued with a false originality."²⁵ These images of inhalation, atmosphere, breathing suggest Hawthorne's "anxiety of influence"; Hawthorne has his own inspiration, his own "breath" to utter, and thus protests against being labeled a "Transcendentalist." Clearing a creative space for himself, Hawthorne develops elsewhere in "The Old Manse" a vision of the unconscious radically different from that of Emerson. Hawthorne's "Transcendentalist" vision of the creative process as fruition and illumination is complicated by a second strain not found in Emerson. Here, the image of beneficent inspiration is disrupted by the threat of taint, of blood-stain, of haunting. At this period in Hawthorne's work, Transcendentalist and Gothic strains intermingle — but do not marry. We are lulled into a somnolence redolent with Emersonian ripeness, with visions of Nature as "Providence." Or we are startled to alertness by a different presence appearing from the unconscious — "the ghost by whom...the Manse was haunted."²⁶

Similarly, creativity is tainted by a sense of blood-guilt, epitomized by Hawthorne's parable of the American Revolution. Unlike Emerson, Hawthorne breaks the present tranquillity to recall that Nature's apparent beneficence has been nourished with blood. The window of the study where Emerson reputedly composed *Nature* overlooks the Concord battlefield, and yet no trace of revolutionary bloodshed entered into Emerson's composition. Hawthorne, in contrast, does not reject the past, but broods upon it, producing a parable of the American Revolution as a "blood stain" torturing the souls of its inheritors. This guilt is rooted in Hawthorne's historical conscious-

ness, his awareness of personal, familial, and national transgression (so familiar to the readers of his romances and tales). There is a serpent in Hawthorne's orchard — a serpent we might characterize in terms of his sense of a personal (as opposed to a collective) unconscious. As in the later Freudian vision of the psyche, psychological exploration is obstructed by repressed guilt, by trauma.

While Emerson projects the "One Mind" — the universal psyche — as an ideal similar to Jung's "collective unconscious," Hawthorne views the personal unconscious as lying deeper:

How little have I told! and of that little, how almost nothing is even tintured with any quality that makes it exclusively my own! Has the reader gone wandering, hand in hand with me, through the inner passages of my being? and have we groped together into all its chambers and examined their treasures or their rubbish? Not so. We have been standing on the greensward, but just within the cavern's mouth, where the common sunshine is free to penetrate and where every footstep is therefore free to come.²⁷

This reverses the psychic landscape of Emerson, who sees the collective (and not the personal) as residing in "the inner passages of (his) being." While, for Emerson, the collective is deeper than the personal unconscious, for Hawthorne, it is the other way around: the personal lies deeper than the collective.

We might clarify this difference through analogy to the different psychological visions of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, who imagined the unconscious as being collective and personal, respectively. If Emerson's vision of the "One Mind" or "Oversoul" has affinities with Jung's "collective unconscious" as an ideal source, Hawthorne's psychological vision is much closer to Freud's. Like Freud, he is intensely aware of the personal secrets of the heart lying beneath the threshold. In "The Old Manse," this "personalism" contends with universal images of imaginative process. On the one hand, we have familiar figures of inspiration (alchemical transformation, organic unfolding); but on the other, we encounter Hawthorne's sense of his unique psychological history — the Puritan ghosts haunting his attic.

Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses" serves a similar function as personal testament. Here, Hawthorne's writing has planted seeds now "germinating" in Melville's mind. His profundity has set Melville going, as Melville recognizes with a "shock of recognition" the existence of another deep thinker adept at "symbolising the secret work-

ings in men's souls."²⁸ Hawthorne, Melville tells us, possesses "a great, deep intellect, which drops down into the universe like a plummet."²⁹ But these depths, for Melville, are quite distinct from Emerson's "unconscious reason": "it is not the brain that can test such a man; it is only the heart."³⁰ Accordingly, the center of the psyche is no longer seen as a region of illumination, but rather as a dark sphere of passion and guilt: "For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side — like the dark half of the physical sphere — is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black...."³¹ Melville (in contrast to Emerson and Hawthorne's "Transcendentalist" strain) finds no light at the heart, only an increasing darkness. The deeper one sinks, the farther one is from the light — the closer to some elusive, unnameable horror.

This "Puritanic gloom" (as Melville calls it) — a sense of "melancholy" — colors Melville's reading of those ripe apples falling in "The Old Manse." Reading Hawthorne's image as "the visible type of the fine mind that has described it," Melville's vision of psychic ripening includes a "Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin."³² We have moved from Emerson's orchard back to the garden of Eden, back to a sense of primordial transgression. Creative inspiration is seen here — not as an avenue to redemption (as in Emerson's case), but as a reminder of the Fall. Thinking deeply, one intuits an insurmountable distance between the artist and his unconscious ground, between transcendent ideals and the emotional realities of inspiration.

Furthermore, the creative "breath" driving Melville threatens to turn into a storm. Captivated by the "enchanted landscape in the soul of this Hawthorne," Melville also finds, "away inland," "the far roar of his Niagara."³³ There was no indication in Emerson — as there is in Melville — that unconscious forces have the potential to erupt in an uncontrollable paroxysm of demonic energy. Even when Emerson (as he does in "The American Scholar") compares the emergence of unconscious energy to volcanic eruption, there is no loss of control, no sense that consciousness is in any way threatened. But turning to Melville, we find that consciousness can become fascinated, if not possessed, by the very creative energy it tries to harness. Even in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville raises the possibility of fascination and possession:

- a) A man of deep and noble nature has *seized me* in this seclusion.
- b) The *soft ravishments* of the man *spun me round about* in a web

of dreams...

c) Now, it is that blackness in Hawthorne...that so *fixes* and *fascinates me*...³⁴

Later, in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, we encounter the terrifying consequences of such fascination.

Both Ahab and Pierre are disposed by forces which have possessed their psyches. Opening the gates to the unconscious, they release pent-up energies which overwhelm them and transform their conscious beings to the shape of trans-human power. As Melville well knew, such creative release carries with it feelings of "super-human capacity" as the ego is intoxicated by the god-like power rushing through it.³⁵ Ahab and Pierre are exhilarated by quests which seem, to them, to be divinely-inspired missions. Each figure is caught up in the rush of forces that lifts him beyond the pale of ordinary humanity into a region of apparently "divine" motivation. Each is possessed by energies which he just barely keeps under control, energies which ultimately destroy him. The narrator of *Pierre* drily observes near the climax of Pierre's fatal career: "But man does never give himself up thus, a doorless and shutterless house for the four loosened winds of heaven to howl through, without still additional dilapidations."³⁶ The "additional dilapidations" for Ahab and Pierre are those of self-destruction.

In *Pierre*, especially, Melville confronts head-on the disturbing question of the physical, even sexual, origin of this energy. Like Byron's Manfred, who opens himself to the destructive sexually colored powers buried in his psyche, Pierre succumbs to the seductive lure of his half-sister Isabel. This "fascination of the terrible" casts him adrift upon "appalling" depths of soul which lead not to revelation, but to unbearable moral ambiguity. Finally, *Pierre* suggests that the Idealist vision of the unconscious is entirely arbitrary. For Melville, the search for a transcendent ground of being within the psyche becomes an activity enmeshed in illusion, since consciousness is seen to falsify its relationship to the physical (indeed, sexual) roots of creative energy. So long as such energy was viewed as "spirit" or "reason," there was little difficulty in assimilating intuited depths of the mind to moral order. For if "God" resides within — in the unconscious — then our most spontaneous impulses receive a divine sanction. But Melville in *Pierre* openly examines the self-delusion of a character who mistakes incestuous sexual attraction for spiritual illumination. The commentary upon Transcendentalist intuition is

clear. How do we know, he asks, what forces are being released by faith in the unconscious? Isn't it all too easy to mistake the message of instinct as that of "Reason"? What if our sense of spiritual energy motivating the psyche is an illusion masking more primitive urges?

What I would like to suggest in conclusion is that we see visions of the unconscious shifting from Emerson to Hawthorne to Melville. This change represents a growing suspicion of intuitive models based upon an Idealist model of the psyche. In other words, Hawthorne and Melville self-consciously examine their relationship to creative energy in terms which undercut Emerson's early Idealism. As the century progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to view the unconscious as the source of metaphysical certainty. Instead, the "metaphysical unconscious" slides more and more toward what Henri Ellenberger has termed the "biological unconscious" — a creative source firmly anchored within individual life-processes, but nothing more.³⁷ This narrowing of the unconscious to personal history results in a corresponding "darkening" of the psyche. The body, not a pool of light, is ultimately encountered at the lowest depths. While Emerson had subordinated Nature to Spirit and envisioned the unconscious as a force embodying itself in spiritual illumination, Melville subordinates Spirit to Nature, viewing the unconscious as physical energy disguising itself in its manifestations. What both visions share — an emphasis uniting Emerson's writings with those of Hawthorne and Melville — is the attempt to imagine the unconscious as the source of creative activity. Finally, the works of all three writers can be compared as different visions of depth-psychology.

NOTES

¹ These two quotations are from Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, 1957), p. ix; Joel Porte, *The Romance in America* (Middletown, Conn., 1969), p. 53.

² Henry Murray, "Introduction" to *Pierre* (New York, 1949); Edward Edinger, *Melville's Moby-Dick: A Jungian Commentary* (New York, 1978); Martin Bickman, *The Unsounded Centre: Jungian Studies in American Romanticism* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

³ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1958), p. 214.

⁴ *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York, 1884), 1:153.

⁵ Thomas Carlyle, "Characteristics," in *Critical and Miscellaneous*

Essays (New York, 1899), 3: 4-5.

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Early Lectures*, vol. 2, ed. S. E. Whicher, R. E. Spiller, W. E. Williams (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 56. Hereafter cited as *EL* with volume number.

⁷ Francis Bowen, *The Christian Examiner*, 21 (1837), 377-378. Rpr. in Merton M. Sealts, Jr., and Alfred R. Ferguson, eds., *Emerson's Nature — Origin, Growth, Meaning* (New York, 1969), p. 84.

⁸ *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Nature, Addresses, and Lectures)*, ed. R. E. Spiller and A. R. Ferguson (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 1:28. Hereafter cited as *CW* with volume number.

⁹ Emerson, *EL*, 2:57.

¹⁰ Emerson, *CW*, 1:35.

¹¹ Emerson, *CW*, 1:36.

¹² Emerson, *CW*, 1:37.

¹³ Emerson, *CW*, 1:37, 38.

¹⁴ Emerson, *CW*, 1:38.

¹⁵ Emerson, *CW*, 1:60.

¹⁶ Emerson, *CW*, 1:70.

¹⁷ *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, vol. 10, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, ed. W. Charvat, R. H. Pearce, C. M. Simpson (Columbus, Oh., 1974), p. 13. Hereafter cited as *CE* with volume number.

¹⁸ Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:7.

¹⁹ Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:13.

²⁰ Emerson, *CW*, 1:37; Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:28.

²¹ Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:24.

²² Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:19.

²³ Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:4-5.

²⁴ Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:31.

²⁵ Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:32.

²⁶ Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:17.

²⁷ Hawthorne, *CE*, 10:32.

²⁸ Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *The Standard Edition of the Works of Herman Melville*, *Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces*, ed. R. W. Weaver (New York, 1963), 13: 128. Hereafter cited as *W* with volume number.

²⁹ Melville, *W*, 13:128.

³⁰ Melville, *W*, 13:129.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Melville, *W*, 13:124, 136-137.

³⁴ Melville, *W*, 13:123, 125, 130.

³⁵ For a discussion of such feelings of "godlikeness," see Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans., R. F. C. Hull (New York, 1956), p. 162.

³⁶ *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 7, *Pierre; or the Ambiguities*, ed. H. Hayford, H. Parker, G. T. Tanselle (Evanston & Chicago, 1971), pp. 339-340.

³⁷ Henri Ellenberger, "The Unconscious Before Freud," *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 21 (1957), 14.