

Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit contributions for publication and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal discourages footnotes and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words.

Experiencing Oblivion

To the Editor:

Of course I was delighted by Umberto Eco's playful meditation on the impossibilities of the art of forgetting ("An *Ars Oblivionalis*? Forget It!" 103 [1988]: 254–61). But it served me, and perhaps some other members of the association, as a reminder, a painful reminder, of my *déclassé* status in the profession.

Eco arrives at examples of the ways in which error overloads and blocks memory only near the end of his essay, recalling two activities that seem wholly disparate but that can be shown to have something essential in common: resetting a circuit breaker becomes an exceptional and problematic, and thereby mnemoclastic, activity only in the context of the career of an intellectual of Eco's eminence, and playing a hypersophisticated game that rewards the most plausible fabrication of a definition of an unfamiliar word is possible only in the identical context. Thus Eco's examples of how memory can be impaired both confirm Eco's very high status in the profession.

I wonder how many readers of these examples instantly recalled, as I did, the last set of student papers, after reading which I had difficulty telling correct spellings from habitual student variants—of "publicly," or "existence," or "relevance" (oops). "Strategies for producing oblivion" are ready to hand for me. I'm in their grip about once a week.

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Nathaniel Hawthorne and Gender

To the Editor:

I was very disturbed by the intellectual shoddiness of "Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne, and *The Scarlet Letter*: Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender," by T. Walter Herbert, Jr. (103 [1988]: 285–97). To begin with, the politely objective abstract of the essay (241) suggests not at all the venomous tone with which Herbert treats Hawthorne, who in the essay itself is portrayed as a monster who could have saved his daughter Una from psychosis and early death had he gotten his gender act together. Worse yet, the essay suggests that Hawthorne provided a cure for Pearl, his literary version

of Una, but refused one to Una herself. "Prescribing a cure for the aberrations of Pearl-Una," says Herbert, "Hawthorne invokes the complex of gender symbols that actually produced those aberrations. . . . Yet he subverts that recommendation—and presumably aggravates the disease—by undermining the gender doctrines in question [in *The Scarlet Letter*]" (291). By his rhetorical strategies Herbert has turned *PMLA* into the *National Enquirer*.

There are so many shoddy tactics in Herbert's presentation one does not know where to start. A symptomatic one involves a misleading use of quotation marks. Several times Herbert uses them where it is critical to his argument to suggest that key words come from Una, Sophia, or Hawthorne. Ostensibly paraphrasing a quotation from Hawthorne that is crucial for his overall thesis that Hawthorne's gender confusion damages Una, Herbert says of Pearl, "The 'manlike' imperiousness gives way to tears of sympathy" (291). But it subtly discredits the argument to note that *manlike* does not come from Hawthorne's text; it represents Herbert's manipulation of evidence. Similarly, of Una's remarks in a letter to her cousin Richard, Herbert writes, "Her further comment focuses attention on the 'masculine' assertiveness at the heart of her conflict" (292). Again, to recognize that the key word—masculine—is Herbert's, not Una's, eliminates the implication that Una was aware of internal gender conflict. A related tactic is the crucial non sequitur. Concluding the paragraph cited above (on aberrations, disease), Herbert writes, "Far from offering *The Scarlet Letter* as a pattern for addressing Una's troubles, Hawthorne forbade his daughter to read the book and kept up the prohibition as late as her sixteenth year" (291). In developing his subtext, Herbert implies that Hawthorne *ought* to have used the novel to address Una's psychological problems (though Herbert's own text indicates that those were not perceived as pathological until some years after the novel's publication); moreover, he implies that though the book was not intended as an antidote to Una's psychological problems, Hawthorne still *ought* to have allowed Una to read it for whatever curative properties it might have provided.

But even more troubling than all the local tactics is Herbert's embarrassment of a respected methodology—"cultural interpretation," in Clifford Geertz's term, or "cultural poetics," in Stephen Greenblatt's, which Herbert endorses. In his essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Geertz admits that analysis of symbolic acts within social discourse is not