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Introduction

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1 In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne were mostly interested in political readings of the two writers’ work, foregrounding issues of race and gender. Without disregarding such matters, recent scholarly voices have been less engaged in tracing the hidden workings of ideology; rather, they have addressed broader themes such as history, subjectivity, or literary form. As Cody Marrs puts it in the Introduction to The New Melville Studies (2019), the aim of new research is to “position [itself] alongside Melville as he writes”: instead of subverting Melville’s text, to look for the subversive within it. A similar tendency may be observed in studies on Hawthorne, for example Hawthorne and the Real, edited by Millicent Bell (2005), and The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne, edited by Richard H. Millington (2004). Characteristically, the most fruitful recent scholarly work on the two writers has tended towards edited collections of essays by various authors, which speaks to the value of a multi-perspectival scholarly discussion. This special issue of the European Journal of American Studies inscribes itself into this trend, in the hope of offering a fresh perspective on these two classic American writers—by focusing on obsession in its psychological, political, and esthetic aspects.

2 The volume brings together articles encompassing a broad spectrum of themes, motifs, and theoretical approaches. It opens with two studies of Hawthorne’s Pyncheon family romance: Emelia Abbé Robertson’s “[In]toxic[ating] Bodies: Spirits and Spectral Biopolitics in The House of the Seven Gables” and Justyna Fruzińska’s “Breaking the Spell of Past Misdeeds: A Hauntological Reading of The House of the Seven Gables.” While Robertson focuses on the motif of intoxication and toxicity as a means to critique the narrative of American progress in the nineteenth century, Fruzińska discusses Hawthorne’s entanglement with the ghosts of the past, pointing to a tension between an optimistic and a pessimistic vision of human agency at the heart of Hawthorne’s romance. The writer’s interest in the ghostly and elusive is also addressed in the subsequent article by Paulina Ambroży—“‘Only a Light Wreath of The New-Fallen Snow’?: Ecogothic Tropes and the Diffractive Gaze in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘The Snow-Image’”—in which she analyzes this lesser-known short story through the lens of...
ecocritical and New Materialist theories to reveal its prioritizing of fluidity and indeterminacy over separation and stability.

3 Marek Wilczyński’s “The School of Hawthorne: New England Women Writers after the Civil War” marks a shift from studies centering purely on Hawthorne’s work to those engaging with broader contexts, both historical and socio-literary. The author discusses works by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Alice Brown, Rose Terry Cooke, Annie Trumbull Slosson, and Sarah Orne Jewett in the light of their indebtedness to Hawthorne—particularly their interest in allegory and fantastic elements. While Wilczyński focuses on Hawthorne’s influence on other literary figures, Michael Petitti in “‘It Was a Scene of Life in the Rough’: Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Paracinema” examines both writers’ presence in popular culture. He discusses the 1963 adaptation of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* and the 2010 adaptation of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* as examples of paracinema, demonstrating how the two classic works function not only in a different medium, but also within a more ‘lowbrow’ context; all this also allows Petitti to problematize the notion of cultural taste.

4 Another article which juxtaposes the work of the two writers is Ariel Silver’s “‘Great Flood-Gates of the Wonder World’: Baptisms of Water and Fire in Melville and Hawthorne.” Silver pays attention to recurrent motifs—water in Melville and fire in Hawthorne—pondering these natural symbols in the light of current environmental challenges. Melville’s work is at the center of the next article: Giorgio Mariani’s “‘The Key to it All’: Why Are We Obsessed with Ishmael, and Are Likely to Continue to Be Obsessed with Him?” Mariani queries the long history of foregrounding Ishmael in the critical analyses of *Moby-Dick* after the Melville Revival. Rather than prioritize the Cold War as the reason behind the anti-authoritarian shift away from Ahab-centric readings, Mariani suggests that the obsession with Ishmael—whether positive or negative—may in fact block interpretation.

5 In the subsequent contribution, entitled “Melville and the Vortex Theory of Matter,” Paweł Stachura proposes to trace vortical imagery in *Clarel* and several other works by Melville. Taking as his point of departure the famous passage on “Descartian vortices” in *Moby-Dick*, Stachura reads similar images across Melville’s oeuvre as early examples of a conflicted preoccupation, among the era’s general audiences, with the vortex theory of matter. A very different approach is taken by Matthew Scully in “Melville’s Obsessional Form: Disjunction and Refusal in ‘Benito Cereno.’” Grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis and focusing on narrative tensions, Scully’s interpretation of Melville’s novella insists on obsession as the key formal principle, which helps to disclose the text’s keen critique of fantasies upholding the ideology of anti-Blackness. The series of contributions to Melville studies is continued with Vanessa Meikle Schulman’s “‘In Honor, as in Limb, Unmarred’: Obsession with the ‘Whole’ Body in Herman Melville’s *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War.*” Schulman’s article is an exploration of Melville’s poetry volume through the lens of disability studies, tracing the political implications of how the bodies of Civil War veterans are represented in the writer’s work.

6 The issue closes with two contributions whose authors trace the influence of Melville in the twentieth century and beyond. In “‘Revolutionary Changes in Sensibility’: References to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* in W. H. Auden’s 1949 Page-Barbour Lectures,” Jacek Partyka considers the take on Melville’s work offered in *The Enchafèd Flood*, Auden’s politically charged University of Virginia lectures, devoted to sea and desert iconography. Mark Tardi’s “‘A Cormorant of Libraries’: The Future-Past of Susan
Howe’s ‘Melville’s Marginalia’ expands the scope of analysis to include the field of contemporary American poetry. Casting Howe in the role of a poet-excavator, Tardi considers “Melville's Marginalia” from her 1993 volume The Nonconformist’s Memorial as consistent with her sustained efforts to establish links between literary ancestors and posterity.

We would like to extend our thanks to the reviewers whose expertise helped shape the present form of this EJAS issue: Antoine Cazé, Kevin Corstorphine, Lesley Ginsberg, Jennifer Greiman, Thomas Hillard, David Jones, Michael Jonik, Eryta Lorek-Jezińska, Zofia Kołbuszewska, Zuzanna Ladyga, Agnieszka Łowczanin, Timothy Marr, Cody Marrs, Zbigniew Maszewski, Richard H. Millington, William Montgomery, Peter Nicholls, Katarzyna Ojrzyńska, Samuel Otter, Alicja Piechucka, Wit Pietrzak, Agnieszka Rasmus, Larry J. Reynolds, Agnieszka Salska, Russell Sbriglia, Tadeusz Sławek, Julia Szoltysek, Magdalena Szuster, Gale Temple, Mikołaj Wiśniewski, Brian Yothers.

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