Hawthorne and the Real
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Hawthorne would always say that his writing offered an insufficient view of what most persons call “reality.” In 1860, when all the fiction he would live to complete had already been written, he told his publisher, James T. Fields, that *The Marble Faun* was hardly a book he would have chosen to read if someone else had been the author:

My own individual taste is for quite another class of works than those which I myself am able to write. Have you ever read the novels of Anthony Trollope? They precisely suit my taste; solid and substantial, written on the strength of beef and through the inspiration of ale, and just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting they were being made a show of. (XVIII 229)

Hawthorne did not give a name to the “class” to which Trollope’s books belonged. As Henry James later observed, Hawthorne “was not a man with a literary theory; he was guiltless of a system,” and probably had not heard of realism, “this remarkable compound having (although it was invented some time earlier) come into general use only since his death” (*American Writers* 321).

In the 1830s and 1840s, when Hawthorne was writing most of his short stories and sketches, Balzac’s *comédie humaine* completed its succession of dense representations of French society, and when Hawthorne was writing his longer works of fiction in the next decade, the French had already begun to label as “réalisme” not only the major novels of Balzac, but those...
of new writers like Turgenev, Maupassant, the Goncourts, Zola, and Flaubert, who was notoriously prosecuted for the supposed indecency of *Madame Bovary* in 1857. But it is doubtful if Hawthorne was familiar with this French new wave; indeed, it was not until 1853 that a review of Balzac’s *comédie* in the *Westminster Review* employed the English word as a literary term (203, 212, 214). Hawthorne’s influences remained chiefly British writers whose comprehensive verisimilitude was mixed with contrary effects. Scott had been his earliest enthusiasm, the inspiration not only of his romantic apprentice novel, *Fanshawe*, but of his undertaking to recover an authentic native past in *The Scarlet Letter*. In 1851, Hawthorne was reading *David Copperfield* to his children during winter evenings in Lenox. He had just finished *The House of the Seven Gables*, a work of Dickensian mingling of the grotesque with social fact though without Dickens’s plenitude of reference. In 1859 he called Thackeray “the greatest living novelist” (Kendall 90); the author of *Vanity Fair* could be said, like Trollope, to have shown how to seize a lump of the world whole, and place it on view as though under glass. It was, however, too late for either Thackeray or Trollope to be his models.

For some of Hawthorne’s greatest American contemporaries—Emerson, Thoreau, and even Melville (despite the whaling-voyage factuality mixed with the visionary in *Moby-Dick*)—the “real,” in any case, was what might be thought, by less platonic minds, to be the unreal. The “real,” to the romantic transcendentalists, was the “ideal” of which physical facts were merely symbolic. Melville detected in Hawthorne a gloomy view of humanity that he might have inherited from his puritan ancestors. But this was something available without reference to that heritage, something to be felt by any deeply reflective person. It was an insight into the hidden cavern of changeless human nature. It was the poet’s task to strike through the mask of the here and now and even of the there and then. Meville’s Hawthorne was not concerned to know, for its own sake, the historic past, despite his use of American colonial materials. Nor was he interested in the mere appearances of the present. He had described himself accurately, Melville would have said, in his preface to *The Snow Image and Other Twice-told Tales*, published in 1851, as one “who has been burrowing, to his utmost ability, into the depths of our common nature, for the purposes of psychological romance, and who pursues his researches in that dusky region, as he needs must, as well by the tact of sympathy as by the light of observation” (XI 4).

Nevertheless, Hawthorne sometimes had a bad conscience about his apparent neglect of the outward world there to be believed in. Matter, understood in the “light of observation,” was what mattered in a “materi-
alist” society, and he felt at fault for slighting it. He blamed himself for his seclusive habits and meager interest in the observable. “I have seen so little of the world, that I have nothing but thin air to concoct my stories of, and it is not easy to give a lifelike semblance to such shadowy stuff,” Hawthorne wrote his Bowdoin classmate, Longfellow, when, in 1837, he sent him a copy of his first book of stories, *Twice-told Tales*. It was a picture he painted also for Sophia Peabody—with whom he had fallen in love. He told her that for years he had spent a “long seclusion” spinning morbid fantasy out of his imagination in a “solitary chamber” (XV 494). Longfellow was moved by Hawthorne’s letter and wrote a supportive review of his book. Sophia responded to his plea for rescue from the prison of solitariness and married him. There was, however, something quite literary—a resort to a familiar romantic convention of the melancholy poet-exile—in this description. It was already proving so effective in the creation of his narrative persona that he would be compelled to give warning in the second edition of *Twice-told Tales* that he had exaggerated. But this confession did not change the impression Hawthorne had made on many readers, and later critics and biographers would, with only a few exceptions, tend to ignore it. Arlin Turner, one of Hawthorne’s best twentieth-century biographers, not only would call the letter to Longfellow “one of the most remarkable instances of self-revelation and self-analysis in our literary archive,” but would declare it to be a key to the writer’s lifelong artistic aims. It showed, says Turner, that “for Hawthorne, the author of moral romances and studies of human character, the important consideration was not what an event or a situation was, but rather what his creative imagination conceived it to be. To him, every object, act or person, including himself and his activities, was less significant in itself than what it could be taken to represent” (1980, 88–89). But Turner took too little account of Hawthorne’s joke—his less than candidness—and deduced too much about his aesthetics from his suspect self-portrait.

In fact, the young Hawthorne had not really been the “owl” he described but a habitual daytime stroller about town and in the countryside, and he had regularly passed summer weeks in the deliberate exploration of New England, visiting rural communities, recording assiduously his encounters and observations. An active, outward-directed side to his personality was also revealed in a less often quoted part of the Longfellow letter when he added that he intended to shortly leave his “owl’s nest” for a tour of New England and was trying to get employment either as an editor or as historian of the contemplated government expedition to the South Seas, “for though fixed so long to one spot, I have always had a desire [to] run round the world.” The expedition, eventually led by Charles Wilkes, would be
gone for four years and circumnavigate the globe, charting three hundred previously unknown islands and the coast of Antarctica. Hawthorne did not get the appointment (what a different life history his might have been if he had!). But his appetite for an untranscendental reality would persist. The man who had portrayed himself as a solitary who preferred to live withdrawn from common life found the group withdrawal of Brook Farm unacceptable. He felt that his stay had been “a dream” and he only “a spectre” there. He decided that he could “best attain the higher ends of [his] life by retaining the ordinary relation to society” (XV 237),

In the sketch “Old News,” published in 1835, Hawthorne had already written of coming upon collections of old newspaper reports of colonial times showing the hardships of daily life among the first settlers. He was prompted to declare that “[a]ll philosophy that would abstract mankind from the present is no more than words” (XI 133). Even when he lived in Concord, while keeping himself at a certain distance from Emerson and his followers (Emerson he would call “that everlasting rejecter of all that is, and seeker for he knows not what”), Hawthorne found more interest in the rubbish of old newspapers and almanacs accumulated in the Old Manse than in the theological treatises left behind by resident clergymen. He wrote in his preface to Mosses from an Old Manse, “It was as if I had found bits of magic-looking glass with the images of a vanished century in them.” The writers of the old books of theology had “been able to produce nothing half so real, as these newspaper scribblers and almanac makers had thrown off, in the effervescence of a moment” (X 20).

The preface to his Mosses from an Old Manse has not been read sufficiently for its ambiguity. The Manse itself Hawthorne describes as not having “quite the aspect of belonging to the material world.” The sluggish Concord River that never occupies itself in turning a solitary mill spindle or grinding any corn, seems to him a representation of idleness he cannot afford, and a remove from the actual. But the Concord past sends other messages. There is the disturbing story told him by Lowell of a wounded British soldier’s murder by a Concord Revolutionary. A “wilder interest” in primal American guilt is aroused when, led by Thoreau, Hawthorne finds Indian arrowheads near his door and imagines the vanished Indian village of chiefs and warriors, squaws, and children at play. He wonders if he feels joy or pain as he looks at the houses and stone fences of the white men who displaced them. Frightened of what his vision of the true past implies, the resident of the Manse somewhat frantically concludes: “But this is nonsense. The Old Manse is better than a thousand wigwams” (X 11).

Living among the better-incomed Concord intellectuals, Hawthorne’s sense of the untranscendental had only increased. He could not keep up
with the rent on the Manse, property belonging to the Emerson family, though he and Sophia sold apples that grew on the place. They moved with their new baby back to Salem to live with his mother’s relatives, the same humiliating shelter he had accepted for years after college. He would feel, repeatedly, the common American shame of pecuniary failure when, after his expulsion from the Salem Custom House, he had had to accept a fund raised for him by friends. “Ill-success in life is really and justly a matter of shame,” he said (XV 309). Not until he was forty-eight did Hawthorne enjoy near-solvency. After the critical success of *The Scarlet Letter* and then, in rapid succession, the publication of *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance*, he was able, at last, to buy a house of his own. But his life would continue to the end to be fraught with matter-of-fact realities that a propensity for dreaming could not obscure.

Hawthorne understood how the machinery of social power engaged the ambitious in the sleights and maneuvers by which a literary career might be promoted. During the public excitement over his dismissal as Surveyor of the Salem Custom House after the electoral victory of the Whigs over the Democrats, he was portrayed by his supporters as a man with no interest in politics and politicking—the owl-man image again attracting sympathy. Hawthorne himself asked a friend to tell the Whig party leader, Rufus Choate, that he was “an inoffensive man of letters—having obtained a pitiful little office on no other plea than his pitiful little literature” (XVI 264). But Hawthorne had been more “political” than he pretended. He had not, it is true, followed custom by firing all the Whig survivors who remained on his staff when he took office, although he had got his post in the first place through the efforts of friends among the Democrats. But he may really have been guilty of some party favoritism—the malfeasance of which he was accused by his enemies. He was hardly unworldly.

It is not surprising that Hawthorne’s other friendships made in college with future politicians Jonathan Cilley, Horatio Bridge, and Franklin Pierce proved far closer than his relation with Longfellow, their class laureate. These less intellectual friends were active to secure him a government appointment even before he got his first job in the Boston Custom house in 1839, and they continued to assist him by such efforts thereafter. It has been held that his eventual literary fame was made possible by his contacts with the literary establishment—writers like Longfellow or Emerson and his circle (Tompkins 1985). But more useful than these had been the Democratic journalist and editor John O’Sullivan, who published two dozen of Hawthorne’s tales and sketches in the *Democratic Review*, a party organ, between 1838 and 1845. Hawthorne’s publisher, Fields, the canny literary entrepreneur who understood the literary market better than anyone,
became his most reliable counselor, important to him to the end of his life. But dearest of all was Pierce, an intimate on every level. Hawthorne’s final, most lucrative government post was that of U. S. Consul in Liverpool, the reward—which he must have expected (though he played innocent)—for writing the future president’s campaign biography. Pierce was already odious to northern intellectuals—including members of Sophia’s family—for his support of the Missouri compromise, and Emerson would call him the worst president the country had ever had. But he was a devoted supporter in a friend’s times of difficulty. And with this “practical” man of the world’s conservative temporizing, Hawthorne’s own pessimism about human possibilities was ultimately in tune.

We are entitled, I want to urge, now, to read Hawthorne’s own directions to readers with the same distrust due his descriptions of his personal character as that of someone remote from common reality. Hawthorne has misled critics who have so often begun discussion of his fiction by quoting the brief passage in The House of the Seven Gables’ preface which offers a definition of the romance with its vague grant of “a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel”—that is, a work in which literal realism played a major part. Romancers, among whom Hawthorne numbered himself, were not, like the novelist, obliged to aim at “a very minute fidelity not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience.” But he may have been making his discrimination with some irresponsibility, as if he were not taking it as seriously as his critics since have done. It needs to be asked how much and what sort of latitude makes the difference in question. Where can the line be confidently drawn between the supposedly different genres? He goes on to allow, almost as an afterthought, that the romantic latitude he speaks of must be resorted to restrainedly. The writer should, preferably, “mingle the Marvelous rather as a slight delicate, and evanescent flavor than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public” (II 1). Hawthorne thus reduces the role of improbability or fantasy—an important aspect of his discrimination—to an inconsequence. Hawthorne must have known that there were few examples he could name that might be airily set apart with no admixture of each other. No master of the novel ever offered fuller and more direct observation of English commonplace life than Dickens, but no writer of romance indulged more audaciously than Dickens in sinuosities of improbable plot and the romantic grotesque.

Hawthorne may have been uncertain when he himself was writing romantically or realistically. The Scarlet Letter is strongly historical in detail, based on the germ of a true episode and framed in an exact calen-
dar of known historic events, a story plain and probable except for occasional moments disclaimed by the narrator as unverifiable (this, itself, a realist gesture). Its subtitle, “A Romance,” is Hawthorne’s own, to be found on the manuscript title page that is the sole surviving fragment of his book in his own hand. This was something more generic than the “A Tale” set beneath the title of Fanshawe. But, originally, he had wanted to include his longer colonial tale in a collection to be called “Old time Legends: Together with Sketches, experimental and ideal.” “Experimental” is an unclear designation, perhaps suggesting “experiential” or dealing with reality in some way; based on experience, as opposed to fanciful or ideal. The sketches would have conditioned readers’ response to the short stories and this newer work also representing old New England. The narrator of The Scarlet Letter refers, in the book’s final sentence, to the “concluded legend” just retold—returning to the first proposed title of the collection, and suggesting a traditional tale with some claim to historicity. “A Romance” may have been a last-minute decision. Fields had advertised the book as The Scarlet Letter: A Novel.

The Custom House preface asserts, though only pretentiously, the historicity of what it introduces—the rewriting of a previous manuscript derived from the verbal testimony of witnesses and confirmed by material evidence, the actual letter once worn by Hester Prynne. And the Hawthorne narrator offers to show Surveyor Pue’s document and the embroidered scrap of cloth to any skeptical inquirer. Of course, this claim is an old novelistic device not meant to deceive. But on one level it succeeds at least in asserting that the tale to be told has something like the authority of historic record; it is in congruence with the frame of recorded colonial history within which it is cunningly placed. Hawthorne also presents himself as a kind of witness from later time by invoking the participations of his Puritan ancestors in persecutions of which Hester’s ordeal is an example, and admitting that he is one of them in nature. Their views and acts, their historic exclusions and executions, made them—and him—complicit in the punishment of deviant persons like Hester.

In a passage too readily seen as a port of entry into Hawthorne’s aesthetic, “The Custom House” preface does seem to declare, nevertheless, that the writer’s imagination was a dream realm which bore only indirect relation to the obvious “true” of waking experience. But this, too, is less forthright than has been supposed. The “familiar room,” the deserted parlor where he sits, is no fantasy and has no romantic strangeness. The coal fire and moonlight which are its only illumination make every object minutely visible—as in realist description—rather than indefinite or distorted. Around him are the ordinary objects of a “domestic scene”—the
table with its workbasket, the sofa and bookcase, the child’s shoe and toys. Yet he claims it “suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests” (I 35), though we cannot be sure what kind of guests these are. Are the personages who people his tale unreal or unlikely fantasies, romance silhouettes, or psychologically “rounded” novelistic characters? Does the romantically demonic Chillingworth—someone E. M. Forster called a “flat” character—inhabit the same generic atmosphere as Hester?

Hawthorne is insistent about the romance status of his later fiction. But in the preface to *The Marble Faun* he remarks upon the difficulty, for a foreign visitor, of composing “a portrait of Italian manners and character”—that is, a detailed and accurate novelistic presentation of a people in its society. He observed that he had “lived too long abroad not to be aware that a foreigner seldom acquires that knowledge of a country, at once flexible and profound, which may justify him in endeavoring to idealize its traits.” Does this not imply that if he chose, he might have written realistically when his subject was his familiar homeland? He had, actually, declared that impossible when he wrote his three earlier books located in his native scene, all labeled outright romances by himself, and denied their status as portraits of American manners and character. To muddle the matter more, Hawthorne also declares, in this same *Marble Faun* preface, that the ideal materials for romance had been absent from that American scene where “actualities” were “so insisted upon.” No author, without a trial,” he writes, “can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land”—unlike Italy, which had all the requisite sites and props including especially ruins, Romance needed, “like ivy, lichens, and wall flowers . . . to make it grow” (IV 3). These supposed absences should have (but had not) prevented him from writing those three earlier books—if romances they were! How had Hawthorne managed to write them without those essentials? Or had he been writing more realistically than he admitted?

In 1879, when he wrote his book about Hawthorne from which I quoted at the beginning of this essay, Henry James took over Hawthorne’s confusions and added his own to his account of an American writer’s handicaps when he referred to the “large number of elements that were absent . . . for a romancer looking for subjects” in “Hawthorne’s America” and went right on, as though his change of term were of no importance, to speak of the contrasting “fund of suggestion for a novelist” available in the “European spectacle.” (emphasis added). His list is not Hawthorne’s except for its syntactic rhythm of “no this . . . no that,” though James has been
assumed to be merely repeating and expanding his predecessor in an almost humorous fashion. But his augmentations make it a recipe no longer suited for romance as Hawthorne had defined it. Instead, they suggest the furnishings of its supposed contrary in the presumed world of social institutions like an aristocracy, church or army, and of palaces, castles, manors, country houses, parsonages, thatched cottages, cathedrals, abbeys, little Norman churches, universities and public schools, even race tracks—a heterogeneous rundown that includes, in addition to Hawthorne's ivied ruins, ingredients for a comédie humaine (American Writers 351–52). It was the novel, of course—as developed by Balzac and his followers, and by the English realists—that required this plenitude—and not, conventionally, the romance.

It seems likely that James's own struggles to redefine realism for his own use may have brought him to suspect that there was something disputable about the view that the novel had to “compete” with life by means of exact and full replication of exterior appearances, or that this replication was any more to be trusted than something more freely imagined—and he suspected, rightly, I think, Hawthorne's own suspicion of the terms he himself had used. He was seeking out ways of implying a verifiable social world by other means, including the development of the inner mirror of consciousness. James deplored what he called Hawthorne’s penchant for allegory and the thinness of his depictions of persons and events. But he added a statement that reflects his judgment of the naturalists he had recently met in Paris—and redeems Hawthorne for the “real,” after all. He declares that Hawthorne's writing

...testifies to the sentiments of the society in which he flourished, almost as pertinently (proportions observed) as Balzac and some of his descendants—MM. Flaubert and Zola—testify to the manners and morals of the French people. He had certainly not proposed to himself to give an account of the social idiosyncrasies of his fellow citizens, for his touch on such points is always light and vague, he has none of the apparatus of an historian, and his shadowy style of portraiture never suggests a rigid standard of accuracy. Nevertheless, he virtually offers the most vivid reflection of New England life that has found its way into our literature. (American Writers 321)

A few years later, in his “The Art of Fiction,” James finds the novel/romance distinction sterile and arbitrary and calls these pigeon-holes of romantic and real “clumsy separations [that] appear . . . to have been made by critics and readers for their own convenience, and to help them out of their occasional queer predicaments, but to have little reality or interest for the pro-
ducer.” He adds, “I can think of no obligation to which the ‘romancer’
would not be held equally with the novelist” and deprecates a dull catego-
rier like Walter Besant, to whom his essay is responding, for his “habit of
calling this or that work of one’s fellow-artist a romance—unless it be, of
course, simply for the pleasantness of the thing, as for instance when
Hawthorne gave this heading to his story of Blithedale” (American Writers
55–56). James may be grasping at Hawthorne’s idea of a mixed form to
which the name neither of novel nor of Romance, in their traditional
senses, is applicable. Much later, writing a preface to The American for its
revision in the Scribner New York Edition in 1907—and feeling the need to
justify this early work’s violations of strict probability—James attempted
once more to define “romance” but, recalling his dislike of this tag, he went
on to admit that the great realists he admired had somehow achieved a
higher art in which such a distinction became insignificant. “Men of large
responding imagination before the human scene,” like Scott or Balzac, even
“the coarse, comprehensive prodigious Zola” were, he wrote, masters of fic-
tion in which “the current remains therefore extraordinarily rich and
mixed, washing us successively with the warm wave of the near and famil-
iar and the tonic shock, as it may be, of the far and strange” (European
Writers 1062–63).

Despite this wisdom of James’s, which I have called upon for support at
this later time in critical history, Hawthorne continued for many years to
be taken not as a realist in any sense, but as the romantic fabulist or the
transcendental symbolist Melville had hailed. Melville’s idea that
Hawthorne’s historical fictions were illustrations of universal truths rather
than exact reflections of a particular past had its most powerful re-state-
ment in the mid-twentieth century, when F. O. Matthiessen (1941) also
said, as Melville had, that Hawthorne’s view of man’s existence was simply
an ancient tragic one—like Shakespeare’s. Matthiessen also detected in
Hawthorne the idea that human life could be read allegorically. It was an
idea derived from a long tradition of which Puritanism was an early Amer-
ican expression and Emerson a later one. It seemed arguable that
Hawthorne could have adapted from the Puritans just what Emerson, also,
had inherited; that is, a way of reading history as a divinely written text, so
subduing its resistant obscurities—the stuff of realism—to a scheme of
universal meaning. Of course, neither Puritanism nor Emerson was the
necessary origin of a post–World War II “new” critical penchant to which
Matthiessen also responded, one that tended to detach literary works from
immediate sociohistorical “context.” Reacting against 1930s critical read-
ings that reduced literature to evidence of historical determinism, some
postwar critics preferred to see Hawthorne as a symbolist or allegorist
whose meanings were related to the national experience only in the most abstract way. If he could be said to represent American life, it was because he represented its enduring myths. Along with Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville, the giants of Matthiessen’s “American Renaissance,” Hawthorne was thought by Henry Nash Smith (1950) and R. W. B. Lewis (1955) to express a pristine “Adamic” spirit at the heart of American culture, the product of its special origins in a “virgin land” empty of the fixed institutions and traditions of older nations. Richard Chase, in a widely influential book (1957), argued that Hawthorne had been a writer of romances rather than realist novels because romance was the inevitable literary genre for American writers from Brockden Brown to Faulkner, the ultimate expression of the frontier experience of persistingly unfurnished American conditions.

In the 1970s and 1980s these ideas were seen to be inadequate to account for the whole of American culture in the antebellum period as new scholars and critics discovered another American Renaissance of the uncanonized or marginalized, particularly writing by women and African Americans. It became obvious that the supposed American vacancy was filled with realities that had not been ignored by these previously less celebrated writers. But had these realities been as much ignored by Hawthorne and other “white, male” establishment writers as appeared? It now may seem that it is more accurate to say that evasion of history was really not possible even for those cultural icons who have been unnaturally separated from the general stream by a dubious critical elevation. Their supposed suppressions may be only apparent.

“Historical Romance” may be an especially misleading term in Hawthorne’s case. It is true that his early stories incorporated only a few of the visibilities of persons and places gathered from his reading in historical colonial sources. He liked, sometimes, to elaborate an abstract moral paradox for which his historical tone barely provided a lightly indicated background. But the reader who has naively taken a literalist view of Hawthorne’s sketches and stories about seventeenth-century New England and, above all, of The Scarlet Letter, is justified. These repeatedly incorporate some incident or description that is not merely the incidental product of Hawthorne’s idle browsing in authentic record, not merely a way of distancing what transpires in the tale from the reader’s sense of the real. Even when the tale told is imaginary, Hawthorne’s stories of early New England are historically resonant. One of his best, “My Kinsman, Major Molyneux,” was rediscovered and appreciated in the 1950s as it had not been before, but mostly as a psychological fable of youth’s coming to manhood—though it is implicated in a complex vision of the antecedents
of the American Revolution, as Q. D. Leavis (1951) finally pointed out. One critic of the day, Seymour Gross, wrote, “History as history had but very little meaning for Hawthorne artistically.” The Gentle Boy, a story about Quakers in the Bay Colony at a precise moment in 1659, seemed to this interpreter “the clearest instance of how Hawthorne deliberately attempted to transmute an historical phenomenon into an elemental condition of existence” (Gross 99).

Hawthorne, however, appears to have undertaken, at an early stage, to conduct a deliberate inquiry into the historical meaning of his local past in projected collections with titles like “Seven Tales of My Native Land” and “Provincial Tales,” as Michael Colacurcio (1984) has pointed out. The Scarlet Letter shows everywhere the traces of its origins in his regional and familial reality, based as it is not only on the true story of the woman condemned for adultery and forced to wear her “A” like a brand, but also locating the story in the enveloping reality of the Massachusetts colony. The choice between use of the fictionized past either as a setting for a gothic tale or, instead, as an encounter with historical reality is expressed precisely in Hawthorne’s early story “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” when the authorial narrator describes his attempt to entertain two young ladies—his representative readers—during a walk to Salem’s Gallows Hill. He offers, first, as illustration of his art, a “wondrous tale of old times”—of brother-sister love, “distempered jealousy,” fratricidal murder, devilish malice—at which mélange of gothic romance his young auditors merely laugh. Only then does he undertake to “see whether truth were more powerful than fiction,” and depicts the veritable horrors of Salem in 1692, the witchcraft trials, the zeal of Cotton Mather, the scaffold of executions—and makes his hearers shudder. At the end he calls for a “sadly commemorative” monument on the spot, as though he desires, himself, to make art out of historic memory.

But as even Colacurcio has insufficiently noted, the shorter tales of the New England colonies, and even Hawthorne’s masterpiece, The Scarlet Letter, conduct an inquiry into the nature of a past still active in the American present. Such commemorative recovery of the past can be said to participate in America’s mounting need, in the antebellum period, to understand its early beginnings in order to determine what its unity in diversity was coming to mean. Orators like Daniel Webster celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the Plymouth landing as an occasion for honoring “our attachment to the principles of civil and religious liberty for which [the pilgrims] encountered the dangers of the ocean, the storms of heaven, the violence of savages, disease, exile, and famine, to enjoy and establish” (Bell 1971, 9). But the persecutors of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchin-
son—not to speak of Salem’s witches—represented, as well, a precedent of repression rather than liberty, and in 1850, as *The Scarlet Letter* was published, Webster supported the Fugitive Slave Act. “What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?” Frederick Douglass asked on Independence Day two years later (Zinn 182). Slavery was not only a contradiction discoverable in the past, but the source of mounting conflict while the ante-bellum years were riven by contesting ideas of nationality. As the United States encompassed greater diversities, it also aspired to a consolidated nationhood. In 1838, Hawthorne had already exhibited the predictive colonial contradiction with exquisite precision in “Endicott and the Red Cross.” The sketch appears to conclude with unqualified praise of Endicott tearing the symbol of English domination from the colonial flag. His gesture is linked to the future Revolution: “We look back though the mist of ages, and recognize in the rending of the Red Cross from New England’s banner, the first omen of that deliverance which our fathers consummated, after the bones of stern Puritans had lain more than a century in the dust” (IX 441). Yet this tribute is undercut by the reader’s recollection of the narrator’s description of other presences in that early scene—the Catholic in the stocks, the labeled “Wanton Gospeller” on the scaffold and his companion with her tongue cruelly held down by a cleft stick, and others suffering mutilation or, at least, symbolic branding, like the man condemned to wear a hangman’s halter or the woman who wears an “A” signifying her adultery. This last victim of Puritan severity is already Hester Prynne. She not only wears her “A” for the same cause but anticipates Hester’s reinterpretation of its meaning. Criminalized by Endicott, the woman of the Letter has embroidered her badge with gold thread “so that the capital A might have been thought to mean Admirable” (IX 435). Hawthorne draws in both cases upon the early American experience of justified revolt—even Anne Hutchinson’s antinomianism—to which Hester refers herself.

One might take notice of the suggestive symbolic discovery of Hester’s embroidered Letter in the Custom House rather than somewhere outside it. It was in the realm of recovered fact—that storage room of the past above the stagnant office where he spent his days—that the Surveyor found inspiration for the masterpiece to be written upon his forced exit. On the lower floor of the Custom House itself, he said, it had been “folly, with the materiality of this daily life pressing so intrusively upon me, to attempt to fling myself back into another age; or to insist on creating the semblance of a world out of airy matter”(I 37). But though a fictional world built entirely out of “airy matter” remained impossible even after his escape, Hawthorne would, very soon, fling himself back into another age perceived through veracious history. “The past was not dead” (I 27).
It was not dead because it was refigured in the present. In the fullness of character Hawthorne awards her, Hester is, after all, incongruous in colonial Boston. She is a nineteenth-century woman imagined as inhabiting a seventeenth-century world. Her growth into an exponent of new freedoms is the center of her story, her originating sexual transgression not being even worth naming within the narrative. Hawthorne’s narrator tries to account for her anachronistic character by the fact that she is someone whose exceptional mind, provoked by sufferings and loneliness, is able to anticipate ideas not conceivable by others in the New World: “In her lonesome cottage, by the sea shore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England” (I 164). But her views are only explicable as those of a radical American woman of the year 1850. Hester thinks of her love affair with Dimmesdale like a nineteenth-century romantic when she tells him it had a “consecration of its own.” (I 195). As though she is already Hawthorne’s feminist contemporary, Margaret Fuller, she conceives of a time when the relation of the sexes will be changed. Extending the implications of her dissidence further, one may even be ready to suspect her adherence to other revolutionary ideas of the modern era. Her feminism suggests other nineteenth-century American causes embraced along with their own by feminist militants in Hawthorne’s later life.

Without mentioning slavery directly, The Scarlet Letter evokes the earliest American polity to discover the presumption. that sustained it in Hawthorne’s day in a land that had been supposed providentially voided for the white man. Still on the American conscience were the excluded Native Americans glimpsed at the edge of the gathered populace of Hester’s Boston. They seem to arouse some interest in Hawthorne’s narrator, who remarks upon the Indians in their deerskin robes. They watch the ceremony of the Puritan Election Day as they also had watched Endicott’s flag-tearing in Hawthorne’s description. They “stood apart with countenances of inflexible gravity, beyond what even the Puritan aspect could attain” (I 232). We are invited to wonder about the meaning of their gravity. We can also recall the remarkable passage already referred to in the sketch prefacing Mosses from an Old Manse, in which Hawthorne expresses his mixed feeling about the genocide of the Native American.

More absolutely suppressed from the text of The Scarlet Letter is the witness of the Africans who formed a part of the first immigrant settlements, as Hawthorne knew, for their descendants were still living in his Salem as well as in Boston. The history of slavery since colonial times could not have been invisible from the vantage of such slave-trade outposts as Salem, Boston, and Liverpool. Writing The Scarlet Letter only a decade
before the Civil War, Hawthorne understood already the consequences of a long social pretense of their non-presence. Later, in his ambiguous Civil War essay, “Chiefly About War Matters,” he drew attention to an apt symbol in the coincidence that the same ship that had brought early white settlers to Boston, had, soon after, come again with a cargo of African slaves, white and black thus linked in commitment to the New World. Slavery was an ancient gloomy wrong too grave to be called “picturesque,” though Hawthorne had outrageously declared, in *The Marble Faun* preface, his regret that America was a country with “no picturesque and gloomy wrong” for Romance to feed on. He did not forget the crimes against witches and dissidents in which his ancestors had participated. Nor could he have been unaware of the history of slavery, the long perpetrated wrong that had become the burning issue of his day.

If black men or women are absent from the scene of *The Scarlet Letter*, their condition *is* shadowed in Hester’s. Her figurative chains recall the slave’s literal ones. After her condemnation, Hester is thought by Hawthorne’s Puritans to have become their “life-long bond-slave” (I 227). It is no accident that the image Hawthorne uses to represent her situation is that of the chains that bind the slave: “The chain that bound her was of iron links and galling to her inmost soul” (I 80). Her desire for a greater freedom is thought to resemble the literal condition of the black slave fleeing his enslavement when she throws away “the fragments of a broken chain” (I 164). When *The Scarlet Letter* was being written, American feminists had already begun to use the word “bondage” to describe the state of women, to liken their unfreedom to the slave’s. Hester on her scaffold in the book’s opening scene is even represented in Howard Roberts’s 1872 sculpture as leaning her hand upon a post from which a fragment of linked chain still hangs even though she no longer bears the shackle on her wrist or ankle. As Jean Fagan Yellin (1989) has shown, a rhetorical feminist tradition identified the slave’s condition with that of all women. There was, also, an evolving popular iconography which transmuted the plea of a kneeling, fettered slave to a white *man*—“I am a man and your brother”—to the appeal of a fettered black woman to a white woman, “I am a woman and your sister.” As the “free” white woman’s sister, the slave reminds the other woman not only of her right to be free but also of the white woman’s own bondage. She implies that the woman she addresses might also be reminding men of her sibling equality to *them*. The standing white woman to whom the appeal is made has herself become, like Roberts’s Hester, a chained victim of a master’s will. Early agitators for female liberation like Sophia Hawthorne’s two sisters, Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Mann, committed themselves to the anti-slavery cause with
some sense of this identification. *The Scarlet Letter* is thus the biography of a feminist whose wider sense of the meaning of human equality can be presumed.

Hawthorne professed to dislike female propagandists for reform, but in *The Scarlet Letter* as well as in *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Marble Faun*, a feminist woman is the magnetic center of his story, irresistible to others despite her odor of transgression. These books express Hawthorne’s distaste for female reformers who campaigned for the rights of political self-expression as well as for the abolitionist cause by raising their voices from public platforms. But he cannot help his own responsive fascination even if he compels Hester, Zenobia, and Miriam to surrender any hope of the immediate fulfillment of their missions. Zenobia and Miriam do not address themselves to public audiences in our hearing, actually. Hester, especially, is a silent woman whose insurrectionary thoughts are unheard almost until the end. She finally cannot—though she would have wished it—become an orating prophetess of personal independence, like Anne Hutchinson. But when she returns to resume her marginal place in the Boston community, it is not because she accepts the old judgment upon her but because she does, after all, have a prophecy to leave to her sisters, though personally and privately conveyed. The prophecy is melioristic—and seems evasive in its rejection of feminist urgency. “[A]t some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation of man and woman on a surer ground” (I 263). This is precisely the way Hawthorne wanted to be able to think about the withering away of slavery—“one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances but which, in its own good time . . . it causes to vanish like a dream” (V 416–17), as he said in the campaign biography he wrote for Pierce. Hawthorne’s language analogizes the causes of abolition and female liberation—both causes whose exigence seemed obvious to others in his day.

In the light of such implicit reference to Hawthorne’s own present reality as well as to that of past history, we may allow ourselves some skepticism concerning his claim, in introducing the historic otherness of *The Scarlet Letter*, that he had been unable to “diffuse thought and imagination through the opaque substance of today” (I 37). But he makes this assertion even concerning the two novel/romances he wrote promptly after, though his recognition of the reality of his contemporary America is openly evident in them. When he writes about his own modern Salem in *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne warns the reader unconvincingly that his story should be read as “having a great deal more to do with the clouds
overhead than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex” (II 3). He would insist that in writing *The Blithedale Romance*, his “concern with the Socialist Community [was] merely to establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagoric antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives” (III 1). But he admitted that he had stayed a while at Brook Farm and, as everyone knew, he had been a friend of Margaret Fuller, who resembled his fictional Zenobia. But these were more than the customary disclaimers to avoid suit. They were a deliberate denial of an art of reference that he was disinclined to confess to. Even the literally identifiable if dead Roman landscape of art objects and ruins replicated in *The Marble Faun*, had, he said, been serviceable only as a “fairy precinct, where actualities are not terribly insisted upon as they are or must be, in America” (IV 3). But his American scene cannot be dismissed as a “fairy precinct.” Hawthorne’s constant claim was that he aimed to escape that American insistence upon actuality, but we may have taken him too readily at his word.

In the two fictions set in the America of his own time, Hawthorne no longer reads the present in the past, but faces the reality of the present directly. The sense of this in *The House of the Seven Gables* is undeniable, despite its gothic features—ancestral curse, decaying old mansion, hidden document, mysterious painting, and the rest. All of these blow away in the end, routed by everyday sunshine, that daylight which is also nineteenth-century positivism and optimism. Hawthorne strove to insert in this book what he called in its preface “the realities of the moment.” He gave significant importance to such new phenomena as the railroad and the daguerreotype. Both technical innovations enforced new modes of consciousness—an awareness of simultaneously merged experiences acquired by Clifford in his flight from the ancient house of the Pyncheons and a new literal vision, threateningly percipient, possessed by Holgrave with his camera.

But the corrupt politics Hawthorne knew all about is represented in the career of Jaffrey Pyncheon. And the presence of mesmerism in the book is not merely for its gothic effect but because it represents the subjugation of weaker wills, especially those of women, but also of the subject wills of workers, to the powerful. Ancient crime persisting in its effects into the living present is the governing motif of *The House of the Seven Gables*, though its author struggles, along with his characters, to escape such continuities and to break into a more democratic world. And Holgrave, the enthusiast of the latest fads and minor reform movements, is a critic also of the fundamental curse of inherited “real” property. His is the
ultimate radicalism of a socialist-communist theory of social equalization. The “romance” plot structure by which the descendant of the Maules triumphs over long-privileged authority and revenges an ancient appropriation is profoundly social and political. But we are compelled by the book to ask at what cost a mere storyteller and “idler” (as Hawthorne’s own ancestors would have called Holgrave as well as Hawthorne) might achieve a place in the modern world. The modern world no less than the Puritan would really have regarded such a person as no more than negligible. There may be more pessimism and irony than we have supposed in the fact that the erstwhile revolutionary and artist does not so much surrender his old views as submit to what he has vanquished. He accepts the uses of those powers over others his mesmerist talents had represented, even though these have been renounced. The descendant of a carpenter/house builder moves into another old house, albeit in the unpolluted country, though he had once believed that every generation should destroy the structures elevated by its predecessors and build anew. The curse of inherited wealth is not to be forgotten in the transfer from the House of the Seven Gables to this alternate Pyncheon property. Masculinist hegemony is doubtfully corrected by the domestic fairy influence of a Pyncheon country cousin.

The Blithedale Romance is still less committed to romance formula. A suspicion of utopian expectation—itself a romantic idea of escape from the social world—operates in the book. Blithedale may be a mythical Happy Place where the refugees from reality discover reality again. But it is also the latest instance of utopian delusion. Hawthorne is distrustful of the contemporary reformer personality as instanced either by Hollingsworth or even the passionate Zenobia. As in The House of the Seven Gables, mesmerism suggests social as well as personal appropriation of the wills of others. Priscilla knits little purses by hand but looks like a mill girl from Lowell. As a hypnotic medium she is a representative of the new slavery of the factory which bound thousands like her to mechanized needlework under the rule of the male factory manager. This darkest of Hawthorne’s books ends not only with the humiliation of Hollingsworth, but with Zenobia’s drowning, a reflection of Hawthorne’s feeling about Fuller, from whose writings her speeches are borrowed. Her stiffened body being pulled from the water in which she drowned seems a nightmare imagining of Fuller, whose body was never recovered after the shipwreck in which she died on her voyage home from revolutionary Rome. Finally, in this only one of Hawthorne’s longer fictions written in the first person, Coverdale, perhaps speaking for Hawthorne, admits that he had a “decided tendency toward the actual.” Reviewing The Blithedale Romance in the Westminster
Review, the anonymous reviewer (perhaps George Eliot) protested the author's expectation that his community could be passed off as a mere convenience of romantic framing. "Would he paint an ideal slave-plantation merely for the beauty of the thing, without pretending to elicit a conclusion, favorable or otherwise, to slavery?" (Crowley 1970, 263). For whatever complex personal reasons, Hawthorne seemed always to want to deny the thrust of his own representations.

As I have been saying, one feels inclined with James to dispense with the realism/romance classification in studying Hawthorne's fiction. It certainly proves an obstacle to a full response to him. We may even find grounds in a more thoroughgoing materialism than his own for rejecting his unconfident sense that an impermeable barrier divides the real from the fantastic. We may want to say that nothing the writer writes escapes the taint of reference, that the realities of literal history speak even through the figurations of fantasy. On the other hand, considering that Hawthorne put himself so insistently in the anti-realist camp, we may, in quite another way, be tempted to find in him an anticipation of a recent skepticism. He claimed to have "read and reread Montaigne in early youth" when his sister borrowed the *Essais* from the Salem Athenaeum on his behalf. Somehow he foresaw a "postmodern" way of thinking that "reality" is a word always to be set in quotation marks as a part of the mind’s figuration. It is remarkable—though not generally remarked upon—how Hawthorne expresses the suspicion that the "real" cannot be confidently distinguished from the imaginary because all we can claim to know in either case is the problematic world of our ideas. James, despite his admirations for Balzac, initiated a realism that was above all, relativist, the register of how we take what we see—and so ushered in the modernism of Joyce and Woolf. If this too, was still mimesis, as Eric Auerbach believed, it was no longer that classic Realism that was the mode of a vision of life as not only confidently recognizable in its details, but confidently interpretable.

Hawthorne himself sometimes seems to make an ironic mockery of our search for stable meanings. How faithful to our experience of reading his stories or novels are the morals he sometimes announces? “Be true, be true...” may be only “one of many meanings that press upon us from the poor minister’s miserable experience,” the Hawthorne narrator concedes as he concludes *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne’s notorious cultivation of ambiguity in his stories seems to mean that he, like ourselves, longed vainly for the classic realist’s confidence in the singularity and accessibility of meaning, the structures of story that lead to an indisputable consequence like the outcome of natural law, the solidity of a world which is not undermined by doubt of our perceptions. But his fiction does not grant to our perceptions
an indissoluble bond with unquestionable reality. What really happened to Young Goodman Brown in the forest? Was Beatrice Rappaccini corrupt or innocent? Had Robin betrayed his kinsman Major Molyneux or risen to an adult vision of the necessary historical future? Was Owen Warland’s worship of the Beautiful a failure to accommodate to life as it was or the triumph of art and idealism? Such questions remain unanswered at the conclusion of some of Hawthorne’s finest tales. The open-endedness of his plots is a denial of classic realism—and where his art faltered, as in The Marble Faun, the open end looked only like irresolution, and readers—to Hawthorne’s annoyance—protested because he had not “cleared everything up” and told what happened further to Donatello and Miriam. Hawthorne was even forced by popular demand—against his own inclination—to add a clarifying “postscript” to the second printing of The Marble Faun.

In his masterpiece, The Scarlet Letter, however, it was precisely this suspension of conclusion and explanation that makes final judgment impossible in the case of Hester, who fails and triumphs, is censured or vindicated from moment to moment as we read Hawthorne’s book. Perhaps Hawthorne’s denials of his own referentiality were rooted in his personal habit of distrust and misgiving in an age of conflicted certainties. Realist reality—at least as it was understood in the nineteenth-century novel—was felt to be something knowable, just as nature had become knowable through science; hence, the general preference for an omniscient narrator whose observation can be relied upon. But Hawthorne’s third-person narrator (not to speak of that self-doubting autobiographical voice that governs The Blithedale Romance and Hawthorne’s sketches) is no such reliable observer. Even the almost anonymous narrator of The Scarlet Letter continually protests his inability to determine things, the inaccessibility of the indisputable. Concerning the appearance of the letter exposed at last to public view on the bosom of Dimmesdale, he offers the contrary theories of supposed witnesses, and says “the reader may choose”—a coy evasion of narrational responsibility which Hawthorne had already practiced in such early stories as “Young Goodman Brown.”

The modern reader is likely to feel at home with such indeterminism. Hawthorne’s open endings can seem to enrich our sense of the complexity of life, its irreducibility to linear plot. But Hawthorne may have been distressed by his own reluctance to simplify. It is, of course, impossible to tell how much his skepticism contributed to the near-surrender of his literary vocation when, after the swift succession of publication of three of his published long fictions between 1850 and 1853, he went into government harness again. In accepting his Liverpool consulship, Hawthorne knew that he
was not the kind of writer to turn books out in off hours from a grueling job—and did not publish his next work of fiction, *The Marble Faun*, until 1860. He seems to have found it more and more difficult to compose the mixed form that had proved successful in his American novels. Remote from his familiar native scene, his descriptive faculty was lavished on the antiquities instead of the living present of Rome, and the thinness of his characterization in the depiction of his Americans removed from their explanatory American world, represented a failure. His late unfinished romances were never-to-be completed efforts to achieve a vision uniting past and present, fantasy and fact. He had kept his notebooks up, recorded numerous observations during his travels, and made a book of his English impressions. It is difficult to say how much failing health contributed to something like the collapse of Hawthorne’s confidence, but the war he had dreaded yet came to see was inevitable and to which he acknowledged his commitment, seems to have profoundly depressed him. “The Present, the Immediate, the Actual has proved too potent for me. It takes away not only my scanty faculty, but even my desire for imaginative composition,” Hawthorne wrote (V 4) only months before he died in 1864.