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Estranged Allegiances in Hawthorne’s Unfinished Romances

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Back Home

The Hawthornes “do not want to leave exactly, at least they don’t know what they want,” Annie Fields—the wife of Boston’s major literary publisher and Hawthorne’s old friend James T. Fields—wrote to her mother from London in May 1860 (Gollin 2002, 30). On June 28, the Hawthornes and the Fieldses arrived in Boston harbor on the Cunard liner Niagara. After seven years abroad, the first four as American Consul to Liverpool, Hawthorne uneasily returned to a far more troubled country than he had left.

He moved back into the house he called the Wayside, in Concord, the only house he had ever owned. While living in rented lodgings and hotels in England and on the Continent, Hawthorne had fantasized about setting down new roots—in Siena, perhaps, or in an English manor house. But he returned to the Wayside. His neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson gave a party in his honor the next day; the following day he attended the monthly dinner meeting of the elite Saturday Club (which had elected him to membership while he was abroad); and two days later his publishers William D. Ticknor and James T. Fields honored him with a banquet. Yet as Hawthorne later told his English friend John Bright, he had stayed abroad too long and lost his “home-feelings” (XVIII 356). He had lost even more. As he more plaintively told another English friend, Francis Bennoch, “I lose England without gaining America” (XVIII 352).
When Hawthorne bought the Wayside in 1852, its chief attractions were the hillside behind it and its moderate price, and it had easily accommodated the family whose three children then “bundled together in one room” (XVIII 263). But Una and Julian now required separate “apartments” and Hawthorne wanted a study. He therefore contracted for an addition capped by a third floor “sky-parlor,” accepted the carpenters’ $500 estimate, and anticipated swift completion. His household was disrupted for months, however, and the final costs exceeded $2000.

Hawthorne had gone to Liverpool anticipating that savings from his consular salary and fees would make him financially secure for the rest of his life, and he had lived frugally in England and on the Continent. But his income turned out to be lower and his consular costs higher than anticipated; and he had made loans to a few old friends, given small sums to destitute Americans and European exiles, paid his sister a monthly allowance, and underwritten Delia Bacon’s polemic about the “true” authorship of Shakespeare’s plays. The unexpectedly high cost of remodeling the Wayside required him to resume writing even before his “sky-parlor” was finished. Drawing on his English notebooks in July, Hawthorne prepared “Some of the Haunts of Robert Burns” for the *Atlantic Monthly*, which his publishers had recently acquired. Soon afterward, he resumed work on a romance that he had conceived in England and sketched in Rome.

Meanwhile, the Civil War was looming. Even before sailing for England, Hawthorne had been out of step with his abolitionist friends and neighbors. Like them, he had opposed the Fugitive Slave Law and signed a Free Soil petition. Yet his 1852 campaign biography of the Democrats’ presidential candidate Franklin Pierce had praised the steadfastness of Pierce’s conviction that Southern slavery was protected by the Constitution. It had also presented the “view” that slavery was “one of those evils, which Divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances” but eventually “causes to vanish like a dream” (XXIII 352).

What Hawthorne had told his friend Horatio Bridge in January 1857—that he loved New England but felt “no kindred with nor leaning towards the Abolitionists” (XVIII 8)—remained true. Therefore, in November 1860, two days before Lincoln was elected President, he declined to attend a Saturday Club dinner honoring the strongly abolitionist Republican governor of Massachusetts, Nathaniel Banks. As he explained, “In the ruin and dismemberment of the party to which I have been attached, it might behove [sic] me to show a somewhat stronger political feeling than heretofore”(XVIII 336).

Hawthorne’s political feeling was still relatively tepid in December, when South Carolina was on the point of seceding from the union. If Henry Bright came to America, Hawthorne told him, he would
have the pleasure . . . of seeing the Union in its death-throes, and of trium-
phing over me in revenge for all the uncivil things I used to say about
England and her institutions.

He was “ashamed to say how little” he cared about “the matter”:

New England will still have her rocks and ice, and I should not wonder if we
become a better and a nobler people than ever heretofore. As to the South, I
never loved it. We do not belong together; the Union is unnatural . . . ; and
as long as it continues, no American of either section will ever feel a genuine
thrill of patriotism, such as you Englishmen feel at every breath you draw.

He even ventured a comical suggestion: England “might be induced to
receive the New England States back again” (XVIII 354–56).

Such professions continued even after the Confederate States of Amer-
ica was formed in February 1861. “Perhaps . . . I shall have a new Romance
ready by the time New-England becomes a separate nation,” Hawthorne
told Ticknor, “—a consummation I rather hope for than otherwise”
(XVIII 363). By then he was working steadily on a new version of the
romance he had first drafted in Rome, centered on a young American who
contemplates claiming his ancestral English heritage, calculated to “illus-
trate the sympathy and the difference between Americans & Englishmen”
(XII 485).

In Hawthorne’s English notebooks, most assessments of that difference
“assert American superiority” (XXI 342). As a curious example,
Hawthorne thought his “excellent” Oxford host Richard J. Spiers, a former
town mayor who purportedly “began life as a hairdresser, . . . would be alto-
ether more at home, and more in keeping with the society around him, in
America, than here” (XXII 149–50). And “only America could have
produced” the “vicissitudinous” seventy-year-old Kentucky man Philip
Richardson, who called at the consulate, a former mine owner and ships’
captain. Richardson had “fought through the whole war of 1812” and killed
dozens of Englishmen at the Battle of New Orleans, including a handsome
officer who died with “the sweetest and happiest smile over his face that
could be conceived” (an image Hawthorne would put to good use) (XXII
170–73). Richardson’s antitype was a seventy-year-old Liverpool “Inspector
of Nuisances” Hawthorne encountered on a train, a “puffy” and “insipid”
man who was “odorous of his office,” but whose greatest contrast with “the
American lies in the narrower circuit of his ideas” (XXII 173–74). Yet many
of his countrymen also seemed ridiculous. They included the many callers
at the consulate who cherished claims to English estates.
In a sense, Hawthorne was one of them. Though he had found little to admire in Liverpool, entering its harbor had been a form of homecoming to his ancestral birthplace. This was the country whose language and literature were also his, where his books had been published and praised. “What a wonderful land! It is our forefathers’ land; our land; for I will not give up such a precious inheritance,” he later exclaimed (XXII 260). Not even “bloody wars and vindictive animosities” could eradicate Americans’ “unspeakable yearning towards England” (V 18).

In his autobiographical preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne had crossed “the gulf of time” to revivify a seventeenth-century Puritan ancestor and his Puritan son, imagining how they would scorn their “story-writing descendant,” yet affirming that “strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine” (I 9–10). Soon after arriving in England, Hawthorne explored that linkage further:

My ancestor left England in 1630. I return in 1853. I sometimes feel as if I myself had been absent these two hundred and eighteen years [sic]—leaving England just emerging from the feudal system, and finding it on the verge of Republicanism. It brings the two far separated points of time very closely together, to view the matter thus. (XXI 138)

This energized his imagination. “In my romance,” he wrote in his journal in April 1855, “the original emigrant to America may have carried away with him a family-secret, whereby it was in his power . . . to have brought about the ruin of the family. . . . At last, the hero of the Romance comes to England, and finds that . . . he still has it in his power to procure the downfall [sic] of the family” (XXI 162).

During his first spring in England, while dining at Smithell’s Hall, “one of the oldest residences in England,” Hawthorne acquired a “good legend” about a “bloody footstep” in the entrance hall. “The tradition is that a certain martyr, . . . being examined before the then occupant of the Hall, and committed to prison, stamped his foot in earnest protest against the injustice with which he was treated” (XXI 160). A variant attributed the footstep to a man wounded by his brother.

To visit Smithell’s Hall was to visit the distant yet persistent past. Hawthorne spent a night in an old oak-lined chamber, explored the mansion and its grounds, and inspected the “miraculous footstep.” Although he mocked the John Bulls and their “females” who were also house guests, and although he attributed the putative footstep to “a darker vein cropping up through the grey flag-stone” (XXI 290–99), he had acquired the setting for his “American Claimant” romance and its central symbol.
The American Claimant

What is now called The American Claimant Manuscripts includes three distinct attempts to write a romance interrogating Americans’ attraction to England (“our old home,” Hawthorne later called it) through a particular American’s claim to an English estate. The first, written in Rome in 1858, is called “The Ancestral Footstep” (XII 3–89). The second and third drafts, written in Concord between 1860 and 1861 on the eve of the Civil War, are entitled “Etherege” and “Grimshawe” (90–342 and 343–471). The manuscripts include notes to himself, plot sketches, and meditations on emergent themes and motifs. No draft is complete. Yet even Hawthorne’s hoary gothic motifs—an old key the hero carries without knowing what it might unlock, an ancient house that is perhaps “his,” an antagonist who tries to kill him, and the legendary bloody footstep—display the intertwined continuities of England and America.

Hawthorne never settled on a single back story for the bloody footstep. Perhaps one brother had killed or perhaps merely wounded another, perhaps during England’s Civil War, and perhaps the woman they both loved eloped to America with her bloodstained sweetheart. Or, a rebellious brother not only opposed the King during England’s Civil War but also beheaded him, and thereafter left a bloody footprint wherever he went. Or, a Quaker tormented by his papist brothers escaped to America, bleeding as he went, then suffered “persecution likewise from the Puritans.” In each variant, the footstep signifies “brotherly hatred and attempted murder.” All are glosses on America’s ties to and severance from England, the archetypal fratricide of Cain, and the inherent fratricide of all civil wars.

Hawthorne’s protagonist is a young American with a lively curiosity and an anglocentric cultural perspective who has come to England in search of his ancestral roots. He hopes to bridge the spatial and temporal gulf between his Puritan ancestors’ land of origin and his own. That hope—which Hawthorne shared—is the inverse of the Puritans’ dream: the hero hopes to reclaim what his ancestors had forfeited.

In the fragmentary “Ancestral Footstep,” written in Rome, the names of people and places sometimes change, but the hero’s character remains stable. Usually called Middleton, he is a lawyer who, like Franklin Pierce, had fought in the Mexican-American War and served in Congress, and who, like Hawthorne, had been scarred by party politics. But he is now on vacation and on a pursuit that might altogether change his life. An unattached bachelor, he embodies the American ideal of Adamic opportunity.

The story opens as he is strolling in the verdant English countryside, venturing into the domain that he has long dreamed of possessing. We
learn his name and national identity only after he is defined as a man of “ready sensibility” who enjoys interacting with everyone he meets; his flexibility “was perhaps a variety of his American nature” (4). During his political career he had “acquired something of the faculty (good or evil, as might be), of making himself all things to all men” (36). But his basic “finess” remains intact.

In each disjunctive plot variant, Middleton enters into dialogues about England and America—initially with an old man he met on his walking tour, later with the incumbent of the ancestral estate, and repeatedly with a spirited young woman. The old man thinks the differences between the two countries cannot and should not be bridged:

England will never understand America, for England never does understand a foreign country, and whatever you may say about kindred, America is as much a foreign country as France itself. These two hundred years of a different climate and circumstance...have created a new and decidedly original type of national character.

Middleton replies that the English and Americans are “in any event two noble breeds of men, and ought to appreciate one another,” and thinks “America has the breadth of idea to do this for England, whether reciprocated or not” (32–33).

A more disputatious dialogue occurs after Middleton has entered the grounds of the ancestral estate and encountered its incumbent. Because that Englishman disdains “Yankees, whose democracy has demoralized them to the perception of what is due to the antiquity of descent,” he is nonplussed by the Yankee’s confident rejoinder. “Yes,’ said Middleton quietly, ‘we have sympathy with what is strong and vivacious to-day; none with what was so yesterday)” (67).

More central to the plot are his discussions with a vivacious young woman called Alice. Now that Middleton has gratified his “natural yearning” to see his forefathers’ country, she argues, he should

return, and cast in your lot with your own people, let it be what it will. I fully believe that it is such a lot as the world has never yet seen, and that the faults, the weaknesses, the errors of your countrymen will vanish away... (56)

Hawthorne himself was never that optimistic. But Alice’s faith in America’s future and her conviction that claiming the ancestral estate would lead to catastrophe turn Middleton’s thoughts to “the life that he ought to be leading in America, the struggles in which he ought to take part” (70–73).
That sense of obligation underlies a plot resolution that Hawthorne entertained: Middleton decides to abandon his claim and return to America, with Alice at his side. “Thus he and his wife become the Adam and Eve of a new epoch and the fitting missionaries of a new social faith,” one plot summary concludes (58); and another ends as the new Adam and Eve “depart, lofty and poor, out of the home which might be their own, if they would stoop to make it so” (85).

The plural pronoun is consistent with Middleton’s feminist sympathies. Advocates of women’s rights favor “yielding the whole sphere of human effort to be shared equally with women,” he informs Alice, then praises his countrywomen’s “courage, patience, energy,” and boldness in “every good cause.” Alice’s reply is a tease rather than a dissent, a rare bit of Hawthornean burlesque: “I think I see one of those paragons now, in a Bloomer, I think you call it, swaggering along with a Bowie knife at her girdle, smoking a cigar, no doubt, and tippling sherry cobblers and mint-juleps” (71).

Earlier, Hawthorne had mocked the incumbent of the ancient estate, who wondered whether Middleton “came from the State of New England, and whether Mr. Webster was still President of the United States” (45). Yet despite such mockery and despite Hawthorne’s note to himself that “The Ancestral Footstep” “must be a humorous work, or nothing” (58), most of it is solemn. When he set it aside in May 1858, it was primarily because his imagination had become more engaged by the ideas and images that would eventuate in The Marble Faun. He had two romances in progress, he told Fields that September, one or both of which he could complete “in a few months if I were either in England or America” (XVIII 151). He completed The Marble Faun in England the following autumn. The other lay fallow until he returned to America.

By the time Hawthorne resumed work on his American Claimant romance at the end of 1860, almost everything that had seemed stable in his own life and his country’s had become unmoored. That may be why he decided to begin his next attempt, “Etherege,” and then its variant, “Grimshawe,” with the orphaned hero’s childhood in post-revolutionary America, the time of his own childhood. The house where the boy lives with a little girl and their guardian adjoins a cemetery whose soil contains the dust of seventeenth-century Puritans (including Hawthorne’s witch-persecuting ancestor). “I have a terrible repugnance against spending any time in Salem or even passing through, if I can help it,” Hawthorne told his sister Elizabeth (XVII 311). Yet he reentered it by setting the American sections of his resumed romance in the “town with which I used to be familiarly acquainted” (XII 343).
In Salem’s old cemetery, the children discover a key with which the boy will eventually try to unlock a presumably rich treasure in England. Their dark old house (based on the one where Sophia Hawthorne was reared) is “overlaid with dead men’s dust” and covered inside with cobwebs. In it, they are “singularly insulated from the rest of the world” (XII 117), as Hawthorne felt he had been in his own family’s house. “I have . . . put me into a dungeon,” he had told Longfellow in 1837, a dozen years after their graduation from Bowdoin College, “and now I cannot find the key to let myself out . . .” (XV 251).

In a particularly severe indictment of Salem in “Grimshawe,” the “hereditary growth of the frame of public mind which produced the witchcraft delusion” generates an attack on the English-born Grimshawe by a mob, “off-scourings of the recently finished war, old soldiers, rusty, wooden-legged; [and] sailors, ripe for any kind of mischief” who shout “‘Tar and feather the infernal Tory. . . . Kill him! Kill him!’” while the “respectable” men of the town merely look on (XII 382–85). More bitterly than in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” Hawthorne deplored mob violence, scapegoating, indifference to suffering, and the ravages of war while challenging the myth that America is the land of “liberty and justice for all.” The deep divisions in the country he had returned to were taking their toll.

Although Hawthorne never decided whether the beleaguered Grimshawe was essentially a benevolent nurturer of the boy he had “rescued” from an almshouse, or a conniver who molds the boy as his instrument of revenge against a noble English family, his stories of an ancestral English estate fuel the boy’s imagination. “He shall have imaginative and poetic tendencies,” Hawthorne told himself; “but yet young America shall show a promising blossom in him—there shall be a freedom of thought, a carelessness of the forms of things. . . .” (XII 123).

Revisiting his own youth, Hawthorne acknowledged the “rudiments of a poetic and singular mind within the boy . . . ; a brooding habit [of] taking outward things into itself, and imbuing them within its own essence, until, after they had lain there awhile, they assumed a relation both to truth and to himself, and became mediums to affect other minds with the magnetism of his own.” The boy “lived far too much an inward life for healthfulness” (XII 425). But the fatherless boy’s guardian (like Hawthorne’s uncle Robert Manning) gave him “the means of obtaining as complete an education as the country would afford, and of supporting himself, until his own exertions would be likely to give him the success which his abilities were calculated to win” (XII 437).

At that point in “Etherege” and then at the equivalent point in “Grimshawe,” Hawthorne leaped in time and across the Atlantic to the
“The Ancestral Footstep”’s story of a young American who comes to England to seek out an ancestral estate, and to the project of comparing America and England. When the old man of “The Ancestral Footstep” reappears, he questions the protagonist’s ability to “feel a heart’s love” for anything beyond New England or “for a mere political arrangement, like your union,” and expresses Hawthorne’s own doubts about whether the American “experiment” could endure. The hero—now called Etherege—protests that he loves America and is proud of its institutions: “there is no man above me—for my ruler is only myself, in the person of another, whose office I impose upon him” (XII 161–62). Yet he remains torn between staying in England (the land of the past) and resuming the “tumultuous life” of his own country (XII 305).

As in the first American Claimant narrative, the protagonist is warned to “let the past alone” and is punished when he ignores that warning. In one variant, he is attacked as a trespasser by the gun-bearing incumbent of the noble English estate, who accidentally kills himself and leaves Etherege bloodstained. In another, Etherege himself is accidentally shot; and he is poisoned in yet another. But the starkest such warning is an allusion to a pit in which plague victims had been buried: when opened, it had released a deadly contagion.

Etherege nonetheless feels drawn to the country his forefathers had left, a country more beautiful and more civilized than his own, where primeval nature had been “redeemed” by centuries of cultivation, and where every inch could be known and loved. Among the virtues of England’s defects, its stodginess promises sanctuary from the volatile American present, its class system offers the comforts of knowing one’s place, and the populace is unified by allegiance to the Queen. Moreover, Etherege’s mind is “full of English thoughts, his imagination of English poetry, his heart of English character and feeling” (XII 147).

His America is a “wild” country despite its limitless opportunities for success. He had learned the hard way that its wilderness is inherently dangerous, and that the flip side of opportunity is the risk of failure. He had lived in ramshackle houses, participated in the “quick violent struggles of his native country,” and survived the “feverishness of active life.” In “one of those fitful changes, to which American politics are peculiarly liable,” his political success as a state legislator and then a Congressman had abruptly ended; and (like Hawthorne) he had endured “the virulence of party animosity, the abusiveness of the press” (XII 147). In a happier “fitful” change in the story’s present, his party resumes power and the President offers him a diplomatic appointment (as Pierce had done for Hawthorne).

In neither “Etherege” nor “Grimshawe” did Hawthorne decide whether
his protagonist was the rightful heir to the English estate, and (if so) whether he would renounce it and return to America. But as both a condition and a consequence of his immersion in the narrative during the winter of 1860–61 and into the spring, Hawthorne remained detached from American politics.

That detachment ended in mid-April 1861, when the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter and Lincoln declared war. Swept up by “the heroic sentiment of the time,” Hawthorne was delighted to feel that at last he “had a country” (XVIII 380). As dozens of his young neighbors answered Lincoln’s call for volunteers and younger ones, including Julian, practiced military drills, Hawthorne anticipated a quick Northern victory and even fantasized shouldering a musket himself. “The war, strange to say, has had a beneficial effect upon my spirits,” he declared (XVIII 380).

He continued to insist that “We never were one people, and never really had a country since the Constitution was formed.” At least provisionally, however, he now agreed with his abolitionist friends and neighbors: “If we are fighting for the annihilation of slavery . . . it may be a wise object, and offers a tangible result, and the only one which is consistent with a future Union between North and South” (XVIII 381).

As his identification with the Union cause increased, the problems of an American claimant to an English estate mattered less. “The war continues to interrupt my literary industry,” Hawthorne admitted to Ticknor in mid-May, fearing it would “be long before Romances are in request again, even if I could write one” (XVIII 379). Then in mid-July came the rout at Bull Run, the first major battle of the war. This immediately dispelled Hawthorne’s anticipation of a swift Union victory and even put eventual victory in doubt. If the news “puts all of us into the same grim and bloody humour that it does me,” Hawthorne told his abolitionist friend James Russell Lowell, “the South had better have suffered ten defeats than won this victory” (XVIII 394). Everyone had relatives and neighbors in uniform and at risk. Lowell found himself in too grim a humor to write. Melville read news of catastrophic Union losses and grimly observed in “The March into Virginia, Ending in the First Manassas. (July, 1861)” that boys may enter battle in “blithe mood,” but they “die experienced” soon after; and he later composed the scores of other sorrowful poems about his “country’s ills” collected in Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (1866; ed. Kaplan 1972; see Garner 1993). Whitman started to accumulate the images of war-torn America that would recur in his correspondence (ed. Miller 1961) and would eventuate in Drum-Taps (1865–66) and Memoranda during the War (1876). Hawthorne’s passionately pro-Union friend and editor Fields began including at least one poem, story, or personal account about the
war in every issue of the Atlantic. And Hawthorne permanently abandoned his American Claimant romance, leaving the protagonist he called his "double ganger" in limbo. "I have little heart for anything," he told his old friend Bennoch (XVIII 387–88). The war was too much with him.

The Elixir of Life

During the spring and summer of 1861, while the Northern army was struggling to preserve the Union, Hawthorne's mind turned to his country's beginnings. Sometime that summer, he began formulating a work of fiction set in Concord at the onset of the American Revolution. He told Fields about it one September day while they were walking along the hill behind the Wayside. "In compliance with your exhortations, I have begun to think seriously of that story," Hawthorne reported in October, "not as yet with a pen in my hand, but trudging to-and-fro on my hill-top." It might "come to nothing," he warned, admitting he had seen "hopefuller plots fail utterly" (the American Claimant plot among them); but he promised to "give it a fair trial for I want to be doing something to earn my bread" (XVIII 408).

Hawthorne told Bright about it in November, though without going into specifics. "The war at first drew my thoughts wholly to itself," he said, "but latterly, I am meditating a Romance, and hope to have it finished by the time the public shall be ready for any other literature than the daily bulletin, or treatises on warlike strategy." Admitting that he felt "a good deal for my native land, since our troubles began," he defended the North's policies to Bright without expecting to persuade him, "for I know Englishmen too well, and know that every man of you wishes to see us both maimed and disgraced, and looks upon this whole trouble as a god-send—if only there were cotton enough at Liverpool and Manchester . . . " (XVIII 420–21). His new romance would attest to his increased distance from England and preoccupation with his native land.

Its seed was a legend about the Wayside Hawthorne had heard from Thoreau: a man had once lived there who believed he would never die. Hawthorne set a story about that man at the beginning of the Revolution, and on his own home grounds. He worked steadily on it for months. In mid-February of1862, however, he admitted that he felt "mentally and physically languid" (XVIII 427). Then on March 6 he set off for Washington, hoping the change of scene would rekindle his energy, and eager to see something of the war for himself. At the White House, Hawthorne called on Lincoln—"the essential representative of all Yankees, and the
veritable specimen, physically, of what all the world seems determined to regard as our characteristic qualities.” At the Capitol, he watched Emanuel Leutze at work on his massive fresco “Westward the Course of Empire” and felt cheered by its augury of an “enduring national existence.” His numerous excursions included tours of battlefields and army camps; he bemoaned Virginia’s “amputated” woodlands, “barren esplanades,” and abandoned houses; he praised the maligned General McClellan as a man of courage and integrity; he boarded the “new war-fiend” called the Monitor; and he scrutinized filthy Confederate prisoners, including one “wild beast of a man.” Talking to a group of ragged and hungry fugitive slaves, he worried about their future and called them “our brethren.” And he pondered the “anomaly of two allegiances” that had turned honest Southerners into traitors who considered themselves patriots—men who had drawn “their swords against the Constitution which they would once have died for . . . with a bitterness of animosity which is the only symptom of brotherhood (since brothers hate each other best) that any longer exists” (XXIII 403–42).

Returning from his month-long trip “sorry for the Southerners, and sorry, most of all, for ourselves,” Hawthorne prepared the long, vividly detailed, pro-Union, but sometimes puzzlingly ironic account of his trip for the Atlantic entitled “Chiefly About War-Matters. By a Peaceable Man.” Before submitting it, he removed “whole pages of freely expressed opinion . . . which I doubted whether the public would bear” (XVIII 457), and he subsequently changed others that consternated the “black Republican” Fields. But he also added footnotes—ostensibly written by his editor—which implicitly invited readers to challenge their own opinions as well as his.

The author states, for example, that John Brown was “justly hanged”—a judgment few (if any) Atlantic readers shared. The “editor” then asks, “Can it be a son of old Massachusetts who mutters this abominable sentiment? For shame!” (XXIII 427). The author declares about the war, “No human effort, on a grand scale, has ever yet resulted according to the purpose of its projectors.” The “editor” asserts that “The counsels of wise and good man are often coincident with the purposes of Providence, and the present war promises to illustrate our remark” (XXIII 431). The author sympathizes with the Southerner whose primary allegiance is to his home State, “the altar and the hearth,” rather than a distant and abstract “General Government.” The “editor” has trouble understanding this passage, yet feels “inclined to think its tone reprehensible, and its tendency impolitic in the present stage of our national difficulties” (XXIII 417).

It has been said that Hawthorne was the “only notable writer or thinker
who took a detached and critical view of the Union cause” (Frederickson 1965, 2), and that to many of his contemporaries, including Lowell and Emerson, his “alleged neutrality was incomprehensible” (Aaron 1975, 44). Yet his sympathy for the South in “Chiefly About War-Matters,” like Melville and Whitman’s sympathy for Southern soldiers, was not a form of neutrality. Moreover, the two-page piece that Hawthorne wrote for a short-lived Concord periodical—“Northern Volunteers—From a Journal”—was fervently partisan. Southern soldiers send their families Northerner’s bones and skulls to use as trinkets and punchbowls, Hawthorne reports in disgust. By contrast, he celebrates the “manly” Union soldiers who had “chocked up a bridge” en route to Alexandria but who open a path for the women traveling with him. “My mother was a woman,” one of them exclaims, expressing “what we felt to be true of those fifteen thousand volunteers. They carried their home in their hearts” (XXIII 445).

Soon after saying so, Hawthorne returned to the romance that opens on the eve of the Revolutionary War, when Americans fought Englishmen who might well have been their cousins. For months, he labored on the successive drafts known as “Septimius Felton” (XIII 3–194) and “Septimius Norton” (XIII 195–448). Yet he brought neither to completion. The issue of national identity emerges on the first page of “Septimius Felton,” with two young men and a young woman sitting on a Concord hillside where “the first settlers of the village had burrowed in caverns,” and where during the next century dwellings were erected and fertile meadows were cultivated—the very place where the war was about to erupt(XIII 3–4). “This country was on the eve of a great convulsion which shook the country, and was thence communicated over the world,” Hawthorne added in “Septimius Norton,” “whence its profound vibrations have not yet ceased to be felt”(XIII 209). In both Septimius narratives, he projected the traumas of the Civil War backward onto that founding convulsion. And in both, he seems uneasy that these “external events” intrude on his “history of a mind bewildered in certain errors” (XIII 16).

Septimius’s chief error is that he wastes his life in an isolated and obsessive pursuit of earthly immortality. It is one more formulation of Hawthorne’s lifelong conflicting imperatives: his need as a writer for isolation, but also for immersion in real life. A complex embodiment of multiple American identities, Septimius can trace his ancestry back to an English baron who had arrived well before the first Puritans, then married an Indian woman and succeeded her father as Sagamore. Their half-Indian son married a Puritan and begat two children—a son who became a zealous Puritan minister and scalped an Indian, and a daughter who was executed for witchcraft.
Septimius is their much later descendant. A graduate of Harvard College, “where the traditions of the great English Universities had lingered on, and had as yet been invigorated by no fresh life of thought, springing up in our own soil,” he had taught school and studied for the ministry (XIII 195). But “bewildered” by his obsessive pursuit of an elixir of life in the story’s present, Septimius “knew nothing, thought nothing, cared nothing about his country or his country’s battles” (XIII 139), insulated “from all consciousness of the civil war that was going on” (XIII 393). As the term “civil war” suggests, Hawthorne conflated Septimius’s predicament with his own.

Septimius’s childhood friend Robert is a far simpler and more optimistic embodiment of an American identity. Robert assumes that the imminent war will prove that Americans have not lost the courage and strength their forefathers brought from England. A stalwart yeoman, he soon carries his grandfather’s gun into battle “in hot blood, and for a good cause” (XIII 157). He matures in the course of inflicting death, surviving wounds on battlefields as far off as Quebec, and—in the narrative’s only festive event—he marries the gentle schoolteacher named Rose, who is Septimius’s half-sister.

The narrative gets under way on the Lexington Road leading to Concord, soon after the skirmish at Lexington and just before the Battle of Concord, then moves on to the British retreat along the ridge behind it. Bound by a single purpose, colonial America converts itself from peace to war. Curiously apologetic yet ironic in the “Septimius Felton” version, Hawthorne regrets that

it is necessary that we should advert to the circumstances of the time in which [Septimius’s] inward history was passing. We will say, therefore, that that night there was a cry of alarm passing all through the succession of country towns, rural communities, that lay around Boston, and dying away towards the coast, and the wilder forest borders. Horsemen galloped past the lone farm-house shouting alarm, alarm!—there were stories of marching troops, coming like dreams through the midnight. Around the little rude meeting-houses, there was here and there the beat of a drum, the assemblage of farmers, neighbors, with their weapons. So, all that night, there was marching, there was mustering, there was trouble; and on the road from Boston, a steady march of soldiers’ feet onward, onward, into this land, whose last warlike disturbances had been when the red Indians trod it. (XIII 15–16)

When he rewrote that scene in “Septimius Norton,” Hawthorne began with a more protracted apology:
If the course of the narrative...sometimes leads us amid historic events,...we accept the necessity for alluding to such, only because it is unavoidable; not really caring much about anything that took place outside of Septimius's brain. (XIII 210)

Then, instead of merely glancing at the “great historic incident,” he expatiated on it. “Septimius Felton”’s undifferentiated group of horsemen “shouting alarm, alarm” is succeeded in “Septimius Norton” by a shirtsleeved hatless “countryman, who had perhaps taken his horse from cart or plough, and...was now belaboring his panting sides with a whip of twisted cowhide,” and shouting “‘Alarm! Alarm! Alarm!’—trailing the sound behind him like a pennon.” The dust and frenzy of this apparition anticipates the culminating observation of Hawthorne-as-spectator: “It seemed as if wars must follow helter-skelter after this messenger of dread” (XIII 215–16).

The scene is more vivid than the comparable one in “Paul Revere’s Ride,” the long poem Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote in the spring of 1860, which Hawthorne certainly saw when it appeared in the Atlantic in April 1861. At that time of dire threat to the nation, Longfellow, like Hawthorne, reviewed its beginnings. The poem ends,

So through the night rode Paul Revere,
And so through the night went his cry of alarm
To every Middlesex village and farm,—
A cry of defiance, and not of fear,—
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,
And a word that shall echo forevermore!
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beat of that steed,
And the midnight-message of Paul Revere.

Hawthorne’s greater attention to historical specificity is evident in the list of weapons local farmers carry into battle in “Septimius Felton”: “the old fowling piece of seven foot barrel, with which the Puritans had shot ducks on the river and Walden Pond, the heavy harquebus, which perhaps had levelled one of King Philip’s Indians, the old King’s Arm that blazed away at the French of Louisburg or Quebec” (XIII 16–17). The cumulative effect Hawthorne achieves is of a country arming itself with its own past.
The similar list in “Septimius Norton” (written several Civil War battles later) ends more grimly with an “old rusty sword, the scythe, or whatever thing had the value (at that moment the chief one) of being adapted to shed blood” (XIII 216). The more Hawthorne contemplated the homely heroism of the provincial farmers, the more he was depressed that in April 1861, as in April 1775, the “Demon of War” had converted “the peaceful husbandman to a soldier thirsting for blood” (XIII 37).

“The experiences of our own day” enable us to know “what emotions were in the atmosphere of that April morning, nearly ninety years ago,” Hawthorne declared (XIII 216).

It was a good time, everybody felt, to be alive in; a nearer kindred, a closer sympathy from man to man, a sense of the goodness of the world, of the sacredness of country. . . . The ennobling of brute force, the feeling that it had its god-like side; the drawing of heroic breath amid the scenes of ordinary life. . . . We know something of that time now; we that have seen the muster of village soldiery on meeting-house greens, and at railway stations; and heard the drum and fife, and seen the farewells, seen the familiar faces that we hardly knew, now that we felt them to be heroes. . . . felt how a great impulse lifts up a people, and every cold, passionless, indifferent spectator, lifts him up into religion, and makes him join in what becomes an act of devotion, a prayer, when perhaps he but half approves. (XIII 17)

That same divided attitude pervades Hawthorne’s account of the Redcoats’ march toward the village of Concord. It begins as they move “massively, with the tramp of a thousand feet” while fifes and drums play a quick step. Though obviously “wearied by their long night-march, their black gaiters bemuddled and bedraggled,” sweat running down from their powdered hair, they seem “welded together, their crossbelts all aslant in one direction, their bright musket barrels all gleaming in a line.” An hour’s rest, a good breakfast, and a pot of beer would revivify them, the narrator-spectator believes, and their “kindly, homely, hearty, honest, obtuse” faces “made you remember they had mothers and homes. . . . it seemed a pity to shoot them.” Yet “any spectator” was also conscious of “a heavy, brutal element” which could transform these homely Englishmen into “atrocious ruffians” (XIII 221–22).

When the Redcoats retreat from the village, Septimius’s Indian blood rises as he grabs his great-grandfather’s gun and loads it; then a group of them come so close to where he “lurks” on the hillside that he can see their faces. He shoots their officer, neither of them aware that they are cousins. The possessions the dying officer bequeaths to Septimius include a musty
old manuscript that will absorb and virtually destroy him—a cryptic formula for an elixir of life.

"'Scalp him,'” Septimius’s aunt urges, “whatever of witch and Indian squaw there was in her . . . triumphing over what civilization & christianity had been trying for a century and a half to do towards taming her.” Septimius rebukes her: “Hush, witch! are you a woman at all! Look at the boy, and think that he had a mother!” Her civilized self then quells her “savage strain” and she rebukes Septimius: “it was a cruel thing to kill him, when the Indian has been tamed out of you so long” (XIII 241–42).

Hawthorne seems to be exploring an atavistic component in the American character. Perhaps one reason Hawthorne made Septimius and his aunt part-Indian was that Thoreau, his source for the legend of a man who thought he would live forever, had often spoken about Indians as “our predecessors.” In his romance, Hawthorne literalized that conception. But like most of his contemporaries, he conceived of Indians both as noble savages who lived in harmony with nature, and as brutal savages who had impeded the grand work of civilizing the wilderness. His summations of Septimius’s “wild genealogy” incorporate but complicate those antitheses.

“It is not our purpose to tell a story of Indian warfare, the meanest kind of contest in which blood has ever been shed,” he said in “Septimius Norton,” “nor to illustrate another incident in the Red Man’s struggle with the Whites; a struggle in which there is such a character of fate, that it almost precludes the ideas of wrong and pity” (XIII 260). Daily newspaper reports must have intensified Hawthorne’s concern with the wrong and pity of such warfare.

Nor could issues of race have been far from his mind. His narrative contains more than one story about Septimius’s Indian ancestors. In one rambling sketch, Puritans attack their peaceful village and slaughter the English-born Sagamore, his “dusky wife,” and all but one of their “wild progeny.” That infant is taken to the Puritan village and grows into an idle but “comely” young man addicted to drink, “a specimen of what the Indian has generally been, when in contact with the whites, all saving virtues blighted by civilized air . . .” (XIII 261–63). The fiercely righteous Puritan minister who is this half-breed’s son not only hates his sister but testifies against her during “the witchcraft delusion . . . when the contagion of terrible suspicions was in the atmosphere” (XIII 263–66). “The mixture of race [is] a crime against nature, therefore pernicious,” Hawthorne asserted (XIII 256). “Something in the mixture of bloods, first of Indian and civilized blood, then of this with the hostile blood of the Puritans, had not amalgamated well” (XIII 266).

The man who had interrogated national myths from the time of his earliest tales specifically condemned the colonists’ mistreatment of Indians.
Most of those who survived pestilence and English guns had been “poisoned . . . with fire-water,” he said, “and teazed [sic] . . . to death with catechisms” by settlers who “took their land, and are still ploughing and planting it . . .” (XIII 362). Hawthorne nonetheless believed that mankind has gradually evolved from savagery to civilization, and that—within each individual as within each society—the “civilized” is superior to the “savage” and should govern.

Therefore, he lamented that in the summer of 1775 as in the summer of 1861, war “filled the whole brain of the people, and enveloped the whole thought of men in a mist of gunpowder” (XIII 54). His bleakest anti-war statement is in his brief depiction of wartime Boston. When Septimius walks into the provincial metropolis, he enters a panorama of devastation, noting vacancies where houses had been torn down for fuel, hoofmarks on the doorstep of a church that had become a dragoons’ riding school, broken cannons lying “idle” in the streets, maimed men limping along, young men training “to kill one another,” boys hurling mud at an old man they called a Tory, and “forlorn, mateless” women standing in doorways. “War was in the ascendant,” Hawthorne observed, “the early enthusiasm of the struggle having subsided, and its hard, heavy, dogged, sullen strain being now felt” (XIII 131–32).

Even so, the Americans who fought the English, implicitly the Union soldiers who fought the Confederates, were heroes. Hawthorne’s chief example is Septimius’s friend Robert, who bravely inflicts and survives wounds in one battle after another. But Hawthorne also makes the case for such heroism through Septimius himself, when he is tempted to leave his study and “go to the wars, which were now drawing into them the energy and courage of every spirited young man,” and “die if he must, live if he might the full, free, generous life of humanity, the conditions of which are to share all the liabilities of his fellow men” (XIII 130).

In “Chiefly About War-Matters,” implicitly explaining why he abandoned his own study for a trip to wartime Washington, Hawthorne said, “there is a kind of treason in insulating one’s self from the universal fear and sorrow, and thinking one’s idle thoughts in the dread time of civil war” (XXIII 403). However guiltily, Hawthorne returned to his study and to the romance of Septimius. In one conclusion he projected, Septimius anticipates seeing “the glory and the final event of the American Republic, which his contemporaries . . . are fighting to establish” (XIII 512). But Hawthorne abandoned the second and last draft of his romance at the moment when Septimius is tempted to join humanity and “die if he must.”

Like Hawthorne, Septimius had “dreamed a life-like dream, most life-like in its force and vividness, most un lifelike by its inconsistency with all
that really is, with men’s purposes, fates, business.” “I know well what his feeling was!” Hawthorne exclaimed. “I have had it oftentimes myself” (XIII 129–30). More deeply confessional is his statement that whenever Septimius felt “on the verge of some utterance that would illuminate the whole subject, and make all its obscurities . . . blaze out into vivid meaning,” he encountered “a tract of dense, impenetrable darkness, on the other side of which appeared a disconnected radiance, which could not be brought into relation with what had gone before” (XIII 316). His own mortality was beginning to weigh on Hawthorne’s mind. He was ill.

A more poignant confession is provoked by Septimius’s feelings of despair:

Perhaps none are more subject to it than Romance writers; they make themselves at home among their characters and scenery, and know them better than they know anything actual . . .; so that all seems a truer world than that they were born in; but sometimes, if they step beyond the limits of the spell, ah! the sad destruction, disturbance, incongruity that meets the eye....Thus he that writes the strange story of [Septimius] may well sympathize with the emotion of that moment. (XIII 446–47)

When he wrote those words, Hawthorne was only a paragraph away from abandoning his “strange story” altogether.

His efforts to pursue it during “the dread time of civil war” included resuscitating some of the abandoned themes of the Ancestral Footstep narratives. Thus in “Septimius Felton,” a Grimshawe-like Englishman who is aware of Septimius’s genealogy says England could use an “infusion of fresh life” and urges Septimius to claim the “ancient hall where your forefathers have dwelt since the conquest.” Septimius’s “Indian blood” makes him reject “what you think so valuable,” yet grants that it might suit him “for a time” (XIII 140–45). Then in the draft’s last paragraph, Hawthorne-as-narrator offers a rumor that Septimius eventually claimed the ancestral estate and passed it on to his posterity. And in the penultimate sentence, Hawthorne’s truthful statement that he had visited Smithell’s Hall “while in England” is followed by a wholly fictional claim: his host had an American physique and “a certain Indian glitter of the eye and cast of feature” (XIII 194).

In October 1862, half a year after returning from Washington and before abandoning “Septimius,” Hawthorne admitted that he found it “impossible to possess one’s mind in the midst of a civil war to such a degree as to make thoughts assume life” (XVIII 501). Worse was to come. In early December—the time of the Union’s devastating defeat at Fredericksburg, when Louisa May Alcott was nursing wounded soldiers in
Georgetown, when Whitman located his wounded brother at the front and then began his long ministry to wounded and dying soldiers in Washington—Hawthorne told Fields he had been “quite ill for some days past” (XVIII 508). Even before then, he had sometimes felt too weak to walk on his hillside or climb up to his study. Then or about then, he gave up on “Septimius” altogether.

During the next year, Hawthorne managed to support his family, meet Fields’s request for manuscripts, and remain in the public eye by writing witty and thoughtful Atlantic essays based on material in his English notebooks. Fields’s encouragements included glowing reports of readers’ praise, an increased rate of pay, and the suggestion that he expand the series into what became a twelve-chapter book—Our Old Home. When it appeared in September 1863, many Northerners resented its dedication to the Confederate sympathizer Franklin Pierce (Emerson sliced it out of his copy, and Harriet Beecher Stowe called Hawthorne a traitor), and many English readers resented Hawthorne’s jibes at their institutions, manners, and physiques. But Our Old Home, the only book Hawthorne would ever complete after returning from England, sold well on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the Preface to Our Old Home—written in July 1863, the time of the Union’s hard-won victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, the violent draft riots in New York, and the horrific slaughter of Massachusetts’ all-black 54th Volunteer Infantry—Hawthorne said he had hoped to draw on his English notebooks for a work of fiction that might “convey more of various modes of truth than I could have grasped by a direct effort.” But as he poignantly explained,

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, and leaves me sadly content to scatter a thousand peaceful fantasies upon the hurricane that is sweeping us all along with it, possibly into a Limbo where our nation and its polity may be as literally the fragments of a shattered dream as my unwritten Romance. (V 4)

Hawthorne was telling the truth, though not the whole truth. Although he had not completed any work of fiction after returning to America, he had struggled with two.

Shortly afterward, he began planning yet another romance that he hoped would be “full of wisdom about matters of life and death” (XVIII 626)—“The Dolliver Romance.” Its setting is the old house Sophia’s family had occupied alongside Salem’s Charter Street cemetery, which Hawthorne
had previously appropriated for “Etherege” and “Grimshawe.” Dolliver, who had been “breeched at the breaking out of King Philip’s Indian War” (XIII 462), is an aged apothecary who (like Chillingworth as well as Grimshawe and Septimius) has mastered both the old world’s pharmacopeia and Indian herbal lore (yet another allusion to America’s cultural pluralism). As the story opens, he bestirs his “rusty joints” with less pain than usual, which he attributes to his first sip of a “certain cordial” concocted by his long-dead grandson. As the sole guardian of his three-year-old-great-granddaughter Pansie, he is “loth to leave her alone in the world” (XIII 546). Therefore he continues to dose himself with the remarkable elixir that turns out to reverse the entire process of aging.

Though Hawthorne began sketching the romance in the summer of 1863, he had only one chapter to show Fields in December. He would complete only one more installment for the Atlantic before admitting to Fields that his “literary faculty” had “broken down” ((XVIII 640–41). In one of Hawthorne’s scenarios for the remainder, Dolliver leaves Salem after reaching middle age, then returns as a nameless toddler after Pansie has become a grandmother. Despite its inherent absurdity, this situation is autobiographical in its rueful acknowledgment of Hawthorne’s infirmities and his concerns about his family’s welfare. Sketching Dolliver as a happy toddler sitting on his great-granddaughter’s lap was whimsical wish fulfillment bordering on the surreal. By contrast, in a brief scrap that darkly reprises an American Claimant motif, the middle-aged Dolliver commits “murders and wrongs,” including one at Smithell’s Hall, where he “treads in the Bloody Footstep and renews it” (XIII 544).

In all the Elixir of Life manuscripts, including this one, Hawthorne asserted that death should not only be accepted but welcomed. In one of his Septimius studies, for example, he wanted his reader “to see how all that is highest and holiest in life depend on death and the expectation of it”(XIII 511); the young officer Septimius kills dies with a “smile lingering on his lips” (XIII 239); and Hawthorne intended “The Dolliver Romance” to come out “in favor of that poor maligned individual, Death” (XIII 545).

During an overnight visit to the Fieldses in December 1863, during which the editor enthusiastically praised what he had seen of “Dolliver,” Hawthorne called England’s empire a rambling squash vine that could be cut at the root and destroyed. By then he no longer harbored any hope of returning there, whether for pleasure or to secure the English copyright of a new romance. As for America, though he had previously avoided talking about the Civil War, he said he hoped the North would win “now” because that seemed “the only way to save the country from destruction” (Gollin 2002, 57).
Ten months earlier, after describing a tunnel under the Thames in Our Old Home, Hawthorne had fantasized about what might happen in one under the Hudson or the Potomac:

It would be delightful to clap up all the enemies of our peace and union in the dark together, and there let them abide, listening to the monotonous roll of the river above their heads or perhaps in a state of miraculously suspended animation, until—it be it after months, years, or centuries—when the turmoil shall be all over, the Wrong washed away in blood, (since that must needs be the cleansing fluid,) and the right firmly rooted in the soil which that blood will have enriched, they might crawl forth again and catch a single glimpse at their redeemed country, and feel it to be a better land than they deserve, and die! (V 250–51)

During his visit to the Fieldses in December 1863, he hoped for such a redemption, but none was forthcoming.

In February 1864, Hawthorne was asked for an “autograph, accompanied with a patriotic statement” for sale at a “Sanitary Fair.” He replied with an admission of “ill-health” but also a terrible confession: “I can really express nothing at this time—except that an American, sick or well, ought to be ashamed (as I myself sincerely am) who can find nothing patriotic to do or say at the crisis of his country’s fate” (XVIII 635).

Three weeks later, after months of illness during which he could rarely write or even read, Hawthorne told Fields he would never finish “Dolliver.” Reverting to the bitter humor of his 1834 tale “The Devil in Manuscript,” and using the imagery of warfare he had incorporated into his Septimius narrative, he said,

if I make too great an effort to do so, it will be my death; not that I should care much for that, if I could fight the battle through and win it, thus ending a life of much smoulder and scanty fire in a blaze of glory. (641)

At no time during his last three months of life could he make that effort. Hawthorne died in New Hampshire on May 19, 1864, and he was buried in Concord four days later. It seems curiously appropriate that Fields placed the manuscript of “Dolliver” on Hawthorne’s coffin, and equally appropriate that he then retrieved it.