Introduction

Contact and Truth

Antebellum American literature voices a passionate yearning for genuine human contact. Authors and characters are frustrated that social encounters feel unreal, and frequently, they focus their frustration on fake personae. "I like a look of Agony/Because I know it's true –," Emily Dickinson rather cruelly wrote (P339). "Men do not sham convulsion/nor simulate a throe." People habitually simulate; they present "sham" images of self to the world, so that one never knows what they really feel and think. How gratifying agony is, in that it forces people to present something true to the world. Similarly, in *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab yearns to "strike through the mask" separating him from ultimate reality (178). That mask is the world of appearance that conceals the world of truth, and his approach to contacting it takes a violent form. In "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman declares he is "mad" for "contact," and he goes to the riverbank where he becomes "undisguised and naked" (189). He sternly commands the reader to do likewise: "Undrape! you are not guilty to me," he writes, threatening to wrest a look at the hidden interior if it is not volunteered: "I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no" (195). People disguise themselves, and human contact requires getting past their disguises to true interiors. Hawthorne seems to sum it up in *The Scarlet Letter*: "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!" (260) All of these examples depict social persons as deceptions – shams, masks, veils, costumes, disguises, and prejudices – that conceal who people really are. The authors' fervent desires for human contact always seem obstructed by intervening masks.

Approaching social performances with hostility, as these passages do, is characteristic of Romantic thought in general. Romanticism tends to suggest that "at the core of being there is an authentic self that is pure in

nature, although corruptible by society" (Rifkin 361). Romantics focus their quests for human contact on striking through or peeling away the social artifices concealing it. Literary works like Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Rousseau's *Emile, or the Education*, Schiller's *Don Carlos*, Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and Shelley's *Frankenstein* exemplify this motif of hostility toward social artifices that obstruct human contact. In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, for example, Goethe's Werther asks incredulously, "What beings are men, whose whole thoughts are occupied with form and ceremony […] I see the little puppets move, and I ask whether it is not an optical illusion. I am amused with these puppets, or, rather, I am myself one of them: but, when I sometimes grasp my neighbour's hand, I feel that it is not natural; and I withdraw mine with a shudder."[1] Werther's words epitomize the Romantic desire for authentic contact and the Romantic conviction that if people would behave naturally, following their inner inclinations rather than reciting scripted lines, they would spontaneously present their authentic selves to one another – they would contact one another. American authors of the Romantic era express this conviction with equal fervor. In "Self-Reliance," for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes: "let us enter into the state of war, and wake Thor and Woden, courage and constancy, in our Saxon breasts. This is to be done in our smooth times by speaking the truth. Check this lying hospitality and lying affection. Live no longer to the expectation of these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse. Say to them, O father, O mother, O wife, O brother, O friend, I have lived with you after appearances hitherto. Henceforward I am the truth's" (CW:II, 41–42). He stresses unmasking: "I will not hide my tastes or aversions" (42). People habitually offer up appearances that meet others' expectations, creating "smooth times," but nothing natural, nothing with the rough abrasiveness of genuine human contact. Refusing to hide one's true tastes and aversions is a cornerstone of human contact in Transcendentalist literature.

American authors writing in the 1850s and early 1860s internalized such assumptions during their developmental years. However, as they imagine human contact on their own terms, they come to suspect that unmasking might not be the best way to pursue human contact. Increasingly, the ideal of an authentic or natural self on the other side of a social mask comes to seem more like a problem than a solution to the challenge of human contact. For one thing, these authors observe, the ideal has violent implications, as Melville demonstrates in the case of Ahab's desire to strike through the mask. For another thing, the ideal misunderstands selfhood by falsely implying the existence of an essential self in need of excavation.

Antebellum literature tends to represent selves as infinite beings creating themselves through contingencies, personae, and performances. If selves are not stable things but dynamic beings caught between the infiniteness of their nature and the finitude of persons, then facades and performances cannot simply be understood as artifices covering up an authentic self. Rather, they are the materials at hand for the task of self-creation. Thus, while it is true that Dickinson voices a conventionally Romantic hostility toward shams and simulations in "I like a look of Agony," in many other poems, especially later poems, she argues against such violent approaches to human contact, advocating instead something like sympathy, the "Sweet skepticism of the Heart –/That knows – and does not know –" (P1438). Sympathy of the sweet skeptical variety is a path to human contact not because it works as some kind of affective technology of truth ("I know it's true"), but as an attitude that accepts the heart's unknowing knowing, that approaches the other with wonder, care, and imagination.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Emily Dickinson all explore the conviction that there is no authentic self on the other side of a mask. They do not therefore conclude that there is no such thing as human contact, though. Instead, each one comes to propose a different way of thinking about human contact, conceiving it not as an epistemological experience ("I know it's true"), but as an affective one. In other words, contact with other people, whatever it is, is not a result of true knowledge but of genuine feeling. They explore what kinds of feelings engender human contact, sharing a general sense that it involves a heightened awareness of a person as an infinite being seeking to create him or herself through the narrow channels of a finite social persona. They depict sympathy as a good means of experiencing that awareness. By sympathy, they mean something like the "Sweet skepticism of the Heart/That knows – and does not know –" (P1438). Their reconceived understanding of sympathy foregrounds a benevolent not-knowing: it is "sweet" because it involves caring about the other as an end in his or her own right, and it is "skepticism" because it views masks as not simply true. One who sympathizes knows she does not know the other truly, but she does genuinely care for that other. Skepticism *is* sweet; sympathy *is* skeptical. That combination of caring non-knowing is the central quality of sympathetic human contact in these antebellum works.

This book challenges the sympathy-fatigue that has come to typify recent American literary scholarship. It questions the implication that antebellum sympathy did more harm than good and that the causes of justice and philosophy are better served by dispassionate forms of thought.[2]

Sympathy is more complex than the first few pages of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the last few pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Focusing on these iconic passages has generated a misunderstanding of sympathy that occludes the complex and surprising explorations of sympathy in literature of the 1850s and 1860s. I restore these to view, arguing that we need to look to second and third books, books like *Dred* and *The Minister's Wooing, The House of the Seven Gables*, and *My Bondage and My Freedom.* In these later works, the authors reverse and refine their own earlier misconceptions of sympathy and human contact in ways that surprisingly yet decisively anticipate our own emphases on difference, embodied subjectivity, and anti-essentialism. These later and less famous works suggest in various ways that sympathy affirms another's infinite individuality. This collective affirmation represents a valuable and underappreciated contribution to the ongoing philosophical discourses of sympathy and human contact of their day. If we can grasp their thinking, it might also alleviate our own poststructuralist nihilism about the value of any concept that we might want to call human contact.

Sympathy and Epistemology

In describing a form of sympathy that is best understood as a benevolent skepticism, this book diverges from a scholarly trend to view sympathy as an affective epistemology, one of dubious value. The common theory goes like this: a person who sympathizes seeks a true understanding of another by affective means, by substituting his or her own experience for that of another. The problem is that in doing so, the sympathizer necessarily negates the difference of the other, replacing it with a false and normative sameness. Thus, the knowledge and connection that sympathy affords is false, forged at the price of the other's individuality. Lloyd Pratt summarizes this "familiar critique of sympathy": "In seeking to bridge an unbridgeable gulf of experience, the reader narcissistically substitutes him- or herself" for the other, who "undergoes a form of politically charged erasure."[3]

The claim that sympathy erases difference is perhaps most influentially developed in Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality*, one of the most important, brilliant, yet also flawed of such critiques of sympathy. Berlant criticizes the antebellum sentimental "culture of true feeling" for siphoning energy away from political engagement and channeling it toward tender feelings. She depicts sentimental women who empathize with others and in doing so enjoy the compensation of affective union. There are two problems with their

empathy, according to Berlant. First, it is quietist, since these women accept the ideological truism that their feelings are of greater value than any political action they might take. Second, it is normative, since to achieve it the sympathizer shunts into the background all of the differences that threaten the all-important feeling of union. Because "autoerasure constitutes the dream-work of sentiment," sympathy does not enable the reader to understand the other truly, and it thus sustains a hegemonic norm, even as it laments that norm (22).

But is this necessarily true of sympathy? Is sympathy by its very nature a transcendent union mediated by universal human feelings that is predicated on ignoring differences? To be sure, some sentimental literature does idealize affective universality, and this commitment may well be the defining feature of sentimentalism, if that is how one chooses to define the genre, as Berlant does. But is it true of sympathy per se? Stephen Darwall does not think so. He defines sympathy as a feeling for another that "involves concern for him, thus for his well-being, for his sake" (261). The focus is on the other's independent value and is antithetical to erasure. Antebellum authors increasingly approach it in just this way. Like Berlant, they doubt the reliability of affective universals and question the ethics of unions grounded in them, yet nonetheless they champion sympathy. While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does feature "autoerasure" (for example, when Stowe instructs readers to understand Eliza's anguish by recalling their own bereavements), in *Dred*, she explicitly rejects her own prior misconception of sympathy: "We have been accustomed, even those of us who feel most, to look on the arguments for and against the system of slavery with the eyes of those who are at ease. […] We shall never have all the materials for absolute truth on this subject, till we take into account, with our own views and reasonings, the views and reasonings of those who have bowed down to the yoke, and felt the iron enter into their souls" (213). One could read this quotation as a rejection of sympathy, but Stowe's complex analyses of sympathy in *Dred* and *The Minister's Wooing* reveal this is not the case. She stresses that sympathy itself must take account of difference and must not seek to transcend persons in search of universals. We don't know the other's experience or thought, and sympathy must start there, not try to overleap difference. Frederick Douglass depicts a white man who tries to put himself into the shoes of a black man but, rather than feeling that he knows the other perfectly, the sympathizer discovers difference: "to him those distant church bells have no grateful music" (9). His empathic identification exposes different experiences for blacks and whites within the common culture and the contingency of what had

seemed to be a stable repertoire of universal meanings.[4] Douglass encourages acts of affective identification not because they forge universal bonds but because they illuminate cultural difference with a visceral shock. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Holgrave urges Phoebe to use sympathy to fathom her cousin Clifford's true self, but Phoebe challenges his illusions about sympathy: "I cannot see his thoughts! – How should I?" She then models true sympathy: "I feel it to be not quite right to look closely into his moods," adding, "It is holy ground where the shadow falls!" (127) Hawthorne explicitly rejects sympathy as an affective epistemology but nonetheless upholds sympathy as the cornerstone of human contact. In this case, Phoebe's feeling of caring discretion for her cousin's privacy is itself sympathetic contact because it acknowledges Clifford's sacred difference and defends his private infinitude.

Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, and Dickinson all grapple with the notion that to contact another is to know her truly, only to conclude that true knowledge is a red herring. This misprision, each one shows, leads to various degrees of confusion, mental contortions, and anxiety. Hawthorne, for example, conjures up deceitful characters whose blatant mendacity seems to frame the issue of human contact as a simple matter of unmasking, of revealing the true self hidden by false masks. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Judge Pyncheon smiles benevolently yet is in fact a "subtile, worldly, selfish, iron-hearted hypocrite" (199). Yet knowing these true facts about Judge Pyncheon's character is not what it means to contact him; Hawthorne determines that unmasking is not human contact. Hawthorne emphasizes instead that contact is a feeling of reverence for "the sanctity of a human heart," a matter of feeling rather than knowing (*Scarlet Letter* 195). In failing to protect the feelings and lives of those around them, villains like Pyncheon, Chillingworth, and Hollingsworth diminish their own humanity, depriving themselves of the possibility of human contact.

These authors understand sympathy as a feeling of care for the other for the other's sake, rather than a method of discovering truth; nonetheless, care does frequently dovetail with a desire for greater understanding. To care about the fullness of another's being involves affirming a person's full self, including secrets. This is a corollary that can make the question of truth-in-contact confusing. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Boston society sees Hester only as an adulteress, and to care about her is to affirm the vast terrain of her feelings and thoughts outside the authorized parameters of her public subjectivity. "Hester," Arthur Dimmesdale asks seven years after their affair, "hast thou found peace?" inquiring about dimensions of Hester's being hidden by her public persona (190). Whatever contact the ensuing

private moment between them creates inheres not in finally knowing one anothers' "true" feelings, though, but in their sympathetic commitment to the moreness of one anothers' being. Dimmesdale contacts Hester by acknowledging that she is a complex being whose infiniteness is channeled through the contingency of her social persona. That is to say, the feeling of contact in this moment inheres in Dimmesdale's benevolent skepticism toward Hester's adulteress persona or mother persona or nurse persona. Benevolently, Dimmesdale affirms Hester's experience of herself as an end, not a means; skeptically, he acknowledges the limits of public personae to present the plenitude of her infinite being. Such sympathy might seem epistemological rather than affective in nature since Dimmesdale explicitly requests secret information. This is a conjunction that seems to confuse Hawthorne himself. Hawthorne's eventual conclusions about sympathy come into focus in *The House of the Seven Gables*; they are all present in *The Scarlet Letter*, but in a jumble. It is in the second novel that he disentangles sympathy from truth, suggesting that no amount of "true things" disclosed about a person will end in true knowledge; only affirming the independent and infinite individuality to which each fact indirectly attests will engender the feeling of human contact.

Sympathetic interest in the other's plenipotentiary nature does in fact take the form of various efforts to understand the other. Sympathy can take the form of a direct request for information. In *The Heroic Slave*, a white man asks an escaped slave:

> If it does not weary you too much, do tell us something of your journeyings […] we are deeply interested in everything which can throw light on the hardships of persons escaping from slavery; we could hear you talk all night; are there no incidents that you could relate of your travels hither? or are they such that you do not like to mention them? (18)

These sympathetic listeners solicit and listen closely to new information about the true experiences of enslaved human beings, an inquiry that is explicitly noninvasive and tactful.

Sympathetic forms of understanding can also take the form of listening between the lines. In *The Minister's Wooing*, when Mary Scudder says she loves her wooer, Virginie says:

> Oh, Marie! you may love him well, but you and I both know that there is something deeper than that. (845)

Here, Virginie's sympathy is grounded in identification and involves intuiting a wider array of feelings than Mary's spoken words indicate.

Sympathy can also take the form of actively imagining oneself in another's situation and feeling what one would feel oneself. In *The Minister's Wooing*, Virginie tries to explain to Mary her love for an immoral man by inviting identification:

> think how it would have been with you, if you had found that [your own beloved] was not what you thought. (809)

Identification helps Mary understand Virginie by prompting her to recall real human feelings rather than think about love affairs abstractly. This is the form of sympathy that risks autoerasure, but this result is not inevitable, and in this case, identification opens possibilities for disrupting conventional beliefs with phenomenological awareness.

Sympathy can also promote other-understanding when two people feel and think the same about things by virtue of like-mindedness. Dickinson writes:

> All choice spirits however distant are ours, ours theirs; there is a thrill of sympathy – a circulation of mutuality. (L34)

Here, sympathy implies an exclusive circle of people who understand one another because they seem to share a body – sameness circulates through their common bloodstream, as it were. This is sympathy imagined as consanguinity.

Finally, sympathy in these works can afford knowledge by means of an attunement verging on a sixth sense. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne writes:

> Chillingworth, too, had perceptions that were almost intuitive; and when the minister threw his startled eyes towards him, there the physician sat; his kind, watchful, sympathising, but never intrusive friend. (130)

Chillingworth intuits Dimmesdale's feelings by means of a quiet attunement. However, while his intuitive knowledge springs from a kind of sympathy, the word "sympathising" in this quotation is ironic: Chillingworth does not *truly* sympathize, even if he does have keen intuitive understanding, because he does not truly care about Dimmesdale's sacred individuality. Hawthorne is trying to figure out what sympathy *is*. He concludes, as Douglass, Stowe, and Dickinson also come to conclude, that the essential component of sympathy is a feeling of care about the other as an end in his or her own right, which may prompt inquiries into secret recesses but which always calls for tactful noninvasiveness.

Scholars have rightly stressed the ethical limitations of sympathetic forms of knowledge but have not sufficiently acknowledged that antebellum authors

came to stress these ethical limits themselves, particularly in their second and third books. As the ideology of a national union cemented by sympathy came increasingly under pressure in the 1850s, authors acknowledged the limits of sympathy and refined their understanding of its meaning and value. In ironically calling Chillingworth's attitude "sympathising," Hawthorne is not rejecting sympathy but to the contrary affirming sympathy as a value of central importance, yet this value quite blatantly does not inhere in its role as an affective epistemology. Rather, he is championing sympathy as a benevolent feeling toward another's individuality that *refuses* unwarranted knowledge of interiors. In this respect, Hawthorne challenges widespread understandings of sympathy, both in his own day and ours. The others also revised their own definitions of sympathy. Stowe and Douglass, for example, both turned away from their own initial understanding of sympathy as an act of identification that transcends identity constructs. Before writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe believes she understands the pain slave mothers experience by associating it with the pain she herself experienced when her son Charley died of cholera. In 1856, however, she stresses that no degree of feeling can transcend the differences of subjectivity and that true sympathy is keenly attuned to that fact. In his 1845 *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Frederick Douglass suggests that identification with black suffering enables white readers to feel the injustice of slavery. However, in his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he promotes white identification with an essentially unknowable other. In 1850, Dickinson depicts sympathy as a likeness of orientation and character that enables two people to understand one another perfectly; in late 1863, by contrast, she describes "a wiser sympathy" that takes the form of sensitivity to another's unfathomability as it is channeled into that other's particular situation (P780). In each of these cases, it might seem that the author is rejecting sympathy, but this is not the case. Rather, they are conceiving "wiser" forms of it.

Because antebellum sympathy does not consistently erase differences as part of an epistemological aim, we cannot simply reject it as one more hegemonic discourse masquerading as universality.[5] Recent critiques of antebellum sympathy focus excessively and misleadingly on the first pages of Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, accepting them as the definitive statement on antebellum sympathetic thought:

> By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation […] enter as it were into his body, and become, in some measure the same person with him […]. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. (3–4)

Critics are right that this image of a seamless flow into another body on the wings of a universal agony is a fantasy of transcendent contact that is necessarily distorted by the starting point of the sympathizer's imagination of the other's suffering. However, scholars under-attend to the lines preceding these, in which Smith bluntly asserts, "our senses will never inform us of what [another] suffers":

> it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. (3)

Smith knows that identification distorts understanding, presenting to one only what one's own senses would present in a given situation. He does not dwell upon what gets lost in translation, it is true, but other contributors to the conversation did. They read Smith, and they engaged with him critically and thoughtfully.

Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, and Dickinson – writing a hundred years after Adam Smith after all – interrogate the epistemological and ethical limits of identification. When Emily Dickinson writes, "I measure every Grief I meet/With narrow, probing, eyes –" and goes on to doubt whether anyone else's suffering feels like her own, she approaches the notion of affective universality with as much skepticism as a twenty-first century literary scholar (P550). That said, she finds the imaginative effort worthwhile. "I wonder [...] I wonder [...] I wonder" she says again and again, attending with care and curiosity to the singularity of the other's experience. She depicts empathic wonder as a means to an ethical not-knowing and explicitly abjures knowledge based on erasure. Her approach to sympathy as a benevolent non-knowing grounded in feeling into the other's life is particularly evident in the following lines:

> How many times these low feet staggered –
> Only the soldered mouth can tell –
> Try – can you stir the awful rivet –
> Try – can you lift the hasps of steel!
> Stroke the cool forehead – hot so often –
> Lift – if you care the listless hair

Dickinson invites sensory identification with this dead housewife, encouraging the reader to imagine how he would feel with a "soldered mouth"