

On “The Inventor:”

I first had the idea for “The Inventor” years ago, when I teaching American Literature surveys as an underprepared, overworked, underpaid instructor assigned a slate of courses none of my tenured or tenure-track colleagues wanted to teach (not that I was ungrateful; I was probably a little too grateful). The students were for the most part sophomores, and we were looking closely at a bunch of Hawthorne stories, an exercise which left me considering the peculiarities of his work from a writer’s point of view. I’m not a Hawthorne scholar (or any kind of scholar, as writing fiction and teaching creative writing tend to drive one back to the state of baby-brained not-knowing that seems to me essential to doing any interesting imaginative writing), and so I should apologize in advance in case this is absolutely inaccurate: my sense of his story “The Birth-Mark” was that it was (and I’m being a little reductive here to make a point about composition) a kind of Faustian miniature of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* written by way of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Oval Portrait.” It seemed to me that the basic story, of a “man of science” who gets too big for his britches and suffers for it (Daedalus, essentially, or, as Mary Shelley has it in her great novel’s less-famous subtitle, Prometheus), was shrinking with each iteration. It occurred to me that this might liberate a modern writer interested in the material, in the sense that the story seemed to have a stable trajectory or structure and allow for improvisation, like a folk-tale or -song, two types of folklore that have interested me since I was very young. With some luck, the resulting story gives credit where credit is due while delivering some fresh material.

--Hugh Sheehy