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Unforeseen Side Effects of Public Transport: an Incestuous Fantasy in a New England Narrative by Nathaniel Parker Willis

Almost simultaneously published in *The American Monthly Magazine* and *The New York Mirror* by the popular American author and editor Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-1867), “Captain Thompson” (1831),[17] far from pertaining, as suggested by its title, to the tradition of maritime tales, relates the two-day journey by coach to Boston of an anonymous senior student in the sole company of Julia, a pleasant-looking young woman, and her son John. While the former balks at the idea of going back home with “an expressive note from [his] Tutor”(189), which, he fears, is nothing but the notification of his expulsion, Julia plans to meet her husband, the captain of the brig Dolly,[18] who is back from a three-year voyage on the southern seas. During the trip, the three passengers eventually take to each other and once in Boston, the narrator grants Julia's “request that [he] would assist her” to find the Marlborough Hotel where her husband is supposed to be waiting for his wife and child. But instead of being gratefully welcomed, the student is savagely assaulted by the so-called Captain Thompson and has no other choice than to retreat and follow the advice of the stage-coach's driver to “take [them] to the stage-house and leave the matter till morning” (194). Quite unexpectedly, “another Captain Thompson” is waiting for them at the tavern, the good one, it seems, as he immediately “took ‘Mrs. Thompson and little John’ into his arms at one clasp, and kissed them” (*Ibid.*). The story closes as the narrator learns that a Captain Thompson who “had always sworn himself a bachelor, [and] had been awaked at midnight by the arrival of a wife and child whom he had deserted in some foreign port, . . . had gone to sea very suddenly” (194).

The protagonists are stereotypes of nineteenth-century Romantic literature: a young student whose lonely heart is immediately seduced by a nice-

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[17] *Princeps* edition: *“Captain Thompson”* in *The American Monthly Magazine,* vol. III, April 1831, rpt. in *Twenty-three Unlikely Stories* (all references are from that edition) and *“Captain Thompson, or Stage-coach Companions”* in the “Fugitive Sketches” columns of *The New York Mirror; Devoted to Literature and the Fine Arts,* Oct. 1. 1831, then a weekly journal.

[18] A trading ship launched in 1796, bound for India and the Pacific.

looking mysterious woman, echoing so many other enamored students such as Washington Irving's Wolfgang in "The Adventure of the German Student"[19] or Giovanni Guasconti's in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter".[20] Like Goethe's Werther,[21] and not more confident in the future of his affective life, the protagonist is a devotee of Nature, worshiping "every striking tree and sheltered moss-knoll from its base to its summit" (189) and finding in the countryside the reflection of his mood. However, the tutor's note to his father makes him feel so "unfortunate" then that he has pulled a "travelling cap […] over a very long face, partly to avoid recognition by [his] classmates . . . and partly with an indefinite feeling that his fellow traveler would observe a tear that [is] coquetting very capriciously with [his] eyelids" (189). His sullen mood spoils even the sweet memory of "the romantic bridge [on which he stood] many a moonlight hour thinking of you, dear —" (*Ibid.*) turning it into "the most exquisitely dismal spot [he] ever looked upon — the trees ugly and distorted, the 'fine old tap-rock' […] desolate and naked, and the pretty buildings below […] absolutely insulting with their peaceful picturesqueness" (189-90). As for the young lady, she displays, in her admirer's eyes, a subtle blend of romantic but contradictory traits:

> Her cheeks were red, and her lips to match, and she had 'two eyes with lids to them' according to the inventory in the play[22] — but when the lids were up the eyes were blue — (and very soft, and gentle, and *dangerous eyes* they were) — and if it had not been for a very thin, spirited nostril, and an expression *like a cocked pistol* about her pretty chin, I should have thought she was made for a Niobe." (190-91, emphasis added)

All the conventional constituents of the Romantic plot are gathered, the almost boyish sudden fit of affection of the young lady's suitor and the former's not-so-prudish reserve included.

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19 From *Tales of a Traveller* (1824).

20 *Mosses of an Old Manse*, (1846), but first published in 1844 in *The Democratic Review*.

21 Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).

22 "I will give out divers schedules of my beauty: it shall be inventoried, and every particle and utensil labelled to my will: as, item, two lips, indifferent red; item, *two grey eyes, with lids to them*; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth." William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (Act I, Scene 4, emphasis added).

However, even if the life of the Romantic hero is eventually seriously threatened by the consequences of his devotion for a forbidden woman, the author tackles the topic with unexpected touches of humor, which largely defuses the dramatic effect of the situation. The arrival of the trio at the Marlborough Hotel verges on the farce when Captain Thompson's presumed family is evoked — "'Wife and child !' said Boniface, repeating my words very slowly; 'I have always understood that Captain Thompson was a bachelor!'" (192) —, so that when the young student stubbornly insists on seeing him, the innkeeper sheepishly replies: "'I have no objection to showing you Capt. Thompson's room, Sir,' . . . and you may carry your own message; but I assure you he'll be very likely to pitch you over the banisters for your intelligence'" (193). Later on, when the irascible sailor threatens the narrator with "slam[ing] [him] through that window" (194), the latter wards off the imminent danger by resorting to self-derision as he thinks: "My heart was grieved for Mrs. Thompson; but if I was thrown down to her from a fourth-story window, I reflected that I should probably be in no situation to express my sympathy. It was philosophy to retreat" (*Ibid.*). The same tone pervades the narrator's account of the upsurge of his tender feelings for the young woman which he depicts as superficial for they seem to stem largely, beyond their "elective sympathies," from the romantic atmosphere and the cozy intimacy of the stage-coach: "Travelling after twilight, I have always remarked, makes one very affectionate. . . . I can answer for its effect upon myself and Mrs. Thompson" (191). The reader is thus led to see in their burgeoning liaison nothing more than a circumstantial passing fancy.

Nevertheless, as previously noticed, the narration recurrently mixes comical and impressive elements whose combination raises it above the conventional tongue-in-cheek story. Indeed, the two protagonists seem to be authentically attracted to each other and if the young student feels "tender to her upon suspicion" (191), Julia reveals that she is unconsciously but genuinely moved by his presence – "If she was not sentimental, there is no truth in symptoms" (*Ibid.*), a statement which would certainly not be denied by psychoanalysts. The time and place apparently have a tangible effect on emotions and as "[t]he forty miles between Worcester and Boston . . . should be sacred to sentiment [,] [the narrator] can answer for its effect upon

[him]self and Mrs. Thompson" (*Ibid.*). Yet, the ephemeral romance comes to a sudden end with their arrival in Boston, while Julia "grew very amiably anxious about [her husband] as the coach rattled on to Washington Street" (191), to the great disappointment of her young suitor. Then follows a series of coincidences which pure chance can hardly explain. First, as expected, a Captain Thompson does stay at the Marlborough Hotel, but his rough appearance and wild demeanor do not correspond to both Julia's and the protagonist's anticipation:

> On a bachelor's bed, narrow and well tucked up, lay a man of the heaviest frame, whiskered to the eyes, and with a fist as it lay doubled on the coverlid like the end of the club of Hercules. A fiery lock of hair, redder than his face (I feel as if I was using a hyperbole) straggled out from a black silk handkerchief twisted tightly round his head, and his nose and mouth and chin, masses of solid purple, might have been, for delicacy of outline, hewn with a broad axe from a mahogany log. (193)

The contrast between the uncouth old sea-dog and the young delicate Julia Thompson, combined with his aggressive attitude when the former learns that his wife and child are waiting for him downstairs, make the reader suspect that he may not be the right person, which is confirmed by the happy denouement. However, the accumulation of characteristics shared by the two Captains — beyond their physical differences, they look uncannily alike — suggests that this unlikely story should not be taken at face value for it is not so easy to account for the fact that these men not only bear the same name, but that both are sailors, with the identical rank of captain, and that they were supposed to stay at the same hotel. Last but not least, it seems that the news of the sudden arrival of Mrs Thompson and her son sounds plausible enough for the presumed bachelor to make him cowardly and hurriedly go "to sea very suddenly," which confirms the rumor according to which he also has "a wife and child whom he ha[s] deserted in some foreign port" (194). In fact, the contrast and similarities of the two captains make one the *Doppelgänger* of the other, one pleasant and faithful, his mirror image dangerous and deceitful,[23] so that the narrative, told in the tone of a pleasant

[23] Otto Rank, in his seminal essay *The Double: a Psychoanalytic Study* (1914), evokes the frequent destructive mad behavior of the tormenting double-self.

anecdote until it becomes grim and oppressive, not unlike some of Poe's tales,[24] seems to verge unexpectedly on the supernatural genre.[25] The implausible appearance of Julia's husband on the doorstep of another tavern — in which he had no stated reason to be —, relieves the young student of a burden he could hardly handle by himself, but does not explain why Julia's information on the Marlborough Hotel proves to be unreliable. The uncanny "double effect" lingers to the very last sentence, thus inviting the "impressed" reader to decipher the narrative at the psychoanalytic level.

In fact, the reader eventually realizes that the narrator is not only seduced by his female companion, but that he takes the whole matter more seriously than he should, probably as a consequence of his limited experience in the uncertain fields of love and courtship. While Julia sees only in the improvised intimacy with the imaginative youth an ephemeral break in her lonely existence of a sailor's wife, perhaps in anticipation of the resumption of her sentimental life, the young student feels "engaged" to her to the point of imagining one brief instant that he could bring her to his parent's home:

> If it had been at any other hour, I would have taken them home till the mystery could be cleared up; but to arrive from college unexpectedly at midnight with a woman and a child — I thought it highly improbable that my motives would be appreciated. (194)

This very last point, an easy deciphered fantasy, reveals the narrator's mental position as regards what he is experiencing then: anxious about what is expecting him once at home,[26] he manages to dissipate the resulting psychic strain by fleeing into dreams and imagination soon after the coach's departure: "It is surprising how '*it's all in your eye*' whether beautiful objects seem beautiful in this world. I do not think there is a sweeter gem of scenery in New England than the spot upon which my eye fell at that moment" (190, emphasis added). What applies to the surrounding landscape is no doubt

[24] See, for instance, the pangs of another deadly rivalry in "William Wilson" (1839).

[25] In accordance with the inevitable cliché, the final scene takes place at midnight — "the city clocks struck twelve" (191).

[26] "[I]f it had not been for an occasional sight of the mailbag under my feet which I presumed contained a simple explanation of my journey, I could have contrived to forget the imminent peril in which I stood of losing my graduate's sheepskin and my father's blessing" (190).

also valid for the young wife sitting opposite him, and accordingly enough, the narrator is not long to change his mood. Having justified his "apparent want of taste" by exposing his present concerns, he feels encouraged and cheered by the lady's offer that he "would assist her with [his] knowledge of localities when [they] arrived at the end of [their] journey" (190). Soon, his perception of the situation takes the unbridled dimension of fantasy:

> In ten miles, I was on very sociable terms with Mrs. Thompson. In ten more, by dint of gingerbread and good humor, Master John was persuaded into my lap, and in ten more — but travellers have a reputation for a long bow, and I shall not be believed. (*Ibid.*)

If facts are limited to occasional "very sweet smile[s] from Mrs. Thompson" (*Ibid.*), the youngster's imagination no doubt flares up with amorous perspectives, the most efficient remedy for his previous intolerable misery. From then on, the once unfortunate student indulges in phantasms nourished with exhilarating desires, which turns an earthbound morose voyage into heavenly daydreaming. However, his desires find their limits in the fact that the woman he lusts after is married, hence prohibited, which tinges the fantasy with a new tone and bends its course toward an unexpected ending determined by the induced feeling of guilt. As a matter of fact, now having little John "into his lap" (*Ibid.*) and traveling along with his mother, the narrator has literally usurped the place of the boy's father. The logical upshot of this identity highjacking is the latter's violent retaliation, which the daydreamer stages at the Marlborough Hotel, during his meeting with the wild sailor. We understand then that the latter *is not* the wrong Captain Thomson, but a vengeful version of him, while we realize accordingly that the address given by Julia *is* the right one. Let us note also that the evolution of the fantasy fits the compromising structure of the symptom: by fleeing the husband's wrath, the daydreamer finds himself again with his wife and child who are "decidedly on [his] hands" (194), revealing that he trickily uses the fit of rage of an unacceptable but lawful husband to better rid himself of him and thus prolong his intimacy with Julia.

If the compromise temporarily satisfies both his wish to stay with the young woman and his apprehension of the consequences of his transgres-

sion, it does not solve the narrator's problems entirely as neither his desire or his feeling of guilt have faded away in the operation. Caressing an instant the perspective to take Julia and her son to his parents' for the rest of the night, he admits reluctantly that it is "highly improbable that [his] motives would be appreciated" (194). It is no wonder then if such a fantasy, intrinsically doomed to failure, comes rapidly to its end by reuniting the family in the shortest possible time, even at the cost of verisimilitude, before the feeling of guilt had time to gather more strength, which would make the dreamer run the risk of being assaulted by another phantasmal incarnation of the avenging husband. Moreover, by assuming *in fine* the role of Julia's rescuer, the narrator is granted an extra satisfaction as he appears in his phantasm as the one whose power surpasses that of the legitimate husband whom he can manipulate as he pleases; few lovers can resist that narcissistic fantasy...

It has been so far almost too easy to show the phantasmal nature of the young student's narrative, but we must admit that the only primary proof of its validity boils down to its consistency. We have blindly assumed that the sexual fantasy was that of the youngster exclusively, and paid little heed to the fact that the young woman was most probably particularly frustrated by the long abstinence due to her husband's three-year absence. These peculiar circumstances make her likely to be the prey of phantasms in which her long-thwarted sexual ambitions may reach some kind of surrogate fulfillment.

Interestingly, we notice that, in this case, the scenario of the fantasy could virtually remain unchanged, and that only the subjective positions of the various protagonists should be reformulated. The new fantasy could be revised as follows: a sexually frustrated young woman, who travels with a son on board a stage-coach in the company of a young man, fancies that she seduces him, but rightly fears her husband's jealousy. The stormy episode of the Marlborough Hotel accounts for her sense of guilt for having if only mentally cheated on her husband and, as a good honest wife, she is reunited with him in a last typically romantic family scene. All things considered, this new interpretation sounds no less plausible than the one we have

developed before, except that neither the first version or the second one take satisfactorily into account the presence of the silent child in the coach.

Few indications are given about little John throughout the narrative, but remarkably, he is the first person to be named, as if his presence in the stage-coach were of prime importance: “the lady told me her son’s name was John, and that he was named after his father who was Captain Thompson” (190). Interestingly enough, the way he is introduced makes “explicit” the family to whom he belongs, namely who his father and mother are. Moreover, while he is repeatedly referred to as “little John,” the narrator calls him twice “Master John” (*Ibid.*), which, beyond the familiarity of the appellation, suggests, should we take the word at face value, that the boy is the one who “masters” the situation and controls the other protagonists. One step further would lead us to see in him the true instigator of the narration, at least of the part which we have so far considered as phantasmal. As a matter of fact, little John, who is too young to have substantial memories, if any, of his father, must be unsettled by the growing complicity between his mother and the young student, the nature of which makes it all the more troubling in his eyes. To see a man at his mother's side is no doubt a new experience for him, which is likely to trigger off his jealousy as, in the absence of his father, he is used to having his mother all for himself. As the latter becomes more and more “sentimental” (191), the young boy tries to decipher her eyes which he sees in turn “soft, and gentle” when she looks at the student and paradoxically “dangerous” (190) for they jeopardize the exclusive link he has shared so far with her. Fearing to be left aside, little John overcomes his malaise by adapting to his mother's attitude, in other words by slipping into the same position as that of the object of his mother's desire: on the narrator's lap. This change in his spatial position inserts him into the field of his mother's gaze and unveils his desire to identify with the object of his mother's trouble. Now symbolically on an equal footing with his mother's suitor, and reading the expressions of her face, little John can mistake the emotional contents addressed to the narrator for messages sent to himself. As a consequence, he is, in a way, vicariously lured by his mother whose face must beam with the pleasure of being courted. At this point, John's fantasy meets up with that of the narrator with whom he identifies.

The experience of being seduced — falsely, but he is too young to realize it — by his beloved mother suggests to little John a new fantasy, the inevitable counterpart of the pleasure induced. The growing suspicion that he may not be at his place brings along the fear to be not only rebuked for his misbehavior, but also ousted from his advantageous position. The instrument of this hostile response appears to him as a vengeful version of his father — whose formidable power literally threatens him to death — embodied by the first Captain Thompson. Confirming the dangerousness of his mother's gaze, the Marlborough Hotel incident appears thus as a phantasmal response to the illegitimate attempt by the young John to seduce his mother. As this is accomplished by a man bearing the name of his father, the oedipal dimension of the scene appears clearly, illustrating more than a century in advance the imaginary effect of the "Name-of-the-Father," a concept later coined by Jacques Lacan more than a century later.[27]

However, the interpretation of the scene has to be completed for the first Captain Thompson's aggression is, first and foremost, an attempt at killing the young student. We realize that this must have been also little John's wish to get rid of a rival who remains in the way. John's identification with the man who bears the name of his father, hence his own since "he was named after his father" (190), allows him to eliminate his rival in his mother's heart in the hope of regaining a three-year *tête-à-tête* interrupted by the student's presence. Here again, the fantasy kills two birds with the same stone: it bars little John's incestuous desire, but, as a compensation which reveals his resistance to the law of the Father, it eliminates his rival. We understand now that the violence displayed in this episode only rightly reflects the dual incestuous origin of the desires involved.

From this perspective, the happy denouement materializes the classic resolution of the Oedipus complex. In reconciling his parents, little John yields back to his father his legitimate place in the family triangle, and in exchange, he defuses his vengeance and regains his affection, a new deal allowed by the transformation of the father figure into a quite different character:

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[27] See, among many other examples, Jacques Lacan, "On a Question Preliminary to any Possible Treatment of Psychosis."

> The first person that appeared on the step of the tavern door was *another Captain Thompson*, a stout, handsome fellow, who took 'Mrs. Thompson and little John' into his arms at one clasp, and kissed them— as one might be supposed to do after a three years' voyage. (194)

All's well that ends well! The family is reunited, Julia Thompson's honor is safe, and little John seems to have overcome his oedipal disturbances satisfactorily. Nevertheless, far from amounting to a moralistic tale designed to educate virtually dissolute readers, this nineteenth-century fiction, based on the intricacy of both adult and infantile fantasies, intuits what psychoanalysis unveiled almost a century later, namely that adulterous desires — at least when directed toward a married, or engaged lover — are basically linked with the unconscious resurgence of oedipal trends.

Alain Geoffroy[28]

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[28] Université de La Réunion, France.