

The trouble with racism, for James Fenimore Cooper, is that it is too subtle. “We will not enter upon any subtle deductions which involve national character, or national enterprise and aptitude for sea-service,” he writes in an 1821 essay. “We leave such nice distinctions for greater ingenuity than we can pretend to.”¹ In opposition to “theorists” who insist on “the inferiority of all . . . who [are] not white,” he declares that there is no such thing as “general national superiority.”² In opposition to metaphysicians who “reason as subtly as they can about the races and colors,” he argues that the “moral tone” of one’s behavior “depend[s] more on the conventional feeling . . . got up through moral agencies, than on birth-place, origin, or colour.”³ In the case of whites and Indians in the trans-Mississippi West, he writes in *The Prairie* (1827), it would take a “curious investigation” to identify the “points of difference” by which they were “still to be distinguished . . . now that the two, in the revolutions of the world, were approximating in their habits, their residence and not a little in their characters.”⁴

But racism is, Cooper recognizes, subtle in another way as well. Thanks to the power of “self-love,” an “unquiet spirit which haunts us to the last,” no one is immune to “the vulgar prejudice of national superiority . . . one of the strongest of all the weaknesses of our very weak nature.”⁵ “It is possible,” writes Corny Littlepage in *The Chain-bearer* (1845), that “unconsciously to ourselves,” he and his father “may have been influenced by the ancient prejudices” of the Dutch against the English, despite having “endeavored scrupulously to avoid them.” “‘Heaven protect me from a prejudice so unworthy of my

reason!” cries Duncan Heyward in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1757) after having been accused of regarding the light-skinned but legally black Cora Munro with contempt. Secretly, however, Heyward is in fact “conscious of such a feeling, and that as deeply rooted as if it had been engrafted into his nature.”⁶ Even Margery Waring, the heroine of *The Oak-Openings* (1848), who has “seen so much of the Indians, as to regard them much as she did others,” is shaped, unbeknownst to herself, by “American notions on the subject of color.” As a result, she “would not have been very likely to fall in love with a young Indian,” even if “one [had] come in her way of a suitable age and character.” Not only baroque in its structure but Gothic in its operations, racism is profoundly remote from the ideal of “republican simplicity.”⁷

There is, however, yet another turn of the screw. The self-love that underwrites nationalism and racism around the world is not, for Cooper, all so bad. For one thing, it is only “by encouraging man’s love of himself . . . that he is got to do so much.” And when self-love expands to fill the spheres of kin and community, it becomes “the dearest incentive that a good man has for struggling against the currents of baser interest,” enabling him to both idealize and identify with certain generalized forms of behavior.⁸ “There is something highly respectable in . . . Scotch nationality,” Cooper writes in an 1836 travel narrative, “and I have no doubt it has greatly contributed toward making the people what they are. If the Irish were as true to themselves, English injustice would cease in a twelve-month.”⁹ By “falling back sternly on their rights” and “sustaining themselves by the proud recollections of their forefathers”—as opposed to internalizing English attitudes, as he thinks the Irish have—the Scottish people have not only preserved but vitalized the clannishness that makes them what they are. “All that common sense and the most fastidious principles require,” Cooper writes elsewhere, “is care, in fostering such feelings, that what is properly a sentiment, be not converted into a narrow and injurious prejudice.”¹⁰ Simple, self-sustaining sentiment is okay; subtle, injurious prejudice is not.

This unstable triangle of topics—the inessentiality of “race,” the intransigence of racism, and the attractiveness of communitarian feeling—is one that contemporary scholars of American literature are most likely to have encountered in so-called passing novels. It virtually follows from the basic premise of such novels, in which at least one major character is capable of identifying as either white or nonwhite,

that the attention of readers will repeatedly be drawn to the speciousness of the race concept, the difficulty of eradicating it, and the moral and psychological appeal of identifying with the nonwhite community. In Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), for instance, the utopian vision of "treat[ing] men according to the complexion of their souls" is countered by the virulent irrationality of race prejudice—"I wasn't reasoned into it, and I do not expect to be reasoned out of it," says one white character—which is countered in turn by the development of an expansive pride in blackness.¹¹ In Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1928), the critique of the race concept is based more on quantum physics than on Christianity; the irrationality of hatred is inseparable from the irrationality of love; and "instinctive" racial loyalty is related to a vertiginous fear of being "free."¹² No less than *Iola Leroy*, however, *Passing* pivots on the relationship between these three positions. Given Cooper's reputation, it is surprising, to say the least, that a similar array of positions may be found in his work. In the passages I have quoted above, we find a writer who is usually identified with Natty Bumppo, the homespun theorist of "white gifts" and "red gifts," professing an Enlightenment-style cosmopolitanism; a writer who is usually identified with psychologically simplistic characterization attending to the vicissitudes of unconscious racism; and a writer who is usually identified with the maintenance of social order singing the praises of a self-amplifying anti-imperialism.

Here is an even bigger surprise. In 1833—twenty years before the publication of what is usually considered to be the first passing novel, William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, and three years before the first reference to passing in American literature, in Richard Hildreth's *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore*—Cooper published an allegorical passing novel called *The Headsman*. The premise of the novel, which is set sometime around 1730, is that in the Swiss canton of Berne, one family has been, for countless generations, the sole supplier of the state's executioners. The current executioner, Balthazar, and his wife, Marguerite, have tried to keep their son from becoming the next executioner and their daughter from suffering the effects of prejudice by giving them fictitious identities. After an opening scene in which Balthazar unsuccessfully attempts to pass as an ordinary burgher, his son, Sigismund, reveals his identity to Adelheid, the daughter of a Bernese nobleman named Melchior. She overcomes her initial shock, but her father cannot; in conversations with a visiting friend, Gaetano

Grimaldi, he struggles in vain to transcend his feelings of disgust. At around the same time, Sigismund's sister, Christine, is publicly identified as the daughter of Balthazar, and her fiancé, Jacques, abandons her. All the principals subsequently ascend the Great St. Bernard Pass, where the body of Jacques is discovered in a deadhouse. Balthazar is charged with the murder and tried in the nearby convent. During the trial, we learn that Sigismund is actually the long-lost son of Gaetano, abducted as an infant and adopted by Balthazar. Balthazar is acquitted, Melchior approves the marriage of Adelheid and Sigismund, and a smuggler named Maso reveals that he is the bastard son of Gaetano, who had earlier revealed himself to be the doge of Genoa. Everyone goes home, and as Cooper's narrator puts it, "the reader is left to his own intelligence for the moral" (*H*, x).

Although the racial dimension of that moral is, as I will show, astonishingly obvious, only one of Cooper's critics has called attention to it. In an overlooked chapter on Cooper's "European novels" in *The Expatriate Perspective* (1974), Harold McCarthy argues that "the particular outrages to which the Headsman and his family . . . are subjected and the impassioned protests of several members of the family should have suggested to readers that what was at issue was slavery." That "veiled appeal" is "crucially reinforced by the names [Cooper] gives to two of his principal characters": Melchior and Balthazar. Traditionally, McCarthy points out, the three magi "represent the three races of mankind: Caspar (whom Cooper does not use) represents the children of Shem (Asia); Melchior represents the children of Japhet (Europe); and Balthazar represents the children of Ham (Africa)." Probably because of the low profile of racial passing in the critical discourse of the early 1970s, all that McCarthy has to say about that aspect of *The Headsman* is that the scene in which Jacques spurns Christine is "a climax that was to become a ritual pattern in American fiction" and that "a maze of complications strikingly similar to Cooper's reappears" in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894).¹³ He does, however, make a strong case for viewing the novel as an appeal to the better angels of white Americans' natures, an effort to rouse, in Cooper's words, the "constant moral sentinel that God hath set on watch in every man's breast."¹⁴

In what follows, I will expand on McCarthy's claims, first by providing a fuller version of the argument that *The Headsman* is a veiled critique of antiblack prejudice and then by suggesting what we might

learn from it. Although there is no reason to believe that the novel had any direct influence on subsequent passing novels—no one seems to have noticed the allegory and the novel sank quickly from sight—it does anticipate, in striking ways, various features of the fully developed genre, such as the morbidly anxious and ultimately jilted heroine; the passionate, ambitious, internally riven hero; and the infant separated from its family at birth. It anticipates, more importantly, the dynamic tension between a humanist antiracism, a brutal, deeply laid prejudice, and a commitment to the kin-rooted self. What makes Cooper's dramatization of that conflict especially significant is that it is so confusing and overwrought, evidently because Cooper himself was so powerfully drawn in each of these directions. The result is a novel that falls outside of the moral and epistemological territories typically associated with the literature of passing, a novel that communicates neither "the value of belonging to the black community" nor "the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent."¹⁵ It communicates, instead, an erotically charged preference for a state of feeling in which anger is aroused but contained, stigmatization is imaginatively but not actually rejected, and ambition is simultaneously prompted and checked. Rather than reading the imaginative pursuit of this state of feeling as a self-indulgence that only the racially privileged can afford, I will argue that it is an essential part of the economy of pleasure in at least some of the passing novels in the African American tradition. Without losing sight of the vast and often traumatic consequences of the opposition between white and black subject positions, it is possible to see, in the light cast by *The Headsman*, that the psychic internalization of that opposition is capable of generating a strange kind of pleasure, a pleasure that Cooper, for one, is neither able to justify nor willing to do without.



Even though *The Headsman* begins with a sentence that identifies it as a book for Americans ("The year was in its fall, according to a poetical expression of our own . . ." [*H*, 9]); even though its introduction contains a reference to the European belief that all of the white people in the United States are turning black; even though the names Melchior and Balthazar stand out in sharp relief against the background of the other names in the book (Roger, Niklaus, Pierre); and even though the book is full of passages that prompt us to read it allegorically; it

takes time for the “other scene” of the allegory to become visible. The principal source of that gradual transformation is Cooper’s repeated description of the line of Bernese headsmen as a “race” rather than a “family.” There are “certain races which are deemed accursed,” Sigismund tells Adelheid, “to answer some great and unseen end—races on whom the holy blessings of Heaven never descend” (*H*, 183). “We are a race of executioners,” says Balthazar, “but we are not the un-nurtured herd that people fancy” (*H*, 423). “We come of proscribed races, I know, Balthazar and I,” says Marguerite to Peter Hofmeister, the bailiff of Vévey, but “we come too of God!” (*H*, 296–97). Elsewhere, there are references to the “calamity of our race” (*H*, 193), the stigma that has “humiliated our race for so many generations” (*H*, 198), and “a fate which has condemned all of my race to have little other communion with their kind but that of blood” (*H*, 299). There are, in all, nineteen places in the novel where Cooper describes the executioner’s family with a word that evokes the contemporary division of humanity into biologically distinct groups.¹⁶

Other signs of Cooper’s intentions are scattered throughout the novel. As a mob enraged by the prospect of sailing with Balthazar shouts itself hoarse, a fight erupts between a St. Bernard with “dull white” markings and a “dusky” Newfoundland with traces of a “more decided black”—a fight that is “quite in unison with the disturbance itself” (*H*, 13). The Newfoundland is later stoned by angry villagers for having eaten scraps of meat intended for the St. Bernard and ostracized by a whole pack of St. Bernards because “some difference in coat and instinct has given him a bad name among [them]” (*H*, 439). During the Véveyan festival, we see two “blackamoors” holding up a drunken Silenus (*H*, 238)—in *Notions of the Americans* (1828), an American’s coat of arms is “a constellation of twenty-four stars, surrounded by a cloud of *nebulae*, with a liberty cap for a crest, and two young negroes as supporters”¹⁷—and four “Nubians” carrying on their shoulders a man playing the part of Bacchus (*H*, 238). Most tellingly, in the midst of a conversation with Sigismund, Peter says, “Now, yonder maiden, the pretty Christine, lost some of her grace in my eyes, as no doubt she did in thine, when the truth came to be known that she was Balthazar’s child. The girl is fair and modest and winning in her way; but there is something—I cannot tell thee what—but a certain damnable something—a taint—a color—a hue—a—a—a—that showed her origin the instant I heard who was her parent—was it not so with thee?”

(*H*, 306–7). Sigismund curtly points out the circularity of the bailiff’s logic: “When her origin was proved, but not previously.” “Aye, of a certainty,” Peter replies. “Your Moor might pass for a Christian in a mask, but strip him of his covering and the true shade of the skin is seen” (*H*, 307). Only by reading *The Headsman* as a critique of anti-black racism—a subtle articulation of the unsubtle belief that “Adam and Eve [are] the common parents of mankind” (*H*, 4)—is it possible to make sense of details like these.

The only significant obstacle to this reading is that Cooper, despite all of his protests to the contrary, did in fact frequently represent black people in demeaning ways. Although he conveys a sincere respect for the likes of Scipio in *The Red Rover* (1827) and Neb in *Afloat and Ashore* (1844), most of his representations of black people are straight out of a minstrel show. In *Wyandotté* (1843), for instance, the narrator tells us that “wrangling, laughing, singing, toiling, a light-heartedness that knew no serious cares and affection, mak[e] up the sum of the everyday existence of these semi-civilized beings,” and in *Afloat and Ashore*, the slaves who welcome Miles Wallingford home are, true to the “light-hearted” nature of their race, “smiling and happy,” displaying “a row of ivory that shone like so many gay windows in their sable faces.”¹⁸ That conception of black people clearly affected Cooper’s position on slavery, which was, in his mind, a “sad [blot]” on “the escutcheon of liberty,” but not a source of misery. “American slavery is mild, in its general features,” he writes in *The American Democrat* (1838), “and physical suffering cannot properly be enumerated among its evils. Neither is it just to lay too heavy a stress on the personal restraints of the system, as it is a question whether men feel very keenly, if at all, privations of the amount of which they know nothing.”¹⁹ At least in part because he believed that black people were naturally and permanently lighthearted—so much so that we are told at one point in *Mohicans* that “the dark, thoughtful eye of Cora, lighted with a humor that, it would seem, the habit, rather than the nature of its mistress, repressed”—Cooper could not believe that the experience of slavery was as excruciating for them as some of his fellow Northerners were making it out to be.²⁰

This view was undoubtedly a large part of the reason why Cooper was never a proponent of immediate emancipation. Another part, however, was his belief that there was no constitutional basis for abolition, that the only “power to emancipate the slaves” was “that which

belongs to their masters" (N, 469). By making slavery "one of the reserved rights of the States," he writes in an 1835 letter to the *New York Evening Post*, the Constitution "concedes the question of principle," placing the government "in the situation of a man who may think a certain thing wrong, but who knows it is not his business to remedy the evil" (LJ, 3:170). Under these circumstances, he argues, the only way to remedy the evil is state-by-state abolition, which means that the only place where the battle over slavery can legitimately be fought is in the hearts and minds of slaveholders. Throughout the 1820s, Cooper seems to have been relatively sanguine that in the fullness of time, as the country as a whole became more refined and humane, the Southern legislatures would do what Northern legislatures had done before them. "Public opinion is making a steady advance to the general improvement, and, I think, to the final liberation of the race," writes the narrator of *Notions*. Although that "advance" has been "far less rapid than most good men could wish," an antislavery "sentiment" is, nevertheless, "silently working its way throughout the whole of this nation" (N, 470, 471). Like Hawthorne, that is, Cooper seems to have believed that "good men" should look upon slavery as something that a "divine Providence" would, in "its own good time," cause to "vanish like a dream."²¹

Unlike Hawthorne, however, Cooper thought that there was something American writers could and should do to accelerate that process. "Books," he writes in his first novel, *Precaution* (1820), "are, in a great measure, the instruments of controlling the opinions of a nation like ours. They are an engine, alike powerful to save or to destroy."²² Imaginative literature has an especially powerful moral influence on its readers, he argues in an 1822 essay. Although "in actual life our business and necessities come between us and living men," no "mixed motives enter into the emotions with which we regard the creations of the painter and the poet. When they bring before us the figures, passions, thoughts, expressions, and adventures of their ideal personages, our interests and prejudices disappear." We are thereby put in touch with "that higher truth, the truth of nature and of principles, which is a primitive law of the human mind, and only to be effaced by the most deplorable perversion."²³

Cooper knew, however, thanks in part to his close friendships with South Carolinians William Shubrick and Henry Cruger, that the Southern gentry did not particularly welcome the criticism of North-

erners on the subject of slavery. “Cruger complains bitterly of the tone of the Northern States on the subject of slavery,” Cooper writes in an 1830 letter. “Is he not right? . . . He carries his resentment too far, no doubt, but we ought to consider how sensitive is weakness when united to honorable feeling” (*LJ*, 1:422). In the early 1830s, when he was living in Europe and sensing that an “advance” in public opinion was underway—as evidenced by the 1830 revolution in France and the 1832 passage of the Reform Bill in England—Cooper was also following the progress of the nullification controversy, which threatened, he thought, to lead to civil war.²⁴ “What do you think of Carolina?” he wrote to Horatio Greenough in January 1833. “Blood will be shed depend on it” (*LJ*, 2:367). It was, accordingly, both more urgent and more difficult than ever to appeal to the consciences of white Southerners, to conjure up “ideal personages” who would make their “interests and prejudices disappear.”

Who might those ideal personages be? The answer, in Cooper’s case, derives from his sense of the importance of caste. After describing black people in general as “a light hearted and a laughing race,” the narrator of *Notions* hastens to add that there is “a higher and a very numerous class of American slaves, who are far better instructed, better clothed, and better fed, and who are altogether a superior race to the lowest class of the European peasants. I mean the domestic servants, and those who labour as mechanics and artisans” (*N*, 470). In “Slavery in the United States,” Cooper writes that because most black people are “ignorant and poor,” a “black face is just as much *prima facie* evidence that its possessor is vulgar and uneducated, in the U.S., as titles, stars, and ribbons in Europe are evidences that their possessors are gentlemen.” Nevertheless, it is “possible to be mistaken in both. I have known many clergymen, several masters of vessels, traders, farmers, &c., among the blacks, and a friend has just assured me, that he knows one who has been a member of the legislature in the state of New Hampshire.”²⁵ Most tellingly, perhaps, in *Gleanings in Europe: Italy*, Cooper sees a “respectable-looking black man” in St. Peter’s Cathedral and, “curious to know who he could be,” tries to strike up a conversation with him in French.

He answered me imperfectly; and I tried Italian, but with little better success. Of English he knew nothing; but he threw me into the shade by commencing a conversation in Latin. I was too rusty to do much at this, but I understood enough to discover that he was

a Romish priest from Africa—probably connected with the Propaganda. . . . What a missionary for America!²⁶

If—and it was a big if—the knee-jerk response of most white Americans to the supposedly prima facie evidence of a black person's appearance could be temporarily suspended, then “respectable” black people, like the one in the above passage, might be able to serve as missionaries in both life and art. If the black people in question were not very black, for instance, or not visibly black at all, and the white people who saw or read about them did not instantly contract a prejudice against them, they might be able to transform public opinion—at least in border states like Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, where public opinion was, Cooper thought, furthest advanced—just enough to change history.²⁷

These are the kinds of thoughts that appear to have led to the conception of *The Headsman*. “I have deferred [*The Monikins*], in order to throw off at a heat, in readiness for the next season ‘The Headsman of Berne,’ an idea that has seized me with such force, that there is no resisting it,” he told his publisher in October 1832. “You may expect, I think, a better book than [The] *Bravo*, for I never had a better thought” (*LJ*, 2:353–54). At least since his composition of *The Bravo* (1831), Cooper had aspired to write novels that were dramatic illustrations of argumentative claims. Knowing that “there is no blunder more sure to be visited by punishment, than that which tempts a writer to instruct his readers when they wish only to be amused,” as he writes in an 1832 preface to a revised edition of *Lionel Lincoln* (1825), he had tried to find a way of making those messages as unobtrusive as possible.²⁸ To “instruct the world,” he writes in *The Heidenmauer*, “it is necessary to watch the current, and to act on the public mind like the unseen rudder, by slight and imperceptible variations” (126). This is, in part, the logic of *The Headsman*. By evoking the injustice of racial prejudice allegorically, Cooper hopes to bypass the defense systems of his most important readers; by encouraging an at least unconscious identification of his ideal personages with upper-caste African Americans, he hopes to act as the “unseen rudder” of the ship of state, imperceptibly but decisively altering its course.

Far from negating a reading of *The Headsman* as a racial allegory, that is, the conservative aspects of Cooper's conceptions of race and slavery may actually be said to explain why the novel took the shape

it did. A more liberal writer might have addressed the social condition of light-skinned black people more directly; a more conservative writer might not have addressed it at all. Only a writer like Cooper—who believed that there was no basis for slavery in nature or reason; that the only way to end slavery was to appeal to the conscience of the white Southerner; that this appeal had to be made circumspectly; and that it could be made by means of novelistic representations of “respectable” black people—would have written a novel in which several presumptively “white” characters turn out to be “black.” He had, after all, already done something very much like this in *The Last of the Mohicans*, in which, by the time we discover the racial identity of Cora—the first mulatto/a character in American literary history—she is fully established as the most interesting and admirable female character in the book. He had, moreover, just encountered, in Frances Trollope’s *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), a description of the “excluded but amiable Quadroons” of New Orleans—who suffer, Trollope writes, from the “violent” and “inveterate” prejudice against “any being, tainted in the remotest degree with the negro stain”—and a discussion of the rumor that when Thomas Jefferson’s “children by Quadroon slaves were white enough to escape suspicion of their origin, he did not pursue them if they attempted to escape, saying laughingly: ‘Let the rogues get off, if they can; I will not hinder them.’”²⁹ If we take into consideration these contextual factors as well as all of the textual evidence I have cited above, it becomes much more difficult to conclude that *The Headsman* is not an allegorical novel of racial passing than to conclude that it is.

But the desire to “instruct the world” is, as I have suggested, not the only motive to the composition of *The Headsman*. When Cooper is “seized” by the idea of *The Headsman*, what he is seized by is not just a way of articulating a cherished political principle, but a way of abetting the satisfaction of a no-less-cherished pleasure principle. As several of his critics have observed, one of the things that typifies Cooper’s work as a whole is a delight in the impersonation of impersonators, an unusually forceful imaginative investment in characters who conceal their identities. In the novels of the 1820s alone, we find George Washington masking himself as Mr. Harper and Harvey Birch masking himself as a loyalist spy (*The Spy* [1821]); Oliver Effingham, son of an officer and gentleman, passing himself off as Oliver Edwards, descendent of Indians (*The Pioneers* [1823]); John Paul Jones pretending to be a

pilot (*The Pilot* [1824]); the insane Sir Lionel Lincoln roaming Boston under the name of Ralph (*Lionel Lincoln*); and Henry de Lacey alias Captain Heidegger alias the Red Rover befriending Henry Ark alias Harry Wilder, who turns out to be his nephew Henry de Lacey (*The Red Rover*). By novelistically impersonating, in *The Headsman*, characters whom he thinks of as racial passers, Cooper is seeking imaginative pleasures just as much as, if not more than, he is advancing political aims.

The most obvious sign that Cooper is not entirely absorbed by the novel's political message is that it is very hard, in the end, to say what that message is. Initially, his dramatizations of the phenomenon of passing, all three of which climax in a scene of exposure, seem to have a fairly straightforward purpose: to evoke both "the strength of prejudices" and "the worthlessness and changeable character of the most cherished of our opinions" (*H*, ix). Upon learning of Balthazar's identity, Melchior, Gaetano, and Adelheid recoil from him; upon hearing him speak of his experiences, they recoil from "the oppression that had given birth to his wrongs" (*H*, 91). "There are moments when prejudices and habits are stronger than reason," Adelheid tells Sigismund after recovering from the shock of his announcement, "but their triumph is short in well intentioned minds" (*H*, 189). Finally, after the festival-goers respond to Christine's abandonment with "coarse, and deriding laughter," Peter experiences "troublesome qualms of conscience . . . intuitively admonish[ing] him that the world had dealt hardly with the family of Balthazar" (*H*, 291, 302). The point, in each case, is that while we are all vulnerable to the "community of feeling that rules a multitude," the noblest among us—"those whose better feelings [are] stronger than their self-indulgence"—are capable of seeing beyond the conventional implications of racial difference (*H*, 102, 301).

We have, as a result, every reason to expect that Melchior will eventually approve his daughter's marriage to Sigismund. That expectation is heightened by the ascent of the great St. Bernard Pass, during which the "more privileged" travelers attain an elevation that changes their "customary associations with the things of the lower world" (*H*, 72, 334), and by the interlude in the convent, in which their thoughts are recalled "from the turmoil of daily and contracted interests, to a wider view of the truths of existence" (*H*, 481). By transporting his characters, over the course of the novel, from the pas-

sionate intensity of the lake storm to the nearly divine purity of “the most elevated habitable abode in Europe” (*H*, 390), Cooper leads us to anticipate a corresponding elevation of their moral beings. Just as important, perhaps, by evoking the romantic conventions of the early nineteenth-century novel in his depiction of the relationship between Sigismund and Adelheid, he makes it difficult to imagine that sordid, worldly considerations will ultimately triumph over true love. Everything points toward a morally significant climax in which Melchior finally manages to liberate himself from his “iron prejudices” (*H*, 482).

Then, to all appearances, Cooper loses his nerve. After Balthazar has been acquitted of the murder of Jacques, suspicion turns to Maso, who claims in the course of his defense that he is Gaetano’s son, stolen as an infant and raised in poverty. Upon hearing of the kidnapping, which is ascribed to a certain Signore Pantaleone Serrani, Balthazar steps forward to say the “broken tale of Maso . . . is removing a cloud that has lain for nearly thirty years before my eyes” (*H*, 460). He asks a few questions to confirm his suspicions, and then declares that Sigismund, not Maso, is Gaetano’s son. Shortly after the date on which Gaetano’s son was stolen, he explains, he had secretly adopted an infant boy from a man matching the description of Pantaleone. Without Marguerite’s knowledge, he had substituted the boy for his own recently deceased son. Once this “improbable tale” has been sufficiently confirmed (*H*, 463), Adelheid informs everyone that her father had consented to her marriage before the trial, on the condition of Balthazar’s acquittal, and that she is, accordingly, Sigismund’s fiancée. Melchior confirms the announcement, “looking about him proudly, as if he would browbeat any who should presume to think that he had consented to corrupt the blood of Willading by the measure” (*H*, 477). And that is that; in what is left of the chapter, there is no further mention of Melchior’s triumph over his prejudices. In the final chapter, the narrator acknowledges that this conquest “was in truth no other than a conquest over himself, he being, morally considered, little other than a collection . . . of narrow opinions and exclusive doctrines” (*H*, 480). But this extraordinary achievement is never presented in a way that is either dramatically interesting or morally inspirational. Rather than witnessing Melchior’s fateful decision, a decision upon which the novel had seemed to hinge, we hear about it secondhand, after it has for the most part ceased to matter.

Reviewers were flabbergasted. If there was one thing Cooper was

known for in 1833, it was, in the words of the reviewer for the *New England Magazine*, “his sturdy republicanism, and his hatred to monarchy and its attendant trappings.” Here, however, after “vainly producing distresses among his dramatis personae, and entangling himself in difficulties,” writes a reviewer for the *American Monthly Magazine*, Cooper “convert[s] the outcast into the son of the Doge of Genoa, himself an aristocrat, a noble, and soon to become in turn an oppressor of his inferiors and dependants, according to the custom of that truly brazen age.” “Had it been the tory design of the republican author to confirm the perpetuated jealousies and requisitions of hereditary rank,” writes the reviewer for the *North American Magazine*, “he could not have selected occurrences and characters better fitted to fulfill his intention.” Perhaps, writes the reviewer for *Metropolitan Magazine*, Cooper has been “too much a sojourner in the old world,” and, “fascinated by its antique prejudices,” has begun “truckl[ing] to worn-out and despicable tastes.” For although the “injustice, absurdity, and impolicy of hereditary and noxious privileges are admirably portrayed and insisted upon through the whole work,” in the conclusion, Cooper “first stumbles, and then bends his knees before Authority, and, in deference to it, refuses to consummate the sacrifice, though the altar is prepared, and the victim, Prejudice, is bound upon it. We did not expect this from an American, and least of all from American Cooper.”³⁰

Why did Cooper do it? The most obvious answer is that he could not summon the will to consummate what is, in essence, an interracial marriage plot. Given how sensitive white Southerners were on this subject—according to Trollope, the “bare mention” of mixed-race people makes the “pure Creole blood” of white New Orleanians “swell the veins”³¹—Cooper may very well have decided that an interracial marriage, even one partially concealed by the veil of allegory, was more than these readers could take. But the sensitivities in question were undoubtedly Cooper’s own as well. In *Notions*, the narrator predicts that an “amalgamation” of whites and Indians will “in time occur,” but that a similar intermixture of whites and blacks will not, owing to greater “physical differences,” which have led to a greater “reluctance to mingle . . . [the] blood” (*N*, 490). In “Slavery in the United States,” Cooper approaches the subject again, this time in response to the evocation of the prospect of white-black intermarriage in the United States in an essay by the French economist Jean

Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi. “I would not willingly hurt the feelings of any of that people, who have, already, experienced but too much contumely,” Cooper writes. “But this much I will say, that such philanthropists in Europe as are single and wish to form one of those matrimonial connexions to which M. Sismondi alludes, have it easily in their power to do so.”³² No less than Melchior, who would prefer to have those “who like philosophy, and justice, and natural rights so well, commence by setting us the example” (*H*, 335–36), Cooper resists the implementation of the principles to which he subscribes.

But that is not all there is to it. As I suggested earlier, part of what attracted Cooper to this project was the prospect of trying on the subject position of the light-skinned black person who is passing as white. Although Cooper seems to have enjoyed all such forms of self-masking, he especially enjoyed the experience of “playing mulatto.” The most striking sign of that pleasure is his obsession with the idea that Europeans believe that there are no longer any “men and women without wool” in the United States, that “all the whites who had gone there were . . . [now] black.”³³ On at least eleven occasions in his published works and at least twice in his letters, he alludes, with a mixture of indignation and delight, to that supposed belief. “Of the eight Americans of our party,” he writes in *Gleanings in Europe: Italy*, “I am the only one that has not light hair and a fair complexion; a circumstance that has excited much surprise in this part of the world, where we are deemed to be, *ex officio*, black” (275). In an 1830 letter from Paris, he reports that a visitor had confessed “that she had not been as much amused by my external appearance, as she had expected to be. I desired an explanation, and with some embarrassment, she acknowledged that had she not known I was an American, she might have supposed I was an European” (*LJ*, 2:12–13). Two years earlier, he had more actively—and deviously—elicited a similar response from an Italian man who had just visited an American ship by offhandedly saying, “Of course, the people were all blacks.” “I thought so, too, signore, until I went on board the ship,” the man replied, “but they are as white as you and I are.”³⁴ The conclusion that Cooper draws from this set of examples is revealingly hyperbolic. “If it were possible to take the sense of the people of Europe on the subject,” he writes, “I am persuaded it would be found that nine out of ten believe the Americans are any thing but white” (*S*, 9).³⁵

What that hyperbole most clearly reveals is not the intensity of

Cooper's unhappiness with European conceptions of the United States—at no time does he segue from an allusion to this myth into an attack on those conceptions—but the intensity of his attraction to the experience of being perceived as “any thing but white.” On the face of it, there is nothing very unusual about that attraction; as Eric Lott and others have shown, plenty of white American men have sought out, tried on, and discarded the signifiers of blackness. But the blackness to which Cooper is most attracted is not linked to a constellation of behavioral traits, as it was for many of the actors in minstrel shows. It is linked instead to the experience of being the object of contempt. In “No Steamboats—A Vision,” a satirical dream-narrative originally published in French, an autocratic ideologue named Monsieur Blouse asserts that in the United States a “social chaos confounds all classes; the Christian is a savage; the savage a Christian. The blacks are whites; the whites mulattoes.” When Blouse subsequently attempts to console Cooper's narrator by telling him that Americans are, for all that, not thought of as inferior, the narrator responds, “Then you do not think we are negroes?”³⁶ As the progression of this dialogue should suggest, the most titillating aspect of the European myth of American blackness, for Cooper, is the insult implicit in it. Rather than rejecting that imputation of inferiority, he seeks it out, teases it out of nonverbal signs, and dwells on it in a way that suggests that it is, for him, pleasurable in and of itself, without reference to any of the uses to which it may be put.

I want to suggest, with this in mind, that the primary function of “blackness” in Cooper's works is to shadow forth a radical state of insultedness. When he rails against the “blackguards” who have insulted him, or against the entire “era of blackguarding” in which he lives (*S*, 228), the language he uses to depict the state he is fending off, the state of unavenged abjection, frequently evokes blackness and slavery. “Such is the desire to blacken the American name, just now,” he writes in 1836, “that every unfavorable incident is seized upon and exaggerated, without shame or remorse.”³⁷ “The insolence and tyranny of these men have got to a pass, that I wonder any gentleman or freeman can tolerate [it],” he writes in an 1841 letter on the verbal attacks of various neighbors and newspaper editors. “I shall put them down, but I do not understand how any man can consider himself any thing but a slave, who lives under such a power” (*LJ*, 4:121–22). By turning the struggle against “blackening” into a way of life, he turns

gentlemanliness into something that he can not only personify, but enjoy personifying—not only claim, but claim passionately. “I love suspense,” the Red Rover confesses. “It keeps the faculties from dying, and throws a man upon the better principles of his nature. Perhaps I owe it to a wayward spirit, but, to me, there is sometimes enjoyment in an adverse wind.”³⁸

It is not surprising, under these circumstances, that the member of Balthazar’s family who is affected most forcefully by the prejudice against them, Sigismund, is the one in whom Cooper is most deeply invested. When we first meet Sigismund, he is “singularly agitated” by the passengers’ efforts to keep Balthazar from boarding their ship, an agitation betrayed by the blood that “rushe[s] across his brow in a torrent that seemed to threaten a rupture of the starting vessels in which it so tumultuously flowed” (*H*, 13). Later, when he is granted the opportunity to propose to Adelheid, his lips are “convulsed” and “a cold perspiration [breaks] out, as by a dreadful inward working of the spirit” (*H*, 18). By means of such responses to “the obloquy that presse[s] upon [his] race” (*H*, 281), responses that recur throughout the novel, we are notified of the presence in Sigismund of what is, for Cooper, the essential feature of an intrinsically noble being: a habit of “self-estimation.” Living with “the full consciousness of what [he is] forever present to [his] thoughts” but refusing “to look at all [his] own merits through the medium of this debasement,” Sigismund is alternately wounded by an awareness of his condition and restored to psychic health by a vigorous refusal “to admit unworthiness” (*H*, 250). What makes this something other than “vulgar vanity” is that it does not lead to a desire to be “greater than [one’s] kind,” a “vicious longing” to “forget [one’s] origin and destiny, by wishing to be more than nature ever intended [one] should become” (*H*, 251, 183, 195). That desire, which cannot be realized without “debas[ing] others,” is, as Sigismund tells Adelheid, unnatural, the product of “artful combinations” that pervert “what should be sentiment and taste, into a narrow and vulgar prejudice” (*H*, 183, 196). Sigismund’s convulsive responses to the experience of being insulted are, from this perspective, not manifestations of vulgar vanity but spontaneous rejections of it. Taken together, they present us with an alternative to the effort to replace partiality with universalism: an effort to replace a partiality that is subtle, artificial, and invidious with one that is simple, natural, and autoreferential.

The name Cooper typically gives to the latter kind of partiality is “self-respect” (*H*, 251), a quality both indicated by and identified with certain physiological responses to insults. Such responses—“speaking between [one’s] teeth,” “cold perspiration,” “seem[ing] about to choke,” a “hot glow” (*H*, 251, 180, 285)—are, of course, inherently public; it is part of their nature to signify that the perimeter of selfhood has been threatened and to warn off the threatening agent. In Cooper’s work, however, the social dimension of those responses is almost always subordinated to the evocation of what it is like to have them. With a mind-boggling frequency, his most noble characters, both male and female, experience floods of passion that they rapidly dam up. In doing so, they may be said to notify those around them that they are responsible social agents, capable of restraining the forces that intermittently well up within them. But that is not what Cooper emphasizes at such moments. Instead, he portrays self-command as a force that is inseparable from the passions it temporarily puts down. Miantonimoh in *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* (1829) experiences a “fierce and uncontrollable burst of ferocious passion” but then “regain[s] his self-command” by means of “a surprising effort of will”;³⁹ George Washington, in an anecdote included in *Notions*, nearly surrenders to a “burst of mighty indignation” but then “recover[s] himself as if by magic” (*N*, 187). The exercise of self-command in such instances is not simply contingent on the surging it quells; it is as preternatural—as “surprising” and “magic”—as that surging. Both the arousal and the suppression of passion seem to belong, in a fundamental way, to the asocial, internal space from which they emerge. By quickly cloaking the expression of a violent passion, self-command may be said to gather that passion into the self experiencing it, simultaneously sustaining its stimulating effect and guarding the space in which it can be privately enjoyed.

This process is especially obvious in Sigismund’s interactions with Adelheid. Just before he reveals his identity to her, when his “evident and violent physical struggles” are too fearfully “announc[ing] [his] mental agony,” he sees that she is beginning to show signs of sharing that agony. By “a powerful effort,” he “so far master[s] his emotions as to regain a portion of his self-command” (*H*, 182). Five chapters later, after an agitating conversation about his sister, he once again succeeds in “regain[ing] the quiet and proud composure in which he appeared to take refuge against the consciousness of the blot that darkened his

hopes, frequently rendering life itself a burden nearly too heavy to be borne" (*H*, 252). In each of these cases, Sigismund does not merely keep his passions down; he keeps them in, out of circulation. There, in the interior space constituted by self-command, he exists apart from the blot and burden of his daily life, before being agitated once again by "moments of feeling so intense" that he is ready to "treat all of [his] species as common enemies" (*H*, 402). In such passages, the superego, which we ordinarily think of as the internal continuation of a punitive external authority, reappears before us as an entity that is, more profoundly, a double agent, in cahoots with the never entirely colonized unconscious. This is, as Leo Bersani has argued, exactly how the superego ought to be conceived, as a representation of external authority that is never identical with that authority.⁴⁰ It is, accordingly, capable of being used by the unconscious for other purposes, one of which is to elaborate and prolong anger against everything in external reality that limits the will. When Sigismund, in the throes of that anger, senses that he must "drill [his] expression" to prevent its escape (*H*, 304), his superego receives an infusion of unconscious energy, the product of a deep-seated aggression toward external reality, which it transmutes into an aggression toward the ego. Self-command of that kind is, to reverse Carl von Clausewitz's dictum, a continuation of war by other means.

Under these circumstances, it seems fair to say that the most compelling feature of the experience of passing for Cooper is the nearly continuous flow of libidinal energy it generates in self-respecting characters like Sigismund. The problem is that the tension responsible for that energy virtually clamors for release. If Cooper had obeyed the logic of his social-reform plot and married off his lower-caste hero and upper-caste heroine, he would have both heightened that tension and drained away the pleasure associated with it. As the future baron of a canton in which his family is despised, Sigismund would have been more vulnerable to insults and less capable of evading or transfiguring them, insofar as he would no longer be capable of retreating to the psychic refuge he had enjoyed as a passer. If Cooper had not united his hero and heroine, he would have alienated the vast majority of his readers—as a rule, he writes in an 1831 letter, "people will not read a tale that they know is to end in any thing but wedlock and a quantum of happiness" (*LJ*, 2:170)—and, in all likelihood, left himself dissatisfied as well. Ten years earlier, in *The Pioneers*, he had attempted to

solve a very similar compositional problem by having Oliver Edwards, the supposedly part-Indian lover of Elizabeth Temple, reveal himself to be Oliver Effingham, the entirely white son of one of her father's oldest friends. By disclosing that Sigismund is not only not "black," but the son of the doge of Genoa, Cooper seems to have been trying once again to give a favored character both the psychic sensation and the social reality of nobility. As in *The Pioneers*, however, the most he can do is provide that character with one of those sources of gratification while depriving him of the other.

It is telling, in this context, that Cooper delays until the next-to-last paragraph of the novel the moment when Sigismund is "legally placed in possession of his birthright" (*H*, 496). Before then, even though there is no longer any doubt that Sigismund is not the son of Balthazar and Marguerite, and even though we have been provided with abundant evidence that Sigismund is in fact Gaetano's son, Maso's insistence that *he* is Gaetano's son leaves the issue technically up in the air. As a result, Sigismund is still tied in some degree to his "stormy, unprofitable, and fruitless" former life, which, in spite of being "barren of all that is genial and consolatory," had "touches of grandeur" (*H*, 406). Twice in the final chapter, Cooper signals the persistence of Sigismund's connection to that life. When Sigismund enters the church where the wedding ceremony is to be performed, he is, the narrator tells us, "firm and self-possessed. Still his carriage was lofty and proud, as he felt that a cloud still hung over that portion of his history to which the world attached so much importance, and he had fallen back on his character and principles for support" (*H*, 486). The extraordinarily fine distinction between a "firm and self-possessed" attitude and a "lofty and proud" bearing emphasizes the latter aspect of Sigismund's appearance, indicating that there is, in spite of his apparently untroubled sense of legitimacy, something he still must make a heroic effort to raise himself above. In the interaction between Sigismund and Marguerite that follows the ceremony, that internal conflict is renewed, this time with the poles reversed. After formally taking Marguerite's hands into his own to kiss them, Sigismund's "grasp" becomes "convulsed . . . for just then the young man felt intensely the violence of severing those holy ties which, in his case, had perhaps something of a wild romance from their secret nature" (*H*, 489). What Sigismund is losing is not just the "touch of grandeur" that accompanies the struggle against white prejudice, but the "wild romance"

of having a secret black family—not just the opportunity to stand, grandly, for his race, but the opportunity to seek, thrillingly, the very same thing.

Hence the centrality of Maso in the final pages of the novel. After Balthazar and Marguerite have departed, Maso leads Gaetano, Melchior, Sigismund, Adelheid, and Christine, now Adelheid's maidservant, to a place where the road to Italy precipitously descends. Having been exonerated on the condition that he will tell the full truth of his origins, Maso becomes the fourth of the "passing" characters to be exposed in *The Headsman*. The stain, in his case, is bastardhood. "I am the son of poor Annunziata Altieri," he tells Gaetano, "who was once thought worthy to attract thy passing notice" (*H*, 495). Earlier in the novel, Maso had unexpectedly asked for Gaetano's blessing and then, after receiving it, "leaped down the declivity on which they stood, and vanished among the shadows of a copse" (*H*, 149). This time, however, he wants nothing. As soon as he has finished speaking, the focus shifts first to Sigismund and Adelheid, who are embracing one another, and then to Gaetano, who stands "with extended arms," crying for "the child of Annunziata" and declaring that he "will at least atone to him for the wrong done his mother!" "It was too late," the narrator writes. "The victim of another's fault had cast himself over the edge of the precipice with reckless hardihood, and he was already beyond the reach of the voice, in his swift descent, by a shorter but dangerous path, toward Aoste" (*H*, 495–96). Rather than seeking a reconciliation that will dissipate his painful feelings, Maso chooses to "smother" those feelings, thereby giving them, and preserving for himself, a special "intensity" (*H*, 161). In later years, we are told, Sigismund "made many generous but useless efforts to discover and to reclaim his brother." But with "a delicacy that could hardly be expected, the outlaw had withdrawn from a scene which he now felt to be unsuited to his habits, and he never permitted the veil to be withdrawn from the place of his retreat" (*H*, 496). Behind that veil, wherever he is, Maso is enjoying what Sigismund no longer can: an ecstasy of agony, generated by the interplay of a "feeling which harrow[s] his very soul" and the "force of an indomitable will" (*H*, 148, 147).



What might we take away from this strange, neglected novel? Although there is no reason to believe that it served as a template for any of the

works in the genre it surreptitiously founded, there is nevertheless a potentially instructive relationship between *The Headsman* and those later works. For the most part, as critics of passing novels have repeatedly observed, the psychic state of the passer appears to be anything but desirable.⁴¹ In Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), for instance, Clarence Garie is so sickened by his lying that "a slight stream of blood [spurts] from his mouth" when he is finally exposed, and in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Tom Driscoll develops "a hunted sense and a hunted look" and "fear[s] discovery all the time."⁴² Such passages have contributed to the popular belief that passing is tantamount to "psychological suicide" and that the central question in passing novels is whether or not the passer will ultimately "achieve a healthy identity" by putting "racial loyalty" ahead of privilege.⁴³ The moral of passing novels, from this perspective, is that transparency is preferable to secrecy, not just because it enables one to recognize and appreciate "the virtues of the black cultural experience," but because it enables one to escape from a soul-poisoning prison of perpetual lies.⁴⁴

There is, however, much more to be said about the psychic experience of people who systematically conceal information about their racial background. As *The Headsman* powerfully indicates, and as some later passing novels at least suggest, the experience can be strangely pleasurable, insofar as it gives one the feeling of having just barely managed to conceal something extraordinarily distinctive and significant about oneself. After transforming herself into the white Rowena Warwick and then returning to the condition of the black Rena Walden, the heroine of Charles Chesnutt's *The House behind the Cedars* (1900) is driven into herself by "painful memories of other and different scenes in which she had lately participated. Once or twice these memories were so vivid as almost to overpower her." Unable to be either "Miss Rowena Warwick" or "the Rena Walden who had left the house behind the cedars no more than a year and a half before," she becomes instead a radically singular being, always at least partially incompatible with her social context, like someone who has "lived in a foreign land long enough to lose the language of his childhood without acquiring fully that of his adopted country." Rather than being ostracized for that idiosyncrasy by the black residents of her hometown, she is respected for it, as if it is a mark of nobility, as if having "some secret chamber, sacred to [oneself]," is what elevates one above the "poor soul[s]" of the world. Although the resultant "physical and men-

tal strain” eventually becomes too much for her to bear, her experience of that strain is not presented to us as something to be avoided at all costs. It is, instead, presented to us as a sign of the “deeper note” that she is capable of striking emotionally, and the “greater intensity” with which she is capable of sustaining its inward resonance.⁴⁵

Something similar may be said of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912).⁴⁶ For most readers, there is something pathetic, if not pathological, about the internal vacillation of the novel’s phenotypically white protagonist, who repeatedly advances in the direction of an active identification with black people but always falls back. But instead of reading that vacillation as the sign of the absence of something else—willpower, say, or loyalty—we might read it as a source of pleasure in its own right, something that the narrator actively cultivates. Being “classed” with black people was, he tells us, like his “first spanking”: an experience that “in long years after” could be “called up in detail” and “lived through anew” (A, 15, 13). By retaining the emotional charge of such “tragedies” just as passionately as he retains the emotional charge of his first adolescent crush (A, 13), he enables himself to repeat in a not entirely painful way things that were extremely painful when they first occurred—to reprocess traumatic experiences, whether remote or recent, as structured dramatic events. This may help explain why, after learning of the virulence of racism in the South, he is overcome by a “strange” desire to visit it; why betting everything he has—opening himself to the prospect of disastrous loss—causes “a thrill of excitement” to go through his “whole body”; why, after seeing his father and half-sister seated next to him at a performance of *Faust*, he lingers there, allowing “the desolate loneliness of [his] position” to gather and intensify until he is filled with “an almost uncontrollable impulse to rise up and scream to the audience: ‘Here, here in your very midst, is a tragedy, a real tragedy!’” (A, 30, 69, 98). The specter of injury, racist or otherwise, gives him access to the same kind of feeling that animates his friend Shiny in the midst of a graduation address on Touissant L’Ouverture, causing his eyes to “[burn] with excitement” and his voice to “vibrat[e] in tones of appealing defiance” (A, 30, 31). Although the narrator never becomes the kind of person who could deliver such a speech, it is not because he repudiates his blackness; with only one exception, the scene in which he is humiliated by “wild, fixed stare” of a white woman to whom he has just confessed his racial identity,

he never feels “absolute regret at being colored,” never wishes to be “really white” (A, 149). It is because his blackness is so attractive to him as a symbol—as a seemingly inexhaustible emotional resource—that he cannot bear to surrender it to action.

In one of the best recent analyses of passing, Anne Anlin Cheng has argued that the tension in the racial passer between “whiteness” and “non-whiteness” is a culturally and historically specific inflection of the tension in every human being between subjectivity and “the objectness of human experience that subjectivity is designed to disguise.” It is “ethically imperative,” Cheng writes, to recognize the irreducibility of this tension, to “acknowledge that human relations are structured along that difference.”⁴⁷ One of the ways of putting my argument about *The Headsman* and at least some of its successors is to say that while they do encourage that acknowledgment, they do so on the basis of a pleasure principle, not an ethical imperative. For characters like Sigismund and the ex-colored man, “blackness” is—or appears to be—what we might call, borrowing a phrase from *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), “dark treasure.”⁴⁸ By drawing characters downward and inward, away from their socially affirmed projections of who they are, it gives them a sense of inward spaciousness, of containing within themselves the vast cultural gap between stigma and prestige. And just as Hawthorne cannot bring himself to say unequivocally that the moral of Dimmesdale’s story is “Be true!”—it is enough, he decides, to be sort of true, to “show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred”—so do some authors of passing novels betray an unwillingness to have their protagonists relinquish the thing they are concealing, the erotically saturated signifier of the objectness their subjectivity disguises.⁴⁹ “Without the contrast between grace and debasement,” writes Nancy Bentley, “there is no sexual agency or feeling worth bothering with.”⁵⁰ Without the contrast between prestige and stigma, Johnson indicates, there may be no racial agency or feeling worth bothering with either.

As that formulation should suggest, the real “treasure” in passing novels is not, in the end, blackness as such. It is instead the tension between whiteness and blackness, a pair of terms that must be understood in this context not as ontological realities but as the products of ascription. In a powerful reading of Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Samira Kawash draws on the work of the anthropologist Fredrik Barth to suggest that “ascription and self-ascription

[are] the most important factors in defining and maintaining an ethnic group.” By emphasizing the “primacy of the role of ascription,” Kawash writes, we shift the “critical focus from the ‘cultural stuff’ (forms, values, and institutions) to the boundary that defines the group. . . . Difference thus refers not to some reality (which then serves as a basis for making determinations of authenticity) but to positionality.”⁵¹ That difference is only enjoyable, however, when it is mapped onto a culturally significant opposition. The value of the literary figure of the racial passer, from this perspective, is not that it deconstructs racial difference, but that it shifts the conflict generated by that difference to a space—the psyche of the passer—in which the subjective mastery of otherness would lead to a diminishment, even an extinction, of pleasure. Subjective mastery becomes, as a result, something one avoids not because it would be wrong but because it would feel bad. In the case of Chesnutt’s heroine, a total identification with either whiteness or blackness would cost her the “deeper note” that the tension between her potential identifications enables her to strike. She ultimately chooses, accordingly, to become an agent of racial uplift, a schoolteacher mediating the relationship between black children and white-identified achievements. Rather than erasing the difference between whiteness and blackness—rather than pointing toward a postracial identity—she enacts an oscillatory racial identification that is driven by the pursuit of pleasure.

What I am gesturing toward here is less a DuBoisian double consciousness than a kind of middle consciousness, in which one’s identity is structured not by a clashing of forces—“two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”—but by a vibration between poles.⁵² In this peculiar state of being, one is neither black-identified nor white-identified; one is, instead, suspended between those two points of identification. Although *The Headsman* does not clearly articulate the logic of this style of identification, it does, thanks to the collapse of its ethical aims, point us in its direction. It might be said, with this in mind, that the greatest value of the novel is that it so spectacularly fails to become what it had set out to be. In their resistance to the prospect of full disclosure, Sigismund and Maso in particular model an attitude that would become, in at least some subsequent passing novels, a crucial if muted element of the protagonist’s psyche. It is an attitude that turns our attention from novelistic conclusions to novelistic middles—to

what Peter Brooks describes as the “‘dilatory space’ . . . which we work through toward what is felt to be, in classical narrative, the revelation of meaning that occurs when the narrative sentence reaches full predication.”⁵³ It is not hard to see why that aspect of passing novels might be downplayed or overlooked at cultural-historical moments when the affirmation of racial solidarity and the open challenging of racial stigmatization are especially urgent needs. We may be at a point, however, when it is possible to read passing novels differently, to linger longer over the strange, addictive pleasures of passing—understood as an ongoing action, a holding-off of full predication—and to recognize the ways in which even the most truly painful forms of stigmatization can be eroticized, can turn us in on ourselves and give us differently back to the world. “All comparatively intense affective processes, including even terrifying ones, spill over into sexuality,” Freud writes in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).⁵⁴ Without justifying or glamorizing the infliction of stigmatic injury, we can honor, even celebrate, its transfiguration.

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Notes

- 1 James Fenimore Cooper, “Clark’s Naval History of the U.S.,” in *Early Critical Essays*, ed. James Franklin Beard (Gainesville, FL: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1955), 19.
- 2 Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, ed. James Franklin Beard (1841; reprint, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1987), 59; Cooper, *The Two Admirals*, ed. Donald A. Ringe, James A. Sappenfield, and E. N. Feltskog (1842; reprint, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1990), 65.
- 3 Cooper, *Afloat and Ashore* (1844; reprint, New York: Townsend, 1861), 496; *Two Admirals*, 65.
- 4 Cooper, *The Prairie*, ed. James P. Elliott (1827; reprint, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1983), 274.
- 5 Cooper, *The Heidenmauer* (New York: Townsend, 1861), 196; Cooper, *Miles Wallingford* (New York: Townsend, 1861), 246.
- 6 Cooper, *The Chainbearer* (1845; reprint, New York: Townsend, 1860), 33; Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, ed. James Franklin Beard (1826; reprint, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1983), 159.
- 7 Cooper, *The Oak-Openings* (1848; reprint, New York: Townsend, 1861), 435; Cooper to Charles Gardner, 24 April 1823, in *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. James Franklin Beard, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960–68), 1:96; hereafter abbreviated as *LJ*.

- 8 Cooper, *The Chainbearer*, 123; Cooper, *The Headsman* (New York: Townsend, 1859), 195–96 (hereafter abbreviated as *H*).
- 9 Cooper, *Gleanings in Europe: The Rhine*, ed. Ernst Redekop and Maurice Geracht (1836; reprint, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1986), 326.
- 10 Cooper, *Gleanings in Europe: Switzerland*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and James F. Beard (1836; reprint, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1980), 30.
- 11 Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy* (1892; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 212, 72.
- 12 Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 2002), 80, 91.
- 13 Harold T. McCarthy, *The Expatriate Perspective: American Novelists and the Idea of America* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1974), 38, 39, 40, 45.
- 14 Cooper, *The Heidenmauer*, 326.
- 15 M. Giulia Fabi, *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2001), 43; Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., “Introduction: The Politics of Passing,” in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1996), 4.
- 16 It was, of course, not unusual for an early nineteenth-century writer to apply the word *race* to a wide range of social types, including those defined by family or occupation. What *is* unusual here is the frequency of that application—which has no parallel in any of Cooper’s other works—and the intensely pejorative quality of the semantic field in which it occurs. Ordinarily, when *race* was used as a synonym for *family*, it evoked the distinction of an aristocratic lineage rather than marginality and dis-possession. Here, however, because it is so insistently associated with words like “accursed,” “calamity,” “humiliated,” “revolting,” “obloquy,” “scorn,” “curse,” “proscribed,” “humbled,” “despised,” “condemned,” and “un-nurtured,” its negative connotations are dominant.
- 17 Cooper, *Notions of the Americans*, ed. Gary Williams (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1991), vii; further references are to this edition and will be abbreviated as *N*.
- 18 Cooper, *Wyandotté*, ed. Thomas and Marianne Philbrick (1843; reprint, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1982), 175; Cooper, *Afloat and Ashore*, 532–33.
- 19 Cooper, *The American Democrat* (Cooperstown, NY: Phinney, 1838), 175–76.
- 20 Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 23.
- 21 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Life of Franklin Pierce* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852), 417.
- 22 Cooper, *Precaution* (1820; reprint, New York: Townsend, 1861), 216.
- 23 Cooper, review of Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *A New England Tale*, in *Early Critical Essays*, 99.
- 24 For a discussion of Cooper’s relationship to the revolutions of the early

- 1820s, see my *Whipscars and Tattoos*: “*The Last of the Mohicans*,” “*Moby-Dick*,” and *the Maori* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).
- 25 “Slavery in the United States” appeared (in French) in the *Revue Encyclopédique*, (April 1827), 239–43, I am quoting from Cooper’s manuscript of the essay, which is reproduced in Robert Spiller, “Fenimore Cooper’s Defense of Slave-Owning America” (*American Historical Review* 35 [April 1930]): 575–82.
- 26 Cooper, *Gleanings in Europe: Italy*, ed. John Conron and Constance Ayers Denne (1838; Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1981), 254–55.
- 27 In “Slavery in the United States,” Cooper writes that “public opinion, by which everything must be moved in the United States, has already made great progress in the important states of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina” (Spiller, “Cooper’s Defense,” 579). A year later, in *Notions*, the bachelor declares that “liberal sentiments towards the blacks are rapidly gaining ground in most of the Southern states.” That “does not mean,” he hastens to add, “that every man becomes in some degree sensible of the evil.” Nevertheless, “a vast number do,” and they are the ones “who are likely to have an effect on legislation” (N, 480–81).
- 28 Cooper, 1832 preface to *Lionel Lincoln*, ed. Donald A. Ringe and Lucy B. Ringe (1825; rev. ed., Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1985), 6.
- 29 Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832; reprint, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 10, 59.
- 30 Reviews of *The Headsman* in *New England Magazine* (January 1834), 88; *American Monthly Magazine* (November 1833), 193; *North American Magazine* (November 1833), 71; and *Metropolitan Magazine* (October 1833), 410.
- 31 Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 10.
- 32 Spiller, “Cooper’s Defense,” 581–82.
- 33 Cooper, *Switzerland*, 3; *Headsman*, iv.
- 34 Cooper, *The Wing-and-Wing* (1842; reprint, New York: Townsend, 1860), 65.
- 35 Cooper, *Switzerland*, 9. The other allusions to the supposed European ignorance of the fact “that the great modern Republic is peopled by men of a European origin, and possessing white skins” (*Wing-and-Wing*, 65) may be found in *The Pilot* (12), *Notions of the Americans* (5), *Gleanings in Europe: Italy* (33, 255), and *The Rhine* (101, 216).
- 36 Cooper, “No Steamboats—A Vision,” *American Ladies’ Magazine*, February 1834, 74. The tale originally appeared under the title “Point de Bateaux à Vapeur—Une Vision” in *Paris, ou le Livre des Cent-en-Un* 9 (1832): 221–50.
- 37 Cooper, *Switzerland*, 228; *The Rhine*, 196.
- 38 Cooper, *The Red Rover*, ed. Thomas and Marianne Philbrick (1827; reprint, Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1991), 296.
- 39 Cooper, *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* (1829; reprint, New York: Townsend, 1861), 180.

- 40 Leo Bersani, "Can Sex Make Us Happy?" *Raritan* 21 (spring 2002): 25–27.
- 41 Michael Awkward, for example, argues that "passing for white ultimately is unsatisfying because of the psychic impossibility of ignoring black biological imperatives and cultural connections" (*Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995], 181). To Mary Helen Washington, passing is an "obscene form of salvation" because it requires "the woman who passes . . . to deny everything about her past" (*Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860–1960* [New York: Doubleday, 1987], 164).
- 42 Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857; reprint, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), 347; Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 119.
- 43 Cheryl Wall, "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels," *Black American Literature Forum* 20 (spring-summer 1986): 98; Judith Berzon, *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1979), 149; Pier Gabrielle Foreman, "Who's Your Mama? 'White' Mulatta Genealogies, Early Photography, and Anti-Passing Narratives of Slavery and Freedom," *American Literary History* 14 (autumn 2002): 524.
- 44 Deborah McDowell, "The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), 92.
- 45 Charles Chesnutt, *The House behind the Cedars* (1900; reprint, New York: Random House, 2003), 148, 56, 174, 56.
- 46 James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1990); hereafter abbreviated as *A*.
- 47 Anne Anlin Cheng, "Passing, Natural Selection, and Love's Failure: Ethics of Survival from Chang-rae Lee to Jacques Lacan," *American Literary History* 17 (autumn 2005): 569, 572, 569.
- 48 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; reprint, New York: Penguin, 2003), 122.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 224.
- 50 Nancy Bentley, "The Strange Career of Love and Slavery: Chesnutt, Engels, Masoch," *American Literary History* 17 (autumn 2005): 478.
- 51 Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), 149.
- 52 W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1989), 5.
- 53 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 18.
- 54 The translation, which I am using for the sake of its compactness and energy, is from Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), 37.