

Forum

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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.

R. C. DE PROSPO
Washington College

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

easy or easily appraised (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic, 1973, 24). But Geertz does not argue that no canons of appraisal exist and therefore that all inferences can be admitted. Rather, Geertz says, "What generality [cultural interpretation] contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions" (25). The method, which Geertz compares to "clinical inference" in medicine and depth psychology (26), thus calls for tactful moves from evidence to interpretation. There are no givens, and interpretation must bridge the gap from fact to inference, but one cannot assume that every move is justified. In Herbert's essay the most crucial move occurs in the first, enabling paragraphs. There, Herbert quotes that wryly comic passage from the *American Notebooks* in which Hawthorne writes of the conflict in Una of "elfish" and "angelic" traits. Though Herbert argues that the remarks have to do with "the cultural construction of gender" (285), Hawthorne's remarks apparently focus on something other than gender—Una's character as angel and elf or devil. Following Geertz, one expects to find a theoretical claim that remarks about angels and devils are "really" about the contrasts between men and women. Indeed, Herbert makes such an enabling claim, but here's the rub: it seems far too vast in its implications to fit Geertz's canon of tact. For Herbert seems to imply that *all* interpretation is rooted in distinctions of gender: "Hawthorne's perplexity illustrates a leading feature of the cultural construction of gender, the way in which perceptions [all, some?] of human reality are concerted—and disconcerted—by the systems of meaning through which gender is construed" (285). On that claim, Herbert leaps from the contrasts of elf and angel to those of masculine and feminine. Thus he argues that since Hawthorne's mind is an "arena . . . of an unresolvable [for everyone or Hawthorne alone?] contest of significations" involving gender, Hawthorne confounds the gender categories of "masculine boldness and hardness and unshrinking 'comprehension of everything'" and feminine "tenderness, wisdom, and the finest essence of delicacy. . . . [Una] strikes him as not human, . . . because she does not conform to the definitions that organize his perceptions of the human" (285). But is everything reducible to a question of gender? Perhaps. To be persuasive, Herbert must provide more evidence from other studies of perception before relying on such a claim. More generally, does every utterance mean something other than what it appears to mean? Again, perhaps. Might one not say, in fact, that the quotation from Hawthorne legitimizes interpretation of nothing more than the difference between the human and the nonhuman, the "human child" and the nonhuman "spirit strangely mingled with good and evil, haunting the house where [he] dwell[s]," a house where questions of divine spirit and human materiality are not mere displacements. Though such questions may be only a disguising of questions regarding gender, Herbert needs

a more subtle intertwining of theory and conclusion than he exhibits here if he is going to make *that* case.

JAMES M. MELLARD

Northern Illinois University

Reply:

Like most angry caricatures, Mellard's description of my argument contains recognizable features of the original. I do hold that Hawthorne's gender conflicts contributed to the severe psychic difficulties of his daughter, though this does not make Hawthorne a "monster." It only indicates he was subject to human frailties and sorrows that all too frequently afflict the lives of ordinary people, who lead lives shaped by the cultural milieu in which *The Scarlet Letter* has been embraced as a classic. It is not surprising, accordingly, if certain readers respond with horror and rage at what I have sought to demonstrate.

To be distressed by my contentions, however, is not the same thing as disproving them. Mellard expresses alarm at a pervading "shoddiness" in my argument, but he never squarely faces it. Instead, he indulges in quibbles about quotation marks, and then turns to extraneous theoretical generalities. Both lines of attack evade the substance of my essay, and on both he is mistaken.

Placing the terms *masculine* and *manly* in quotation marks forms part of a consistent pattern, which signals my reference to nineteenth-century conceptions of gender that I myself do not hold. I hardly expect the reader to think I am quoting Hawthorne when I write that Hester "makes a 'man' out of Arthur Dimmesdale." The essay argues openly and frankly that Hawthorne's views were informed by the gender ideas current during his time, so I have no need of slyly insinuating this claim through a misuse of quotation marks or through what Mellard terms "crucial non sequiturs."

Mellard's discussion of interpretive doctrine is also quite remote from the substance of the essay. Clifford Geertz's cultural theory does not license the construction of arguments in which evidence fails to support conclusions, and I do not invoke Geertz in order to obtain such a license. I mean for my arguments to stand or fall on the grounds I have supplied, not by their conformity to some body of theoretical teaching. No "subtle intertwining of theory and conclusion" can establish that Hawthorne was preoccupied by issues of gender if the surviving documents indicate otherwise. Yet Mellard wants more theorizing, especially about perception, and indicates his willingness to accept the silly proposition that all perception is "reducible to a question of gender," if only enough theorizing were provided.

It is demonstrable that perception may be informed by a wide variety of cultural traditions; it may be shaped, for example, by definitions of America's national identity, as