

**The Healing Arts of Play:
Scenes of Self-Determination in
Hawthorne's *Biographical Stories for Children***

Elizabeth N. Goodenough

The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life . . .

Friedrich Froebel,
The Education of Man (55) (1826)

One August evening, visiting the Berkshires in 1838, Nathaniel Hawthorne joined a funeral procession, as locals and even passersby were wont to do in small New England towns. "About sunset a coffin of a boy about ten years old" is laid in "a one horse wagon among some straw—two or three barouches and wagons following." After a slow climb, a grave is dug "on the steep side of a hill." Father and mother stand "weeping at the upper end of the grave, at the head of the little procession." But when the coffin is lowered, it will not settle in the grave: too much earth left at the bottom. "The mother sobbing with stifled violence" peeps forth "to discover why the coffin had to be drawn up." As hard lifting stalls into grim finality, straw is strewn upon the coffin, "this being the custom here, because 'the clods on the coffin lid have an ugly sound'" (8:126).

This note on how to muffle the noise of pelting stones upon a boy's casket reflects Hawthorne's macabre interest in burial rites as well as the mourning practice of generations who tilled the rough soil of Massachusetts. In *The Puritan Way of Death*, David Stannard estimates that in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a young married couple could anticipate the probable death of two or three children before they reached the age of ten (55-56). Hawthorne's keen eye for the grief-stricken parents and ear for this ritual of comfort anticipate the Victorian cult of beautiful deaths about to flower as he published his first children's books in the early 1840s. Yet ironically "the sudden turn between 1840 and 1910 to searching treatments of childhood death and dying both in works intended for children and those for

adults” did not result from any drop in mortality rates for infants and children. As Judith Plotz has shown, child mortality did not decline in the United States until the last part of the nineteenth century (168-169). Meanwhile, “the invention of the idea of childhood” burgeoned, crossing national borders, “occasionally being stopped and discouraged but always continuing on its journey” (Postman 55). In Massachusetts an educational theorist and Transcendentalist publisher of Hawthorne’s first books for young readers was cultivating a philosophy of the human potential that connected men of genius to children. “Does the becoming interest the human heart more than the arrived?” Elizabeth Palmer Peabody asked herself in a journal entry (August 10, 1838).¹¹

As the concept of the child was altering rapidly during their lifetimes, Peabody and Hawthorne, both born in 1804, witnessed a child’s death paradoxically become the least tolerable of all losses (Zelizer 25) when this trauma was still highly likely to occur.²² Hawthorne’s fascination with such contradictions does not separate from the search for his own strange intermediate realm, a “neutral territory,” where imagination takes root. Such dark and light truths amalgamated in his brain as romantic ideas about the child’s divine innocence permeated Transcendentalist thought, educational reforms, the Sunday school movement, the growth of pediatrics and the spawning of a new secular literature for and about children. While the Calvinist notion of infant damnation was finally discarded, gentler discipline was advocated in child-rearing manuals, now addressed to mothers, which proliferated after 1830. The egalitarian and child-centered family impressed Alexis de Tocqueville on his visit in 1831. Reflecting on this shift in sentiment that privileged the young during his own generation, Ralph Waldo Emerson quoted a “witty Physician” who lamented that “it was a misfortune to have been born when children were nothing and to live until men were nothing” (Cable 101).

At thirty-four, neither husband, father, nor financially secure writer, Hawthorne struggled in 1838 with his own sense of “nothing.” Taking on hackwork to earn money, he collaborated with his sister on the *Universal History* (1837) for Samuel Goodrich’s Peter Parley series. He was lured into composing histories and biographies by the demand for children’s works stimulated by booksellers and the Sunday school movement. His on-the-spot observation of parents witnessing the burial of their child

THE HEALING ARTS OF PLAY

augurs how the interruptive moment would shape *Biographical Stories for Children* (published in 1842 and substantively revised in 1851). Leaving North Adams in 1838, Hawthorne also visited the cemetery in Litchfield, Connecticut, for “no particular reason for going there except the life he was shortly to write” (Miller 158). Returning from this three-month walkabout, he was encouraged by his energetic promoter and publisher Elizabeth Palmer Peabody not to abandon “a great moral enterprise” to create “a new literature for the young” (199-200).³³ She even “wangled him the offer of a post as customs inspector at the Port of Boston” (Marshall 370) to supplement his income from sale of these works. Soon her sister, the invalid artist Sophia Peabody, to whom the author became secretly engaged at the New Year, would illustrate these stories for and about children.

Framed by the tale of a contemporary family afflicted by their son’s eye ailment, *Biographical Stories* conjoins past and present, ranging from boisterous to bookish boyhoods and from Quaker to royal theories of childrearing. In this fourth and final collection of *The Whole History of Grandfather’s Chair*, together titled *True Stories from History and Biography*, Hawthorne turned from the archetype of the wise old man to that of the child. Addressing adults via children and young readers through their elders, this cross-written sequel to *Grandfather’s Chair* centers not on a sagacious, hoary storyteller but on a sensitive book-loving auditor whose sight is “naturally so delicate” that “So far as his eyes were concerned he was already an old man, and needed a pair of spectacles almost as much as his own grandfather did” (6:215). Yet when their eight or nine-year-old struggles with going blind, Mr. and Mrs. Temple, middle-class Bostonians, neither repent sins nor challenge God. Instead they establish the new home-centered learning environment advocated by antebellum domestic manuals (Brodhead 90) and embodied by the Peabody “family school.”

Although *Biographical Stories* has been critiqued as the author’s weakest collection in an inferior genre,⁴⁴ the voyage of consciousness it represents is worthy of attention precisely because it subsumes the dominant motifs of Hawthorne’s life and art. It also offers keys to his survival during a fallow and difficult time before he could marry. Recurring to Hawthorne’s own boyhood marked by frequent illness and absence from school, Edward Temple’s eye ailment remains uncured at

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE REVIEW

the end of the book. Confinement becomes the frame through which an ache for stories is felt. Biographer Randall Stewart credits the enforced leisure of lameness with Hawthorne's acquiring "the early reading habit" at age nine (4). The sudden and bitter narrowing of Edward's life reflects Nathaniel's plight; at the same age he needed crutches and limped for fifteen months after injuring his foot. A shy and gifted boy, orphaned at four by his father's death, he found in books such invisible friends as those narrated to Edward Temple by a father he cannot see. The miscellaneous contents of early nineteenth-century periodicals and allegories like *Pilgrim's Progress* became Hawthorne's visual storyteller, as his solitary mind found ways to exercise itself in all its powers. Such inner play gave birth to Hawthorne as a writer, adapter, and editor. At sixteen he amused his family by posing as an impoverished journalist attacked by critics for his hand-lettered *The Spectator*, spoofing local newspapers.

Yet adults in Hawthorne's early life showed little confidence in a juvenile mind's capacity to follow its own trajectory. Nathaniel's loss of a parental home in Salem, adoption by maternal uncles, and lengthy separations from his mother vexed the boy's sensitive imagination. Pragmatic Uncle Robert Manning, who supervised Nathaniel's schooling in Salem, seems to have imparted to his nephew the suspicion that the artistic side of his nature was morally weak and indolent. This struggle with patriarchal authority and himself as an "idler" threatened Hawthorne's financial future, power to marry, and male identity. Edward Temple, who loves books but cannot read, suggests Hawthorne's dilemma in the long slow ascent of his career.

In the dark pastoral of *Biographical Stories*, the tearful Edward is led away from playmates and studies into a blackened chamber, "his mother on one side and his little friend Emily on the other" (6:216). Here he enters a secular cathedral like the Temple School where Elizabeth Palmer Peabody assisted Bronson Alcott in 1834 to found a radical school. At the new Masonic Temple, a Gothic revival structure at the corner of Tremont Street and Temple Place in Boston, she helped Alcott establish a 60-foot-long schoolroom where Wordsworth's poetry was read. Transcribing conversations for her forthcoming *Record of a School* the summer of 1835, Peabody would become the first American to publish Transcendentalist ideas. In so doing Peabody defined education as "this

“divinest of all arts” (Marshall 317) because imagination is “called into life” (*Record of a School* 16). Likewise, in the Temple family’s dusky space or secular cathedral, a stricken boy listens with bandaged eyes to Mr. Temple’s “stories and adventures,” presumed to help his son accept his sad condition. Conjuring inner spaciousness in a fire-lit room, Mr. Temple recounts how Benjamin West, Isaac Newton, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Cromwell, Benjamin Franklin and Queen Christina found their positions in the world. With rambunctious brother George and adopted sister Emily, the invalid is offered scenes of origin that weave together archetypes of becoming. The lives of six famous people suggest how common events like illness, everyday objects, and children themselves, alter with the emotions of perceivers. Just as auditory and visual sensations magnify each other in this non-schoolbook, traditional, contemporary, and iconoclastic images of the child oscillate and conjoin, as they would be depicted by pioneering photographers later in the century, to justify Hawthorne’s aesthetic claims.

Because Edward does not die, he is not sentimentalized as the childlike pieta of later Victorian literature. Nor are his last words triumphantly recorded in the manner of James Janeway’s *Token for Children*, a Puritan celebration of spiritual precocity reprinted and imitated by evangelical writers well into the nineteenth century. The boy is locked into a more awful and indeterminate horror, struck blind and stuck inside his own home. “Not a ray of the blessed light of Heaven could be suffered to visit the poor lad. This was a sad thing for Edward! It was just the same as if there were to be no more sunshine, nor moonlight, nor glow of the cheerful fire, nor light or lamps. A night had begun which was to continue perhaps for months—a longer and drearier night than that which voyagers are compelled to endure, when their ship is ice-bound, throughout the winter, in the Arctic Ocean” (6:215). Frozen in alienation, like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, Edward is a trope for the author himself, whose hamartia or wounded vision had stalled his creative output.

This most child-centered, fragmentary, and critically neglected work balances adult and child at a pivotal time when Hawthorne himself stood in the gap, observing the crack in the process of his own becoming. “He tried in vain” to complete the work at Brook Farm in 1842 but “found the ‘ferment’ around him too disturbing,” Mark Schorer suggests

(Laffrado 42). Finishing the whole collection a few months after he left this experimental utopia, Hawthorne mastered the composition only a decade later (1852), as the more confident and celebrated author of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). In this final version of *Biographical Stories*, what at first is deemed a personal and “intolerable calamity” is gradually raised to the level of archetypal understanding. Six youngsters, who come alive through distinctive types of play, probe the interface between public and private spheres. The hidden essence, direction and orientation of their unique powers shape the insurgency Hawthorne found in his own calling. The internalized phenomenology of youth constitutes the lens through which he grapples with the labyrinth of his own career.

Grouped together, these scenes of self-determination provide a compendium of genres for young readers—from fairy tale and paean to cautionary tract and gothic legend, object lesson and exemplum. Invoking the formulas of more primitive and archaic fictions, the collection also references more up-to-date productions (such as *The Flower People*, an 1842 illustrated botanical guide by Mary Peabody) as well as the juvenile canon from the previous century (sold by Michael Johnson). Hawthorne thus maps a larger understanding of how his revolution in books for boys and girls could be born. Defending this project in the preface “as well worth cultivating as any other,” he addresses “little readers,” hoping “to be remembered by them till their own old age,—a far longer period of literary existence than is generally attained by those who seek immortality from the judgments of full-grown men” (6:214). Yet reading this 1842 work forward, as notes to a new life, reveals the centrality of its incompleteness to Hawthorne’s efforts to move into a world of choices, seen from a wider frame of reference, before those choices could be made.

With its unifying focus on play, *True Stories* portrays children as great teachers, enlarged through being open to the mysteries wheeling around them. In the last days of his bachelorhood, shuttling between Boston and Brook Farm, Hawthorne rejected what Mary Peabody called “the steam-engine system” (Marshall 315) of cramming young minds as he formulated something more complex and various than Puritan and Romantic notions of the child. In narrating the origins of famous men and women, he groped towards self-realization by way of temperamental affinities and aptitudes personified through play. The very bleakness



THE HEALING ARTS OF PLAY

of the frame allows an intimacy with Hawthorne and his lifelong fascination with puzzles of identity. This self-referential achievement is unusual for a writer whose maddening secrecy and ironic genius often turned to parody or coy dallying.

Writing for children was more than a profitable source of income for an ambitious stylist. Reshaping and heightening the dramatic structure of eminent childhoods, he invented American child speech as well as symbolic details that prefigure the range of feeling in the great romances. The “objective correlative” defined by Washington Allston, the painter who mentored Sophia, is explored for the sake of producing a sequence of specific sensory effects, scenes evoking what Sophia called “word-painting.” The “fountain” of young hearts he and his publisher understood as a conduit for reform embodies instinctive tendencies. Such moments pictorially elaborated in exceptional childhoods exemplify Wordsworth’s “attendant gleams/Of soul-illumination” and explain why Romantic writers like Blake capitalized Imagination. Showing Peabody’s belief in “the inward truth” as “the first truth” (*Record of a School* 60) as he struggled against authorial extinction, *Biographical Stories* can be read as an allegory of Hawthorne’s wandering towards the wonder books to come.

The play-based learning of six “eminent personages” also embodies the author’s own reflective practice. They offer ways to understand values, beliefs, norms, and practices of families of diverse backgrounds. Turning from differences and similarities across contexts of development in discipline, communication styles, and expectations, the collection provides parents with materials to support learning at home, strategies for productive discussions about difficult subjects, and ways to repair relationships. Each child’s unique sensibility holds sway, as a distinctive voice, agency, and self-knowledge surface in the earliest activities. Little things that happen at the start—collecting shells, buying a whistle, watching the stars, dancing on a marble floor, drawing with chalk, giving a bloody nose—determine whole lives. Hawthorne’s efforts to turn such biographical anecdotes into contemporary fables show his allegorical bias. They also validate such “unsupervised play on the Boston Common” as Temple School allowed every day (Ronda 112) and the premise articulated by Froebel and espoused by Elizabeth Peabody as she would pioneer the kindergarten movement in America: “A child

that plays thoroughly, with self-active determination, perseveringly until physical fatigue forbids, will surely be a thorough, determined man, capable of self-sacrifice for the promotion of the welfare of himself and others" (Froebel 55). The conversations among Edward, his older brother George, and their adopted sister Emily adumbrate another instructional belief of Peabody underlying her transcriptions of dialogues at Temple School: to nurture curiosity and each child's unique gifts, open discussion must draw out every student's separate self.

Today Hawthorne's obscure early work has been deemed "censuring and moralistic" (Laffrado 41). Yet to antebellum contemporaries, familiar with this writer's "morbid melancholy" and power to reach into shadowed corners of the human heart, it achieved the "highest effects of biography": in 1851 *Graham's Magazine* found "mere names and shadowy abstractions" turned into "living and distinct ideas of persons" by the reader who "unconsciously builds up their characters in his own imagination" (*Critical Heritage* 185). The same review praised Hawthorne's "simple, cosy, conversational manner" (185), his frame's nightmare world of incipient blindness never mentioned. Our era's more coddled and constricted view of youth and tendency to dissociate it from illness, anguish, and death may block us from seeing the quality of mind that underlies both Hawthorne's narrative frame and six biographies. He assumes that risk and failure, deprivation and affliction can work for the betterment of the individual and humankind. In drawing vital connections between pain and play, Hawthorne distills lessons for parents and children filled with blighted prospects and hardships overcome. It would be a mistake to read these apparently "didactic" stories didactically when their contradictions and ambiguities provoke the kind of independent thinking credited Franklin's father: "He had read much for a person in his rank of life, and had pondered upon the ways of the world, until he had gained more wisdom than a whole library of books could have taught him" (6:270).

The Yankee sturdiness and potential for transformation intrinsically celebrated by *True Stories* grow from something more anxious and universal than a mere inventory of intriguing play histories and literary styles. In the child's secret world, where there is always something new to learn, some invisible presence or unacknowledged phantom waits to be encountered. How perceptual phenomena and verifiable facts interact

with emotion in direct, hands-on experience illustrates how core images become talismans for the self: West's camera obscura, Newton's wind mill, Johnson's make-believe, Cromwell's fist fight, Franklin's wharf, Queen Christina's dirty hands. From a small collection of dominating images grows a distinctive mode of apprehension that shapes how the individual makes things up or figures them out.

The Child is Father of the Man in this veiled autobiography. Yet its structure also prefigures the scaffold scenes of *The Scarlet Letter*, where sin painfully births a new consciousness. Three paired lives balance and oppose each other, their perceptual shifts elaborating Hawthorne's visual psychology. What prodigies West and Newton make by hand or accidentally discover transform the playing fields of art and science. A fall from the grace of these wonder-driven children is enacted in the punishing and patricidal mentalities of Samuel Johnson and Oliver Cromwell. Their deliberate, self-menacing and irrevocable acts unsettle the center of the work. They willfully risk themselves as players implicated in complex social orders. Like Hawthorne, they suffer from the need to resist authority and break from customs in which they are enmeshed. Their boldness destabilizes the generational attunement registered in the first two tales in a distinctly American fashion: opening their eyes to oppressive contexts, Johnson and Cromwell enable new and more adequate conceptions of the self.

The final pair of biographies, yoked by opposing paternal models, looks forward to constructs of fatherhood. Both Ben Franklin as positive object lesson and Queen Christina as negative exemplum have personal relevance for the betrothed Hawthorne: Mr. Franklin, a soap boiler and tallow-chandler in Boston, and Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus are closely critiqued. Suggesting at the end of the series that more stories will follow, Mrs. Temple gently opposes her husband. She raises the question of whether a less misogynist point of view is not needed after the condemnatory tale of Queen Christina, who abdicates the throne: "But it is very possible for a woman to have a strong mind to be fitted for the active business of life, without losing any of her natural delicacy. Perhaps some time or other Mr. Temple will tell you a story of such a woman" (283-4). It is hard not to imagine Sophia Peabody as the source and inspiration of such a storyline. Having illustrated *Grandfather's Chair*, she was enjoying new health and confidence as a sculptor

engaged to a writer “handsomer than Lord Byron” (Marshall 352). The “simple, severe lines” (Marshall 371) of her sketch for “The Gentle Boy,” Hawthorne boasted in the 1839 preface, had earned the “warm recommendation” of Washington Allston for this now “thrice told tale” (Marshall 372). If Hawthorne was hinting at the end of his collection about a collaboration to come, the sequel to *Biographical Stories* took place in marriage, not art.

Drafting a love letter to a future with Sophia, Hawthorne channels the success of his earliest, most popular tale, “The Gentle Boy,” in the Quaker Benjamin West (Miller 43). Hawthorne had reached a point of no return in entering the Peabody sisters’ embracing circle. A tone of wonderment and gratitude infuses this threshold tale: all obstacles to success and objections to art are put to rest in a celebration of Quaker spirit, consensus and peace. “A famous preacher of the Society of Friends” proclaims the ways of Providence, echoing Milton’s happy ending. He foretells that little Ben “would be one of the most remarkable characters that had appeared on the earth since the days of William Penn” (6:220).

This forward-looking tale takes us from the woods of Springfield and the Indians who gave Ben “his first colors” to the boy’s destiny in the great galleries of Europe. The infant to whom the Quakers “look for wonderful things” goes on to win “notice” by “many great people.” The humble icon of the little painting hung at the Royal Academy of London, a “small and faded landscape” that “little Ben had painted in his father’s garret,” completes the circle of the hero’s journey. From an acorn has grown the whole tree. “The story of his life is almost as wonderful as a fairy tale for there are few stranger transformations than that of a little unknown Quaker boy, in the wilds of America, into the most distinguished painter of his day” (228-229). Yet Hawthorne’s “almost as wonderful” indicates his reservations about this genre applied to human history. The boy’s request of a not very magical animal helper (“Puss,” said little Ben to the cat, “pray give me some of the fur from the tip of thy tail?”) leaves her cold, “thin and ragged,” so determined is Ben to have brushes (6:223).

Nevertheless, the Indians in this story function as ideal parents supporting the child’s innate gifts. By providing two colors from their face paints, they enable Ben to move forward from drawing “with a piece of chalk, on barn doors or on the floor” (6:222). West reciprocated

In the respect he was shown as a child with his painting "The Indians Delivering Up the English Captives to Colonel Bouquet" (1764) that shows a young white child "recoiling from a British soldier and seeking refuge in the arms of his adopted Indian parents" (Mintz 9). By pointing out the generosity of the Indians' nurture of the gifts of the Great Spirit, Hawthorne implicitly condemns the Puritan notion of breaking the spirit of children to force them into conformity with religious doctrines.

Drawing on John Galt's *The Life of Benjamin West* (1816) at a time when copyright laws did not exist, Hawthorne cribbs the order and content of several early episodes. In these vignettes he emphasizes child-friendly qualities of the Pennsylvania Quakers, who alone among the Northeastern colonists lived in harmony with the nomadic Indians camping seasonally in their fields. The indulgent Indians allowed each child to pursue his own destiny. The Quaker community enabled Ben's gifts to be nurtured as the Indians did because of their belief in prophecy and Providence. What Hawthorne adds to Galt is the voice of the child who recognizes in a dreaming baby a "blissful quiet": "How beautiful she looks!" said Ben to himself. "What a pity it is that such a pretty smile should not last forever" (6:221). His sketch of the sleeping infant is done for the sheer joy of it. He hides his drawing from his mother "as if there might be something wrong in stealing the baby's face and putting it upon a sheet of paper" (6:222). Yet these actions reveal that a seven-year-old who expects "to be well scolded" could invent the ideal of art non-existent in his family and culture.

Ben keeps his optical passion going, building it up, to enlarge the self. Likewise, the next interaction between little Emily and Edward enhances the invalid's confidence by teaching him to knit without seeing. Although Edward at the end of this tale bemoans his invalidism ("it seems as if I were alone in a dark world"), Mr. Temple affirms his son's discovery of the mind's eye. Edward's power to envision such images as Ben's camera obscura connects him to the Quaker boy whose illness also confined him to a dark room. The black cat and Mr. Pennington, the Quaker who gives Ben his first set of paints, enable instinctive action right for the fairy-tale hero. Though Ben's behavior does not conform to ordinary standards, it accords with the wholeness of the situation: his mastery is always a surprise but fulfills the totality of his potential.

Like Ben who makes his own brushes before actually seeing a painting, Isaac Newton learns through his hands. With a set of tools designed by him, this mechanical genius creates a miniature version of a new windmill being built nearby, after “prying into its internal machinery” (6:233). Though not appearing “a very bright scholar,” Newton teaches himself intuitively. While Sir David Brewster in *The Life of Sir Isaac Newton* (1831) portrays Isaac as a “sober, silent, thinking lad” who “never was known scarce to play with the boys abroad” (Westfall 13), Hawthorne invents dialogue whereby a playmate, enchanted with the mill, points out it lacks a miller. Invoking the Lilliputian world of Gulliver as he anticipates Beatrice Potter, Hawthorne imagines Isaac creating a dark grey coat and a questionable character for Mr. Mouse.

Sparked by analogies, Newton is driven by curiosity and exuberance, jumping against the wind to test the measure of its force. “Thus even in his boyish sports he was continually searching out the secrets of philosophy” (6:233). Adapting Brewster’s biography for young readers, Hawthorne draws connections between the microcosms of play and later discoveries: the optics of light, gravitation, and motion of the spheres. “The boy had found out the mechanism of a windmill; the man explained to his fellow men the mechanism of the universe” (6:236). Hawthorne’s song of praise, that exults in the humility of the greatest scientist, climaxes with a vision of Newton’s fame: “as enduring as if his name were written in letters of light formed by the stars upon the midnight sky.” This zenith of macrocosmic revelation (a dramatic effect used at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*) is heightened by its juxtaposition to the little world of extracurricular recreation. Newton found “how to gain knowledge by simplest means”: “I seem to myself like a child,” observed he, “playing on the seashore, and picking up here and there a curious shell or a pretty pebble, while the boundless ocean of Truth lies undiscovered before me” (6:237).

Turning from glory displayed to guilt exposed, Mr. Temple continues the game of trying on the perspectives of others. The darker stories of Samuel Johnson and Oliver Cromwell follow an interlude of fighting between George and Edward that mirrors the bookish and bellicose temperaments to come. Mr. Temple, “without seeming to notice” both his sons’ bickering, begins with Samuel Johnson’s “doing penance for an act of disobedience to his father committed fifty years before.” Although



THE HEALING ARTS OF PLAY

his story's sermonizing led to its reissue as a Sunday school tract, its emotional pain runs against the apparent moral. Its extension into two parts, after an interruptive moment of half a century, shifts perspective and raises deeper questions: why, instead of trudging off to peddle a few books, does young Sam defy his father "loudly and deliberately" — "Sir," said he, "I will not to Uttoxeter market!" This boy had already been punished for disobedience: "while Sam was younger, the old gentleman had probably used the rod whenever occasion seemed to require. But he was now too feeble and too much out of spirits to contend with this stubborn and violent-tempered boy" (241). Yet the son's own "vivid imagination" smites him as he envisions his father's demeaning efforts to sell books to a non-reading "noisy crowd around him."

Sam seemed to behold him arranging his literary merchandise upon the stall in such a way as was best calculated to attract notice. Sam, in imagination, saw his father offer these books, pamphlets, and ballads, now to the rude yeomen who perhaps could not read a word; now to the country squires, who cared for nothing but to hunt hares and foxes; now to the children, who chose to spend their coppers for sugar-plums or gingerbread rather than for picture-books. And if Mr. Johnson should sell a book to man, woman, or child, it would cost him an hour's talk to get a profit of only sixpence. (6:242).

Sam grabs liberty for himself but in a harrowing fantasy ("his imagination set to work") of his father "so weary, sick, and disconsolate that the eyes of all the crowd were drawn to him."

Perhaps his father would faint away and fall down in the market place, with his gray hair in the dust and venerable face as deathlike as that of a corpse. And there would be the bystanders gazing earnestly at Mr. Johnson and whispering, "Is he dead? Is he dead?" And Sam shuddered as he repeated to himself, "Is he dead?" (6:243).

This scene conjures Johnson's "awful dread of death" (5:122) that was shared by Hawthorne, as well as anger at a mercantile order that devalues and possibly destroys both writers. Just as *The Scarlet Letter* uses spatial dynamics to delineate pride and shame, the marketplace dramatizes Sam's suffering as more complex than mere sloth or obstinacy. Hawthorne's characters are tormented by the lonely anguish of who they are: as

The Blithedale Romance puts it, “our souls, after all, are not our own. We convey a property in them to those with whom we associate; but to what extent can never be known, until we feel the tug, the agony of our abortive effort to resume an exclusive sway of ourselves” (3:194).

Introduced by Boswell to the story of Johnson’s penance “at a very early time” (Miller 428), Hawthorne revisited the tale throughout his life. The incoherent identity of Sam in *Biographical Stories* combines shabby clothes, disfigurement, tremor, and near blindness with an awareness of his talent, “uncommon sense and ability” (6:240). The menial task of “offering books to the rude and ignorant country people” (6:241) is offset by how Sam overcomes his disabilities with his schoolfellows: “Three of them were accustomed to come for him every morning; and while he sat upon the back of one, the two others supported him on each side; and thus he rode to school in triumph” (6:240).

Yet the power of this boy to pretend is elaborated fifty years later, when the grown son enacts a curse (“You will think of this, Sam, when I am dead and gone”) that proves far more scarring than the rod (6:241). This verbal trauma plays out like Greek tragedy. Just as Hawthorne followed Franklin Pierce’s career with “a playgoer’s interest in the impending peripeties of a protagonist’s fate” (Abel 47), the suspense of the marketplace scene in part two is less moralistic than dramatic, as realized in a public show. “Should he fail, what extinction it will be! He is in the intensest blaze of publicity,” Hawthorne wrote of his friend Pierce (Abel 47). So too the rude interplay of what is seen and unseen in the self-inflicted role-play of the writer, returning like Rip Van Winkle, is heightened not by atonement, but by Johnson’s status as “the greatest and learnedest man in England” (6:248).

The haunting guilt submerged in this conflict is countered by the resolute confidence of Oliver Cromwell who led the Puritan revolution. At the heart of *Biographical Stories*, between biographer Johnson and autobiographer Franklin, rises the big-body play of Little Noll. At five he “thrusts himself through the throng of courtiers and attendants and greeted the prince with a broad stare,” refusing to kiss the little royal hand. This “rugged, bold-faced sturdy little urchin” probes the paradoxes of fair play, fomenting disorder within order (6:254).

To sociologist Erving Goffman “a play event is like a delicate transparent bubble. Collectively, participants inflate the bubble and

guard it from all manner of interferences that might cause it to shrink or burst" (Henricks 22). Cromwell's life is structured to pinpoint the moment this sphere ruptures when a stubborn five-year-old bloodies the nose of the future king. Not only does this oft-told tale foreshadow regicide, but the encounter between Little Noll and the prince interrupts a feast in the great hall, where King James, like "a supernatural being," is served by others on bended knees. The "warlike leader" of liberty-loving Puritans attains "all the power of the reign" by way of his anti-monarchal sentiments, physical hardihood, and refusal to be bullied: "He struck me first,' grumbled the valiant little Noll, 'and I've only given him his due'" (6:256). The "tumult" (as if "a general rebellion had broken out") forecasts a "protectorate" of traditional gaming: "for boys, whether the sons of monarchs or of peasants, all like play, and are pleased with one another's society. . . Perhaps they played at ball, perhaps at blind-man's bluff, perhaps at leap-frog, perhaps at prison bars. Such games have been in use for hundreds of years, and a prince as well as poor children have spent some of their happiest hours playing in them" (6:255).

Although the king warns Charles not "to tyrannize over the stubborn race of Englishmen, and to remember Noll Cromwell, and his own bloody nose" (6:257), his son fails to apprehend the give-and-take that must negotiate social hierarchies. Charles' inability to maintain authority over his subjects is identified with play-deprivation. "Though by no means an ill-looking child . . . his cheeks were rather pale, as if he had been kept moping within doors, instead of being sent out to play in the sun and wind" (6:253). The "pitiful" plight of this "shy, or even sulky" six-year-old is that he never learns. His failure at rough-and-tumble exchange ultimately costs him his life: the child who punched him in the nose oversees his execution.

The lives of Johnson and Cromwell both end with a complex scene in which observer and observed intersect in public spectacle and private drama. The military officer resists entreaties of his own children on their knees "to rescue his majesty from death." Yet in a legendary and gothic moment, the hooded Cromwell visits the coffin of the beheaded corpse, beholding "the poor victim of pride, and an evil education" (6:258). Unlike Samuel Johnson, Cromwell's resolve in this gloomy chamber is unflinching. Yet "grown old, his visage scarred with the many battles in

which he had led the van,” the challenger meditates from the summit having prevailed as king-of-the-hill.

The political fray of gender and the pitfalls of performing public service define the last two lives. Both center on patriarchal education in an “age of proprieties”—or, as the biographer of the Peabody sisters, Megan Marshall, rewrites William Ellery Channing, “an age of contested proprieties.” Composed while Sophia was getting her hands dirty and her name known by sculpting the blind twelve-year-old Laura Bridgman, *Biographical Stories* concludes like a lovers’ quarrel between her and Nathaniel on how far schemes of do-good-ism can progress before they backfire.

Ben Franklin, for example, “a bright boy at his book, and even a brighter one when at play with his comrades,” tests the limits (6:262). Fishing on the outskirts of Boston, his gang is forced to stand “in a deep bed of clay.” “It was queer enough, to be sure, to hear this little chap—this rosy-cheeked, ten-year-old boy—talking about schemes for the public benefit” (6:264). Yet public-spirited Ben rallies the boys to build a wharf with stones they filch from a nearby building project. In an extended conversation Ben would “never forget,” his “inflexibly upright” father reproves him for theft, explaining the “eternal” principle behind the maxim “that evil can only produce evil” (6:271). Their open discussion, in the spirit of Temple School, counters the curse of taciturn Michael Johnson. It also defies the example of Gustavus Adolphus who, wishing for a son, spawns neither a successor to the throne nor a useful, happy daughter. Though he loved and played with little Christina, dancing gaily “along the marble floor of the palace” with her, the “evil effects of her education” render her unfit as a woman. Though she could ride, hunt, shoot “with wonderful skill,” and read “the classical authors of Greece and Rome” (6:281), these accomplishments do not offset the denial of her gender. In quaint anti-feminist language, Hawthorne derides Christina’s mannish clothes and grimy hands. Little Emily, “shocked at the idea of such a bold and masculine character,” whispers, “I could never have loved her . . . It troubles me to think of her unclean hands” (6:283).

Getting muddy fishing is Ben’s “pickle”: “See! I am bedaubed to the knees of my small-clothes” (6:265). His pals play in marsh clay “like a colony of ants” to perform “a great work.” But perhaps Hawthorne

THE HEALING ARTS OF PLAY

regarded dirty hands on women less favorably after Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe commissioned Sophia to manually sculpt the bust of his star pupil Laura Bridgman in “cold clay.” Although the money bought Sophia’s wedding trousseau, her hands raised funds for the Perkins School in a project independent of Nathaniel Hawthorne. With this “most famous child in America” attracting Charles Dickens on his visit in 1841, Hawthorne bootlegged public interest in the sightless girl for *Biographical Stories*. He infused the delicacy of Sophia’s and his past invalidism into scenes that speak to the blind even as he responded to Washington Allston’s call, in his review of “The Gentle Boy,” for more of the couple’s “kindred” art. He followed the Transcendental drift of Elizabeth Peabody’s comments on Allston’s landscapes: “The highest art does more than give us a fac-simile of a piece of Nature; it selects and combines natural objects under the inspiration of a sentiment or idea, so that the whole is suggested by the miniature” (Marshall 382). Yet troubling imprints and outcomes of female education are revisited in Hawthorne’s first story after marrying Sophia. A birthmark in the shape of a tiny hand on Georgiana’s beautiful face must be erased, though as she complies with her husband’s plan, she dies as the blemish disappears.

University of Michigan

Notes

*Portions of page 2 were originally published in “*The Magnetized Observer*”: *Hawthorne’s Romantic Vision*, an exhibition catalogue (Salem, MA, Essex Institute; Cambridge, MA: Houghton Library, Harvard University, 1988) and in “*Grandfather’s Chair*: Hawthorne’s ‘Deeper History’ Of New England,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 15 (1991): 27-42.

¹On how Peabody saw Waldo Emerson and future brothers-in-law Horace Mann and Nathaniel Hawthorne, men she intended to help “realize their own genius and bring it forward,” see Megan Marshall (368).

²For an overview of “the changing relationship between the price and value of children” see Zelizer on a “unique form of emotional book-keeping” (14): “The emotional pain of the bereaved father and mother became the dominant subject of a new popular literary genre—consolation literature” (25). Hawthorne’s intrigue with such emotional calculations focused in 1838 on how the threat of a child’s blindness might afflict or console a bereaved parent: “A child of Rev. Ephraim Peabody’s was

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE REVIEW

threatened with total blindness. A week after the father had been informed of the child's death; and in the meanwhile, his feelings had become so much the more interested in the child from its threatened blindness, that it was infinitely harder to give it up. Had he not been aware of it till after the child's death, it would probably have been a consolation" (*Hawthorne's Lost Notebook* 79).

³For an outline of Peabody's career, see Bruce Ronda's introduction to E. P. Peabody's *Letters* (3-40). "Peabody's reference to the now lost correspondence between Hawthorne and herself, during 1837-1838 and perhaps longer, make me regret the light that might have been thrown on this important period of his life" (Pearson 259).

⁴According to Nina Baym, "*The Biographical Stories for Children* is much inferior" to earlier volumes in *The Whole History*. "Hawthorne attempts a variation on the same framing formula, but handles it much more mechanically" (96). Laura Laffrado sees *Biographical Stories* as "not only of inferior quality when compared with *The Whole History*, but, with its ineffective frame and imperfectly rendered stories, an inferior work on its own" (41).

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