

Another Source for Hawthorne's
"Egotism; or, the Bosom Serpent"

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1836 American Notebook entry:

A snake taken into a man's stomach and
nourished there from fifteen years to thirty-
five, tormenting him most horribly. A type of
envy or some other evil passion.¹

¹(Boston, 1902), p. 34. (All my references to Hawthorne's
works are to the Wayside Edition.)

has long been recognized as his earliest reference to the
idea from which he developed the story "Egotism, or the
Bosom Serpent."² It is interesting to note that that same

²Mosses from an Old Manse (Boston: 1902), pp. 303-321.

year a story was circulating in the New England newspapers
which may have served as the inspiration for the original
Notebook entry. I happened upon it in the Concord, Massa-
chusetts, Yeoman's Gazette for April 3, 1836, and it reads:

SNAKE IN A MAN'S STOMACH!--During the last
four or five years, we are informed, Marshall

Edson (not Calvin) of Greenwich, fifteen miles from Barre, Mass., became afflicted with an internal disorder, the cause of which he nor his physicians could satisfactorily account for, until recently. Mr[.] Edson was a skeleton in appearance, and although from the commencement of his disease he had a constantly increasing, unheard of appetite, and devoured an immense quantity of luxurious [sic] aliment, it by no means had the effect as it does upon aldermen, to make him grow fat. About three weeks since, a council of physicians was held over him, who decided that there was some kind of living animal within his body--some of them thought it a snake, and others, that it was some other animal. At any rate they all with one accord decided that the man should totally abstain from every kind of nourishment for eight days, that being the only alternative between life and death. On the 8th day, a pan of milk was placed on the floor, and Mr[.] Edson was taken by the heels and held over it. Very soon the head of a black snake was discovered making his way out of his mouth to the

milk, and began to lap the luscious beverage. It was immediately drawn from the throat of the agonized man, and killed, measuring eighteen inches in length. Mr[.] Edson is now regaining his health.--Barre Gazette.

I doubt that Hawthorne read this particular item in the Yeoman's Gazette, for he did not move to Concord until 1842, but the article itself states that it was reprinted from the Barre, Massachusetts, Gazette, and implies, through the correction of Edson's name, that it had appeared elsewhere. Anyone familiar with local newspapers of that day is aware of the fact that articles, particularly those of a sensational nature, tended to circulate from newspaper to newspaper for months at a time, so it is quite likely that Hawthorne ran across the item a little closer to Salem, where he was residing in 1836, than either Concord or Barre.