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***Throes, Pangs and Latent Homosexuality:  
A Moony Ride under a Wild Moon in a  
Literary Fantasy by Nathaniel Parker Willis  
(1806-1867)***

First published in the November 1834 issue of the *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, "The Lunatic's Skate"<sup>1</sup> written by its editor, Nathaniel Parker Willis,<sup>2</sup> relates the anguish of a young man, Larry Wynn, tortured by an irrepressible idiosyncrasy which urges him to go out and run throughout the countryside to the point of exhaustion by the nights of full moon. Passing over this dreadful handicap, he resolves to get married but on his wedding night, he yields to the old uncontrollable impulse and goes to skate in the wintry freezing moonlight instead of sharing the bride's bed. He then finds a most unearthly solitary end in the dead of night, worn out by efforts beyond human endurance and frozen by the icy wind, despite his best friend's warnings and desperate attempts to rescue him. No explanation is given for the skater's strange behavior, and his symptom remains without any kind of consistent interpretation, so that the reader finally concludes, influenced by the narrator, that it was probably the harbinger of an amazing "impending madness" (LS 213).

Willis's 1834 narrative was in fact no novelty as the prototype of the plot had already appeared in a lesser known short fiction by the

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<sup>1</sup> Republished in *Inklings of Adventure*, n° III of "Scenes of Fear," vol. I, New York: Saunders & Otley, 1836, 208-22. All further references are to that edition and labeled (LS).

<sup>2</sup> Willis was the former editor of *The Legendary* (1828) and of *The Token* (1829) and the editor of *The American Monthly Magazine*.<sup>2</sup> The magazine was published in Boston by Pierce & Williams from April 1829 to March 1831, and from April to July 1831 by Willis himself. Its pages contained essays, fiction, criticism and poetry often written by its editor. Among the contributors were the historians John Lathrop Motley and Richard Hildreth, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, and Albert Pike. Due to financial difficulties, the magazine was absorbed by George Pope Morris's *New York Mirror* in August 1831. Willis also published *Fugitive Poetry* (1829); collections of travel sketches: *Inklings of Adventure* (1836), *Loiterings of Travel and American Scenery* (1840); and plays: *Bianca Visconti; or, The Heart Overtasked* (1837) and *Tortosa; or, The Usurer* (1839).

same author, published under the title of “Incidents in the Life of a Quiet Man”,<sup>3</sup> in an 1830 issue of *The American Monthly Magazine*. In this story, the author narrates the pangs of a male nurse confronted to unnatural frightening behaviors in three sketches, apparently loosely connected to each other, the last one introducing the insane skater and his wild rides in the moonshine.

Philip, Larry’s best friend, is the narrator of the two fictions, and if little is said about his personality in the second story, the first one provides the reader with significant details about his former life, which may be useful to identify the pathogenic combination of elements which condition the two successive accounts of the lunatic’s irrational behavior. Accordingly, before we turn to Larry himself, let us emphasize that in his youth, Philip suffered from a strange form of claustrophobia which manifested itself both by his “very decided aversion . . . for the smell of a sick room” and by his excessive attraction for the great outdoors: “I loved the open air with an eccentric affection [which] gave me a thrill like a release from imprisonment” (*ILQM* 242). However, his reluctance to be confined, first associated with sickness, soon gives way to its very opposite after he was obliged to nurse his best friend for a whole month in his own room while they were college boys, “administering all his medicines, and watching with him, and performing for him the thousand kind offices which the sick demand” so that “one by one, [he] insensibly overcame [his] aversions” (*ibid.*).

Not so surprisingly, when Larry eventually recovers, his nurse is nostalgic for the previous weeks instead of feeling relieved, as he “wishes, him back again, making the same nervous complaints, and calling upon [him] for the same recurring services, and querulously refusing every other watcher” (*ibid.*). This is apparently at the origin of a no less symptomatic behavior, which the narrator confesses to be “an unhealthy passion” for the sufferings of others, which generates a special “excitement . . . which feeds in him a spring of curiosity” (*ILQM* 242-43). From then on, nursing comes to take an almost ontological

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<sup>3</sup> « Incidents in the Life of a Quiet Man », *The American Monthly Magazine*, October 1830, n° VII, vol. II, reproduced in *Twenty-Three Unlikely Stories published in The American Monthly Magazine (Boston: 1829-1831; New York: 1833-1838)*, *Alizés* n° 27, Université de La Réunion, June 2006, 242-50. All references are to that edition and appear as (*ILQM*).

dimension for Philip as it provides him with deep knowledge of the nursed that is both literally *essential* and beyond discussion:

Men are nowhere without disguise but in a sick room. The character is nowhere else so tried, the weaknesses so uncovered, the fine godlike under-traits, which it is the way of the world to cover and keep down—disinterestedness (sic) and courage, and patience—nowhere else so irresistibly developed. I could never be deceived in a man I had nursed in sickness. (*ILQM* 243)

This uncommon certitude—and incomparable closeness—is enlightening as to the unconscious meaning of the original symptom of the narrator which can legitimately be seen as the outcome of a mechanism of defense against the constraints and dangers brought by the new addiction: for nursing, according to Philip's own words, induces a most demanding bond between the nurse and the sick person, nourished by an exclusive "unhealthy passion" which leads the latter to "refusing every other watcher," while the former can "indulge such a passion to its extent [and] soon bec[o]me a *desirable* attendant" (*ILQM* 243, emphasis added). We realize now that claustrophobia, once associated with sickness, used to protect the narrator from unconscious *desirable* situations in which he could have indulged in excessive intimacy which might have put his own existence at risk, as dramatically illustrated by the first two "incidents" and with even more details by the third one. Once obliged, out of friendship, to confront the anxiety-provoking situation, the narrator eventually overcomes his phobia, thus yielding in fact to a long-repressed liking: he can then indulge in his passion without restraint, not unaware however of the dangers involved both by his "desirability" and the frequentation of "places where human nature is brought into extremity" (*ibid.*).

The study of the three incidents as related in the first short fiction reveals a few common features that may be helpful to better understand what these dangers—the probable causes of the original phobia—actually consist in. First, we note that the three of them occur after dark, and each time, the narrator is fascinated by the mystifying spectacle of the night. In the first section, he is captivated by "[t]he clear,

sparkling snow [that] lay like fairy-work over the beautiful common, and the trees, laden with the feathery crystals, [which] look[ ] like motionless phantoms in the moonlight" (*ILQM* 244). In the second one, "[t]here [i]s no moon, but the stars look[ ] near and bright, and the absolute silence and the sweet spiciness of the air combined with the solemnity of [his] vigil is giving the night almost a supernatural beauty" (*ILQM* 246). The third episode takes place during a night with a full moon; neither his friend or the narrator can sleep, and, as they go out skating, they are captured by "[t]he extreme polish of the ice [which] sen[ds] [them] forward with very slight exertion at great speed, . . . as if [they] shot over the long shadows from the shore with a superhuman swiftness" (*ILQM* 249). "Fairy work," "motionless phantoms," "supernatural," "superhuman," the vocabulary used by the author belongs to the supernatural field, giving the atmosphere a dreamlike quality reinforced by the fact that they occur at night.<sup>4</sup>

The oneiric nature of the three episodes is further strengthened by the fact that they seem to be unknown to any other person. When he feels that he is about to be assaulted by the madman, Philip thinks of "shouting for assistance, but even if [he] had been heard by the sound sleepers in the rooms about [him], such noises are too common in college to excite anything but a curse on the rioter" (*ILQM* 244); after his noisy fight with the wild cat, he realizes that his "two fellow watchers, strangely enough, slept through it all" (*ILQM* 248); and the solitary interminable ride of the two skaters remains unnoticed, both in the prototype text and in the final version. But above all, what typifies these stories is no doubt violence and the apparent irrepressible blindness and meaninglessness in which it manifests itself. The madman looks as if "he was dreaming" and vain are the efforts of the protagonist to calm him down with "the steadiness of [his] gaze" (*ILQM* 244) as a hypnotist would do. Similarly, the necrophagous cat

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<sup>4</sup> They announce the somber universe of Edgar Allan Poe, in particular "The Black Cat" (1843) in which his protagonist hangs his favorite pet in a fit of neurotic violence. The wild madness affecting the sick man, the frenzied white cat, and the skater who acts like a sleepwalker echo both Poe's mystery texts and the novels of Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) in which mental imbalance serves as a pretext to explore the meanders of the human psyche.

“d[oes] not seem to be aware of [his] approach, and [he] ha[s] grasped her round the throat with both [his] hands before she t[akes] the least notice of [him]” (*ILQM* 248). In the same way, the two skaters’ nightly ride soon “assume[s] a wildness which [Philip] trie[s] in vain to shake off” (249) as his companion’s face appears to be “wild with a mysterious fear” (*ibid.*). In the second text, after the wedding ceremony, Larry “look[s] more like a demon possessed than a Christian man” (*LS* 216), while during the final ride, “every lineament of his expressive face [is] stamped with unutterable and awful horror” (*LS* 219). In fact, all these stories stage characters, whether they be human or animal, who are the preys of some inner irrepressible “wild” drives which make them uncontrollable, as if they were mad. Here again, the conjunction of madness, night and irrationality call to mind the domain of dreams and the unconscious, so that we are tempted to interpret the stories as the reports of successive dreams made by an unquestionably neurotic narrator around whom each scenario is centered, like in any oneiric production.

Now we still have to identify which kinds of desires or feelings are strong enough to bring about such outbursts of violence. The obviously unconscious essence of the answer incites us to follow roundabout ways before a suitable answer can be proposed. In the first two episodes, Philip appears successively as the innocent victim of a murderer subject to “a periodical madness” (*ILQM* 243) and of an exceptionally ferocious cat, both of them endowed with unnatural strength. Remarkably, the two aggressors have in common the color white—the madman wears a white night dress and the cat’s coat is white—and their felinity as they both adopt the same attitude of wild predators: the madman “spr[ings] into the middle of the floor, and with a stealthy and rapid tread *like a tiger’s*, glide[s] to the door” before he “spr[ings] upon [Phil]” (*ILQM* 245, emphasis added); similarly, the cat “spr[ings] into the room” (*ILQM* 247), before she “spr[ings] out of [Phil’s] hands with a suddenness for which [he] was not at all prepared, and flew into [his] face with the fury of a hyena” (*ILQM* 248). While the madman “chok[es] [Phil] nearly to strangulation with the closeness of his grasp” (*ILQM* 245), the latter seems to be more fortunate with the cat which he holds down “with [his] feet till she stran-

gled" (*ILQM* 248), but in both cases, strangulation is clearly meant to bring death. Let's finally note the enigmatic words of the sick man, who wants to kill the narrator for no particular reason, when he answers preposterously about his motives for murdering Phil: "I have found you alone, and I know you!" (*ILQM* 245). These apparently absurd words however echo our interpretation of the origin of Phil's phobia, since, in his eyes, the danger consists precisely in staying alone with someone who may "know him" too well. Even if the phobia itself has disappeared, the roots of the unconscious dread remain in Phil's mind as illustrated by his narratives now undeniably assuming the status of fantasies. However, we understand that, despite their frightening side, the fantasies assume a protective role against Phil's irrational fear, for in all cases he does survive the wild, blind violence. Nevertheless, the secret nature of the fright has still to be discovered.

The skating episode of the 1830 fiction is probably more mysterious than frightening, but the intense emotions related by the narrator testify to the underlying violence of the ride:

[M]y interest in the adventure assumed a wildness which I tried in vain to shake off. The extreme rapidity of our motion, the dim haze of the moonlight, the partial distinctness of the naked trees on shore, and, when we crossed a longer shadow than usual, the transparency of the ice, reflecting every star as distinctly as a mirror far beneath us, all combined with the knowledge that I was following one who was wild with a mysterious fear, in exciting and bewildering my imagination. (*ILQM* 249)

In contrast, the happy ending thanks to "the help of [an] hospitable hunter" (*ILQM* 250), partly dissipates the seriousness of the fit that affects Larry, and, added to the return to ordinary life like in the two previous accounts, tends to indicate that Phil's mind manages, somehow or other, to quell an anguish the nature of which remains vague. At any rate, if these three episodes can be interpreted as dreams, we can say that, according to Freud's assertion that "the dream is the guardian of sleep, not its disturber" (Freud 155), the dreamer continues to sleep peacefully. Moreover, the relative decline of bodily violence in the three successive incidents—in the first one, the aggres-

sor tries to kill Phil, in the second one, he is only the victim of a cat, and the last one amounts to a physically exhausting experience—suggests that the strength of the unconscious perturbation is diminishing along with its successive elaborations.

Conversely, “The Lunatic’s Skate” assumes a much more disquieting dimension and its tragic ending—Larry’s last ride turns out to be fatal—contradicts the promise of Phil’s recovery as it appears in the 1830 text. On the fictional level, the 1834 episode chronologically follows the first night ride—four years separate them—<sup>5</sup>, which may account for the aggravation of the symptoms and, contrarily to our first prognosis, for the failure of the narrator’s mental recovery. A detailed analysis of the latest text not only corroborates this new approach but makes the cause of the perturbation more readable.

First, we discover in it the unusual intensity of the feelings shared by the two friends, far beyond what could be deduced from the prototype version. According to Phil’s own words: “Larry and I were inseparable” (LS 208); and they were bound by the same shared feelings: “Larry loved me” (LS 209) and “I loved Larry Wynn, as I hope I may never love man or woman again with a pain at my heart” (LS 210). In fact, these profound affective ties originate in the early confidence which Larry once made to his new roommate: “in the first days of our intimacy he had confided a secret to me which, from its uncommon nature, and the excessive caution with which *he kept it from every one else*, bound me to him with more than the common ties of school-fellow attachment” (LS 208, my italics). The exclusivity of the secret which literally founds and justifies the links between the two friends may account for the situations of strict intimacy present in the four “dreams,” *i.e.* the presence of only *one* other protagonist with the narrator, which rings like a knell in the madman’s sibylline words: “I have found you alone, and I know you!” (ILQM 245). This is fairly convincing evidence that Phil’s fantasy is nourished by the peculiar bounds that attach him to Larry.

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, on the reality level, four years similarly separate the two publications.



Years later, having lost all tracks of Larry Wynn and having grudgingly “grieved over . . . a departed friendship” (LS 210), Philip is led as if by pure chance—he declares: “I do not know why I undertook, at this time, a journey to the West” (LS 211), but who would believe him?—to the town where his old friend lives. However Phil, whose feelings seem unchanged, is promptly disappointed by this reunion “[s]ome two or three years after [they] had taken ‘the irrevocable yoke’ of life upon [them] (not matrimony, but money-making)” (LS 210):

Larry was glad to see me—very. I was more glad to see him. I have a soft heart, and forgive a wrong generally, if it touches neither my vanity nor my purse. I forgot his neglect, and called him “Larry.” By the same token, he did not call me “Phil.” . . . Larry looked upon me as a man. I looked on him, with all his dignities and changes, through the sweet vista of memory, as a boy. . . . He was to me the pale-faced and melancholy friend of my boyhood; and I could have slept, as I used to do, with my arm around his neck, and feared to stir lest I should wake him. Had my last earthly hope lain in the palm of my hand, I could have given it to him, had he needed it, but to make him sleep; and yet he thought of me but as a stranger under his roof, and added, in his warmest moments, a “Mr.” to my name! There is but one circumstance in my life that has wounded me more. (LS 212)

Nonetheless, Larry’s distant attitude can easily be explained by the fact that he has now something else in mind, a long way from “the good old days” with Phil, as he abruptly delivers most unexpected news to him: “‘You are come in good time,’ said Larry one morning, with a half smile, ‘and shall be groomsman to me. I am going to be married.’ . . . I repeated the word after him, for I was surprised” (LS 213). Phil is not only astonished, but he feels bitterly disappointed because of Larry’s “apparent unwillingness to renew [their] ancient confidence” (*ibid.*) as the latter never mentions his “unhappy lunacy” (*ibid.*), so that the former hopes “that he ha[s] outgrown or overcome it” (*ibid.*). Yet, his honesty in the matter remains questionable because when he learns about Larry’s imminent marriage, he has words whose ambiguity hardly conceals a secret disapproval: “No man in his

senses, I thought, would link an impending madness to the fate of a confiding and lovely woman" (*ibid.*). Phil's reprobation, added to his bitter regrets of their former connivance, evokes the half-concealed manifestation of a jealousy he is probably not aware of: as he "inwardly condemn[s]" his friend (*LS* 215) and in the guise of protecting the bride, Phil is actually willing, at least unconsciously, to stand between the betrothed.

If Phil's feelings are now less and less mysterious for us, Larry's remain so far as obscure as his symptoms. He confesses to his friend that he has tried all possible means to muzzle them, from hard work to narcotics, but all fail to free him from the indomitable urge which takes hold of him on the moonlit nights:

Since he had left college, he had striven with the whole energy of his soul against it. He had plunged into business; he had kept his bed resolutely, night after night, till his brain seemed on the verge of frenzy with the effort; he had taken opium to secure to himself an artificial sleep: but he had never dared to confide it to anyone, and he had no friend to sustain him in his lonely hours; and it grew upon him rather than diminished. He described to me with the most touching pathos how he had concealed it for years . . . how he had prayed, and wrestled, and wept over it; and, finally, how he had come to believe that there was no hope for him except in the assistance and constant presence of someone who would devote life to him in love and pity. (*LS* 215; 216)

Marriage appears then as his ultimate attempt to find a medicine for his agony, as if the presence of a loving woman at his sides could protect him from yielding to a mental—if not moral—weakness which he sees as shameful. Larry hopes that he would then be taken care of by a wife who would both surpass and outdate his former involvement with Phil, whose hidden jealousy no longer appears so unjustified, considering the intensity of his love for his friend. Furthermore, one may even deduce at this point that what Larry tries to achieve through marriage reveals a last frantic attempt to put an end to, or at least obliterate, what binds the two friends: the shared secret, the intimate knowledge generated in and by the nursing, and the tender mutual

feelings born from their combination. Undoubtedly, Larry is more and more embarrassed, with the passing of time, by Phil's affection as well as by his own for Philip, which makes clear why he became distant in his letters, and eventually decided to get married, as a last "desperate experiment" to cure "his insane restlessness" (LS 216). Such a drastic remedy discloses that Larry's frantic resistance to his feelings is no doubt proportional to their intensity.

Love between two men—even when passionate—can comfortably be enjoyed in the shelter of mutual friendship as long as sexual desire remains dormant. The excessive embarrassment of the two protagonists leads us to wonder precisely whether their bonds are totally devoid of sexual connotations, which would justify Larry's resistance as well as Phil's disquieting fantasies, in years when homosexuality constituted a sinful offense "against the moral and Levitical law, fashionable on this side of the water" (LS 212). Indeed, in that part of the Scriptures, the corresponding prohibition is quite explicitly stated: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is abomination" (Leviticus 18: 22). If this complementary premise proves to be true, it is no wonder then if, although expressed in quite distinct registers, the respective symptoms of the two friends betray the same characteristic trait, *i.e.* a fierce resistance to various representations of a mysterious, indecent endangerment connected with socially and mentally repressed sexual drives.

Originally diverging in their manifestations—claustrophobia, then fantasies of aggression with Phil; irrepressible urges and avoidance strategies with Larry—, these representations eventually converge into a common *mise-en-scène* in which the two friends skate together at night. As noticeable as in the first three episodes, the color white—the moonshine and the snow—tinges the atmosphere with a baffling, desirable note, "giving [the lake] the effect of one white silver mirror stretching to the edge of the horizon [which] was exquisitely beautiful" (LS 214). The magnificence of the scenery, added to Larry's restored closeness when he "laid his hand familiarly on [his] shoulder" (*ibid.*), immediately conjures up old memories that Phil articulates with almost tender undertones: "What glorious skating we shall have," said [he], "if this smooth water freezes tonight!" (*ibid.*). The inconceivable incon-

gruity of the proposal—it is Larry’s wedding night!—suggests strongly that Phil’s impatience and heedlessness are kindled by desire—what else could lead a man to such recklessness! Consequently, it can logically be inferred that his unconscious fantasy is to replace the bride by Larry’s side. The latter’s reaction is equal to his profound uneasiness:

I turned the next moment to look at him; for we had not skated together since I went out, at his earnest entreaty, at midnight, to skim the little lake where we had passed our boyhood, and drive away the fever from his brain, under the light of a full moon.

He remembered it, and so did I; and I put my arm behind him, for the color fled from his face, and I thought he would have sunk to the floor.

"The moon is full tonight," said he. (LS 216)

Shattered by the metaphorical—but no doubt too clear—expression of his friend’s wishes, Larry tries to contain his emotions first by drinking heavily, then by concentrating on his wedding, desperately endeavoring to turn away from Phil’s equivocal suggestion by seeking refuge by his wife, “suddenly clasp[ing] his arms about [the bride], and, straining her violently to his bosom, br[aking] into an hysterical passion of tears and laughter. Then, suddenly resuming his self-command, he apologize[s] for the over-excitement of his feelings, and behave[s] with forced and gentle propriety till the guests depart[.]” (LS 218). But what strikes Phil then is not so much Larry’s gloomy expression, but the amazing change in his gaze: “all the blood in his face seemed settled about his eyes, which were so bloodshot and fiery that [he has] ever since wondered if he was not, at the first glance, suspected of insanity” (LS 217). From then on, the narrator insists recurrently on the “wild sparkle [that] still dance[s] in [Larry’s] eyes” (*ibid.*), until he realizes that this wildness is fueled by “the full moon . . . [that] stream[s] full into his eyes” (LS 219). According to psychoanalysis, the eye is a privileged organ of desire through which “the gaze [reveals] the constituent gap of castration anxiety (Lacan, 1973: 70, our translation), a gap here filled with moonlight, a clear hint at sexual desire and

femininity.<sup>6</sup> Appearing “directly in the path of the moon’s rays” (LS 218), Larry, then literally feminized, becomes the object of Phil’s desire who “summon[s] [his] last nerve for the effort of catching up with [his] friend . . . insistently keeping him *in [his] eye*” (LS 220, emphasis added).

Phil seems to be aware of the dangers awaiting the two skaters, and “thanking God that [they] were probably approaching some human succor” (*ibid.*), he realizes that, in conformity to the Levitical law which condemns sinners, to yield to their reciprocal fondness would “cut [them] off from among their people” (Leviticus 18: 29). In the first version, the midnight skate ends up in a most ambiguous tableau showing the two men in a contented, almost tender attitude, a happy ending however shaded by the ominous evocation of the lake, now in broad daylight, revealing the immeasurability in which they may have lost their way : “my friend lay soundlessly asleep with his head across my body, and through a break in the trees I could see the broad icy bosom of the Lake stretching away in the clear light of the morning with a look of almost interminable distance to the opposite shore” (*ILQM* 250). In “The Lunatic Skate” however, Larry deliberately moves away from civilization—geographically as well as socially—and dashes toward the unknown, soon out of reach, heading for a solitary death:

to my horror, the retreating figure before me suddenly darted off to the left, and made swifter than before toward the center of the icy waste. O God! What feelings were mine at that moment! Follow him far, I dared not; for, the sight of land once lost, as it would be almost instantly with our tremendous speed, we perished without a possibility of relief. (LS 220)

Chased by his friend, Larry desperately flees in the icy night, but if he manages, thanks to his extraordinary energy to outdistance his pursuer, he fails to escape from the irrepressible power of the moon-

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<sup>6</sup> Let’s note that most appropriately “[t]he moon is also the symbol of the dream and the unconscious” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 594, our translation) and that according to Freud, it can be interpreted “in the humorous sense of the French *la lune*” (Freud 249-50)...

light: "His last act seemed to have been under the influence of his strange madness; for he lay on his face, turned from the quarter of the setting moon" (LS 222). This time, Phil's fantasy brings his secret inclination to an end in a most cynical way, for it is as if, rather than accepting to abandon the object of his love in a woman's arms, he prefers to lose it body and soul so that neither he or the woman can have him.

Nevertheless, the radical denouement of his fantasy does not deprive Phil of all satisfaction, far from it... His short evocation of the bride's "uncontrollable agony" when she hears the news of her husband's death testifies to his unhealthy, insatiable cravings, even if he firmly protests that he refuses to indulge in the awful drama: "I cannot describe that scene, *familiar* as I am with pictures of horror" (LS 222, emphasis added). But the first version reveals the very nature of this familiarity, "one of the deepest seated cravings of [Phil's] nature . . . an excitement" only satisfied with "the deepest—death or wild insanity—whatever tries the sufferer most, and demands in the spectator most of sympathy and nerve" (ILQM 242). We realize now that Larry's torments and, last but not least, his widow's must have satisfied Phil's murky desires doubly.

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