Hawthorne and the Real
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Bell, Millicent.
Hawthorne and the Real: Bicentennial Essays.
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
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Facts, as we really find them, whatever poetry they may involve, are covered with a stony excrescence of prose, resembling the crust on a beautiful sea-shell, and they never show their most delicate and divinest colors, until we shall have dissolved away their grosser actualities by steeping them long in a powerful menstruum of thought. And, seeking to actualize them, we do but renew the crust.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Our Old Home* (V 135–36)

Nathaniel Hawthorne is the dead white male we love. After all, more people read *The Scarlet Letter* than see the movie, any movie, based on it; and while other dead white male writers languish, their books largely untaught—John Dos Passos, William Dean Howells, or my favorite, Theodore Dreiser—Hawthorne soldiers on, a mainstay in high school and college curricula in spite of the changing canon. What’s more, Hawthorne’s correspondence, his journals, his fiction, his nonfiction, his children’s tales, and his early bad poetry have been gathered together in twenty-three thick volumes, each well annotated, called the *Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. If that weren’t enough, there’s so much critical ink spilled about Hawthorne that the annual called *American Literary Scholarship* devotes an entire chapter to him. As for biographies: mine (Wineapple 2003) is not the only one and certainly won’t be the last; they’ve been appearing with regularity since the decade after his death in 1864.

But Nathaniel Hawthorne is also the dead white male we love to hate.
Though we set his stories to music and tiptoe through the *House of the Seven Gables* (which soon will contain a Hawthorne museum), we denigrate Hawthorne as a man and, often, even as an artist. Pitting him against his dead white canonical peers—our Manichean culture demanding invidious comparisons—Hawthorne frequently comes up the loser. Or at least that’s what happened when T. S. Eliot set Hawthorne’s novels next to Henry James’s; and, more recently, when literary critics measure Hawthorne’s personality against Herman Melville’s: Hawthorne appears fastidious, withdrawn, remote; Melville, generous, seductive, bold—and the writer, unlike Hawthorne, for whom truth forever has its ragged edge.

Even deep-dyed Hawthorne fans tip their hats to Melville. “I just wanted to say that if anybody is lacking in the [Melville-Hawthorne] friendship, it’s Hawthorne,” a Hawthorne scholar not long ago claimed. “I don’t think there’s a Hawthornian that will not say that” (Bryant and Milder 1997, 247). The issue here is not art but the two writers’ truncated friendship. And the rub is not that a cold Hawthorne rejected an effusive Melville or even that the friendship ran its natural course during the fifteen months both men lived in the Berkshire hills. It’s that Hawthorne committed the sin of remaining popular while Melville’s literary stock plunged soon after he met his handsome neighbor. As a consequence, Hawthorne fails to get Melville’s high grades not because Melville is an unruly artist lavishing talent on every object in his ken but because he’s a victim of bad press, stupid readers, lousy sales, and his own nihilistic profligacy. Hawthorne, by contrast, becomes an “establishment writer” to Hershel Parker, Melville’s most recent biographer. An author as popular as Longfellow (an offense), Hawthorne is simply not cut from the same apostate cloth as Walt Whitman or, patently, Melville himself (Parker 2002, 876).

Two years after Hawthorne and Melville met, Hawthorne’s publisher, the irrepressible James T. Fields, judged Hawthorne’s newest book, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), a failure—let’s hope we have no more of these, he wrote a friend—and then in 1860 *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne’s last completed novel, annoyed its share of readers (like Thoreau, who called the book mere mush). Regardless, Hawthorne’s reputation soared. Henry James himself said he wept the day Hawthorne died. And Hawthorne’s books, even if they didn’t earn pots of money, continued to stay in print. When booksellers wisely interlarded the Tauchnitz edition of *The Marble Faun* with pictures of the sites Hawthorne described in the novel, even dubious Americans began to carry it abroad as if, enthusiasts would note, Dostoyevsky had written a guidebook.

Nor did Hawthorne’s Anglophobic essays, collected in the volume *Our
Old Home (1863), wreck his reputation. Fields understandably had worried that, if nothing else, Hawthorne’s dedication of the book to Franklin Pierce, fourteenth president of the United States and Hawthorne’s friend since college, would ruin sales. Discredited by the time Our Old Home was published, Pierce had presided over some of the most dubious federal policy in the nation’s short history: namely, the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, mandating that escaped slaves be returned to their masters, and the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, which not only ensured violence, bloodshed, and slavery in the territories but augured the massacres that would become de rigueur in the Civil War. During that war, Pierce had been reckoned nothing more than a drunken traitor—the “hero of many a hard-fought bottle,” critics laughed—who, it was later alleged, had urged his former secretary of war, Jefferson Davis, to secede.

Hawthorne held firm, his steadfastness endearing him—far more than Pierce—to posterity. In the dedication he praised his friend, declaring that “no man’s loyalty is more steadfast, no man’s hopes or apprehensions on behalf of our national existence more deeply heartfelt, or more closely intertwined with his possibilities of personal happiness, than those of FRANKLIN PIERCE” (V 5). (Disgusted, Emerson sliced the dedication out of his copy of the book.) But sixteen years later, in 1879, the matter still irksome, Henry James put it to rest with characteristic savoir-faire. Hawthorne “defended . . . [Pierce] manfully,” James extemporized in his fine study of the elder writer, “without a grain of concession, and described the ex-President to the public (and to himself), if not as he was, then as he ought to be” (James 1984, 449). James then quoted in approbation Hawthorne’s letter to Fields insisting he include the dedication despite his publisher’s advice: “If he [Pierce] is so exceedingly unpopular that his name ought to sink the volume, there is so much the more need that an old friend should stand by him” (450).

Hawthorne’s reputation was saved. But he had parted company with most of his literary peers—Thoreau, Emerson, Longfellow, the Alcotts, and Henry James Sr., for instance—on the matter of slavery, which is one reason, no doubt, why the literati who outlived him conveniently forgot, or wished to forget, his politics. His sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody, a tireless Hawthorne booster, insisted Hawthorne “knew nothing about slavery . . . he knew nothing about contemporaneous history,” adding “that he could not understand history until it was at least a hundred years old!” Similarly, Hawthorne’s friend George William Curtis, the anti-slavery editor of Harper’s Weekly, rationalized Hawthorne’s seeming detachment from the turmoil engulfing the country. “If you ask why this is so,” wrote Curtis shortly after Hawthorne’s death,
—how the tragedy of an old Italian garden, or the sin of a lonely Puritan parish, or the crime of a provincial judge, should so stimulate this imagination with romantic appeals and harrowing allegories, while either it did not see a Carolina slave-pen, or found in it only a tame prosperity,—you must take your answer in the other question, why he did not weave into any of his stories the black and bloody thread of the Inquisition. His genius obeyed its law. (Curtis 1879, 354)

Which is to say that Curtis and others believed that Hawthorne’s genius obeyed a transcendental law, floating above the mire of petty politics even when these politics had everything to do with the fate of an American nation, the subject of much of Hawthorne’s work. Obviously, some people were troubled by Hawthorne’s sentiments. “What a devil of a Copperhead he was!” Walt Whitman remarked. Yet Whitman also forgave Hawthorne his ways, as did many others, by adverting to his talent. “I always more or less despise the Copperheads, irrespective of who they are, their fame—what—not,” Whitman declared, “but aside from that, all my tendencies about Hawthorne are towards him—even affectionate, I may say—for his work, what he represented” (Traubel 1982, 6:123).

When Henry James in 1879 portrayed the author as a benighted provincial too callow to occupy the sophisticated drawing rooms of sex, power, and money, his book set the tone for future Hawthorne biography as well as a cottage industry investing Hawthorne with eremitic ingenuousness and straining to minimize his political involvement and prove he was nothing more than a consummate artist with an itchy conscience. It had been fashionable, for instance, to ignore Hawthorne’s unsavory political alliances, and as a result Hawthorne for many years came before the public as a special sort of visionary delivered from the tawdry realities of time and place or people, like Pierce, we don’t much like. In 1872, Leslie Stephen (who would soon publish James’s Daisy Miller in his Cornhill Magazine) highhandedly characterized Hawthorne as an “American,” which, according to him, is a man confined “till middle age among the bleak granite rocks and the half-baked civilization of New England”—a romantic genius in the wilderness with no sense of political or cultural realities (Idol 1994, 491). Then, following James, the early biographer George Woodberry insisted in 1902 that Hawthorne “took the party view of the slavery question, not with any energy, but placidly and stolidly, as far as one can judge. In fact he took little or no interest in the matter” (Woodberry, 1902, 237).

F. O. Matthiessen himself perpetuated this sort of perspective in American Renaissance (1941), a brilliant and for many years standard book
about the personal style—or artistry—and public voice—or humanity—of five American writers, all devoted, as Matthiessen declared, “to the possibilities of democracy” (ix). Yet even for Matthiessen, Hawthorne was a problem. Describing the writer as taciturn and “tragically secluded” (329) in a chapter ostensibly about Hawthorne’s politics (and so titled), Matthiessen insists that Hawthorne as writer seeks not to explain “the superficial and journalistic aberrations of the moment” but to illuminate “what is essentially human,” delving into “the primary attributes of man, through grasping the similarities of his problems beneath different guises” (329, 320). Trust the tale, we’re told, in modernist terms compatible with Matthiessen’s.

And so we should, up to a point. For the biographer, however, it’s not a viable point of view. One simply cannot ignore the maker of the tale who, in this case, was not an American rube, wide-eyed at malfeasance and heedless of current events—even if he’s often associated with the Puritans and colonial New Englanders, the subject of many of his early stories. But no wonder: born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1804, Hawthorne grew up with civic history in his bones. Schoolchildren are still reminded, as was Hawthorne, that his notorious ancestors, among the oldest English settlers in America, were folk of iron, hard and mean: his great-grandfather, the Puritan magistrate William Hathorne, was particularly intolerant of Quakers, and burning holes in the tongues of women who talked too much; William’s son John, Hawthorne’s great-grandfather, piously sought the death penalty for hundreds of the accused during the infamous witchcraft delusion of 1692.

These trusty tales helped form the teller.

And in a town like Salem—in a state like Massachusetts—the past is never dead. “One lived in the atmosphere of the Stamp Act, the tea tax, and the Boston Massacre,” said Henry Adams, who, had he been from Salem, would have also added the atmosphere of the witch trials and Jefferson’s embargo (Adams 1931, 43). The former leached the town of its self-righteousness (though not its snobbery); the latter, of its prosperity. Said Hawthorne himself, Salem was the New England city over which an aristocratic class held firmest sway, although scorned by its own merchants and ship owners, and where a chill ocean wind blew through the old wooden houses, “few or none of which pretend to architectural beauty” (I 8).

The past, the present: Hawthorne was oblivious of neither. Nor was he unaware of the women and men reshaping his culture—contrary to Stephen, American culture did exist—and his world: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Henry Thoreau, Charles Sumner, Margaret Fuller, Sojourner Truth, Garrison, Greeley, Alcott, Stowe, Whittier, Walt Whitman,
P. T. Barnum, and of course Emerson, Longfellow, John Brown, and Elizabeth Peabody. These were Hawthorne’s contemporaries, mostly sprung from the same antebellum soil as he. Yet they are largely absent from the record partly because, early on, they were edited out. In this, Hawthorne’s wife, Sophia, assisted; she, along with James T. Fields, who stoked the Hawthorne fires, shared the genteel premise that to countenance Hawthorne, warts and all, would belittle him. Thus, according to the dictates of the day, they discreetly sanitized Hawthorne’s language, abjured any reference to politics or political unpleasantries, and refashioned Hawthorne as the lofty genius.

In subsequent years, Julian Hawthorne, the author’s son, further domesticated his father in his own two-volume biography, *Hawthorne and His Wife* (1884). Narrating his father’s life along the lines of a fulfilled marriage plot—mother and father reborn as the ideal couple—Julian retells his father’s life as a composite story of success (an unknown Hawthorne takes world literature by storm); of romantic genius (complete with untimely death); of victimization (the genius cheated by unprincipled or negligent editors); and of crisis and recovery in which the eternally optimistic Sophia rescues Hawthorne from despair and dismal solitude.

In this fashion, Julian Hawthorne inducted the Hawthorne marriage into the Hawthorne saga, where it frequently remains: Sophia Hawthorne is the angel behind the artist, a muse releasing Nathaniel from his “dismal and squalid chamber” (Hawthorne’s term) in which his stories—albeit some of his best—were first created (XXIII 152). Of course, there are gaps in the story, not just pertaining to Hawthorne’s political cronies but to his early years, when Hawthorne was reared in a bustling household that included his mother, two sisters, at least one aunt, and two uncles along with a servant, several cats, and a steady stream of visiting relatives and friends. The years of Hawthorne’s so-called seclusion (bachelorhood sans Sophia) have become a presumptive psychological conjecture based on the absence, rather than the presence, of evidence.

While Hawthorne, as unmarried adult, lived in Salem, he wrote to his family only when he traveled, if then; his family, meanwhile, had no occasion to write to one another. His friends, particularly those friends engaged in public service, evidently destroyed his letters, and he theirs. As a result, little documentary material from this period survives, which isn’t the same as saying its paucity proves Hawthorne stayed at home, day and night, locked in his chamber. Rather, it being more useful to wonder about the purpose of this story, we discover without too much trouble that it complements the legend of the liberating marriage: Hawthorne reborn in Sophia’s arms.
Similarly, the tale of Hawthorne's honeymoon years at the Old Manse accommodates the legend of the now happily married man—even though a crushing poverty gripped the new family and sent them back, humiliated, to Salem's dismal chamber. Still, Hawthorne's marriage was central to him and his work, although perhaps not in the way Sophia and Julian intended. For example, when the former soldier and political activist, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, reviewed Julian Hawthorne's biography, Higginson concluded that “both Mr. and Mrs. Hawthorne came to each from a life of seclusion; he had led it by peculiarity of nurture, she through illness; and when they were united, they simply admitted each other to that seclusion, leaving the world almost as far off as before” (Higginson 1884, 407). Reproving though it is, Higginson’s observation nonetheless sustains the picture of the Hawthornes in retirement, shut away from the world. Hawthorne is a family man to be sure, but now sharing with his wife an ignorance about contemporary events. More recently, in Dearest Beloved (1993), his pellucid examination of Hawthorne's novels, T. Walter Herbert persuasively argues that the shelter, which did exist, had a creaking latch: the Hawthorne marriage was a partnership that depended, as collaborations do, on mutually fulfilling fantasies that run afoul of individual needs.

Doubtless, Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne devoted themselves to the making of a neat, even repressive, middle-class nuclear family, which also meant they worked hard to insulate and protect themselves from ideas and people they found threatening. Elizabeth Peabody tried in vain to supply her niece, the Hawthornes' elder daughter, Una, with pamphlets on slavery, while Sophia violently protested, “And you would display before her great, innocent eyes a naked slave girl on a block at auction!!! which I am sure is an exaggeration. I have read of those auctions often, and even the worst facts were never so bad as absolute nudity” (Wineapple 2003, 332).

The insights of Higginson and Herbert notwithstanding, if the don't ask/don't tell school of Victorian biography (still extant today) reassembles Hawthorne, by happenstance or design, in the death mask of the Romantic genius—a solitary figure (male) in a garret, inhibited and solipsistic, or just different from the whole damned bunch—their heirs frequently follow in the wake of Frederick Crews and his shrewd reading of Hawthorne's work. These critics deploy a psychological vocabulary which, again, deprives both Hawthorne and his work of the history they inhabit, to say nothing, in his case, of choices he consciously made. Instead, by plumbing his character for tics, indiscretions, such armchair psychologizing locates the origin of character, fiction, and even voting habits in supposed childhood trauma (alleged but never demonstrated), as if character remains,
from murky childhood onward, static, unmoved—and independent of economic and political (or accidental) contingencies.

Take, for instance, that biographical canard, already mentioned, of Hawthorne’s relationship with Melville. A conscientious Melville biographer, Laurie Robertson-Lorant, misidentifies Hawthorne’s father—not a heinous crime—but then goes on to claim that Hawthorne’s uncle “evidently transgressed [sexual] boundaries in ways that disturbed Nathaniel, as he was on guard against physically demonstrative men for the rest of his life” (Robertson-Lorant 1996, 255). Her source, a footnote in James Mellow’s 1980 Hawthorne biography, is itself so shaky a supposition that the prudent Mellow himself avoided including it in his text. No matter. Though generally judicious, Robertson-Lorant cannot forgive Hawthorne’s declining to write a review of *Moby-Dick* after Evert Duyckinck published his own slighting one. Hawthorne is therefore “self-centered and self-absorbed,” Robertson-Lorant writes, a man suppressing his “hurt and angry inner child” (292, 269).

Nor is Robertson-Lorant alone in ascribing to Hawthorne an interior life in conformity with present-day fashion. At the hand of several contemporary critics, this inner child—the subject of Edwin Haviland Miller’s 1991 biography—matures into a homophobe. Apparently, by refusing to accept Melville’s proffered intimacy—whatever that was, wherever it may have occurred—Hawthorne suggests to the psychologically wishful literary community that he would not or could not deal with the lust in his heart. But what constitutes evidence in a situation like this? The evidence, again, is Mellow’s speculation based on an enthusiastic reading of various texts as well as inspired fantasy. That no concrete evidence exists for Melville’s overture or, obviously, for Hawthorne’s refusal makes little difference to the fantasizer.

Besides, we must ask, do litterateurs bedevil only one another? Hawthorne may have disappointed Melville (or Melvilleans), but he did sustain lifelong friendships with a number of men lacking Melville’s cachet—Horatio Bridge, Franklin Pierce, John O’Sullivan, or even William D. Ticknor and James T. Fields—men whose rugged entrepreneurship, miserable politics, or impressive lack of grandeur have kept them under the academic radar, where they will not complicate, or implicate, Hawthorne. Nor do Hawthorne’s friendships with these men advance the myth of the writer as grand isolato or victim of his seething unconscious. Better, then, forget them although, again, this is not a wise biographical option.

But because the current climate, at least in the academy, is moralistic in tone and aim, despite pretensions to the contrary, critics less overtly psychoanalytic now travel a different and presumably “historical” road, upbraiding
Hawthorne for what he did not write rather than looking at whom he knew and what he did. Armed with the obsessions of the present, they hunt for signal failures: Did Hawthorne endorse Jackson's Indian policies? All of them? Any? Is the Missouri Compromise at stake in The Scarlet Letter? Committed to finding rot in every narrative joist, these critics accuse Hawthorne of what he didn’t do and call it “cultural work.” To take one case, consider the recent books that flay Hawthorne for not mentioning race in his stories or novels, even though race plays a part in such diverse writings as “Old News,” “A Select Party,” and “Sunday at Home,” as well as The House of the Seven Gables and The Marble Faun. In truth, race was very much on Hawthorne’s mind, early and late, particularly in his unfinished “Elixir of Life” manuscripts, where the main character, Septimius, is descended from both Indians and Africans. Septimius is a “hybrid” (CXIII 40): Hawthorne’s term is not used in its current fashion as something salutary. “The mixture of race is a crime against nature,” Hawthorne writes in his notes to himself, [and] “therefore pernicious” (XIII 40, 246).

That Hawthorne writes about racial issues directly, forcefully, or unpleasantly is no discovery—unless, like early Hawthorne critics, we accept the myth of the lonely author, swathed in an inky cape, silently striding through the darkened streets of Salem where he “gained companionship in dreams alone,” as Edmund Clarence Stedman rhapsodized (Stedman 1908, 185), and then berate him for the so-called unconscious of his texts, from which his unreconstructed political views leap forth. But Hawthorne once referred to himself as “a thorough-going Democrat” (“Old Esther Dudley,” [IX 290]) with only a modicum of irony who remained faithful to the political party that most people associate, then and now, with imperial expansion and, not coincidentally, slavery’s extension into the territories. Moreover, Hawthorne wrote of racial issues not just in sketches and tales but in Horatio Bridge’s Journal of an African Cruiser and, even more explicitly, in his 1852 campaign biography of Franklin Pierce. Here Hawthorne wasn’t particularly cagey, plainly stating—hoping—that the institution of slavery, if let alone, would eventually disappear like a dream, “by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation” (XXIII 352).

The campaign biography “cost me hundreds of friends, here at the north, who had a purer regard for me than Frank Pierce ever gained, and who drop off from me like autumn leaves,” Hawthorne vocally confided to Horatio Bridge after the book was published. “But they were my real sentiments,” he added, “and I do not now regret that they are on record” (XVI 605).

Almost ten years later, Hawthorne’s mind had not changed; if anything,
his position was more entrenched. “We go all wrong, by too strenuous a resolution to go all right,” he wrote in *The Marble Faun*, reiterating phrases from his Pierce biography, namely:

There is no instance, in all history, of the human will and intellect having perfected any great moral reform by methods which it adapted to that end; but the progress of the world, at every step, leaves some evil or wrong on the path behind it, which the wisest of mankind, of their own set purpose, could never have found the way to rectify. (IV 239; XXIII 352)

He’s alluding to the abolitionists, their methods and aims. And when Elizabeth Peabody sent him antislavery pamphlets, he paraded the same phrases past her. “Vengeance and beneficence are things that God claims for himself,” Hawthorne scolded. “His instruments have no consciousness of His purpose; if they imagine they have, it is a pretty sure token that they are not His instruments” (XVIII 116). Always loyal, Peabody decided that Pierce, the knave, had led Hawthorne astray.

Long a thorn in the side of the Hawthorne myth, Elizabeth Peabody represents an alternative political voice that contrasts with that of Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne’s, much to their discredit. This may be one reason why Peabody has been consistently belittled, the rumor of her engagement to Hawthorne summarily dismissed. For years Hawthorne scholars, all male, scoffed at the notion that someone as talented and sexy as Hawthorne might ever have toyed with someone so tiresome and, well, so earnest. Moreover, an engagement between Nathaniel and Elizabeth flies in the face of Hawthorne’s inevitable marriage to Peabody’s more quietistic sister. Regardless, the very hint of a liaison, even if spurious, with Peabody might explain why Hawthorne kept his engagement to Sophia a secret for so long. Perhaps he wanted to wait a suitable period of time before announcing to the world that he had jilted—or had seemed to jilt—the other Peabody sister. For whether he had proposed to Elizabeth Peabody or whether she thought he had, he would have been well aware of the stickiness of the situation, and a man of his scrupulous sensitivity would have pondered his moral obligation, if any, to an implied promise.

Whether or not Hawthorne proposed to Peabody (there is no definitive proof either way), my point is far simpler: the less information we gather, sift, and reconsider about Hawthorne, the more he will, over time, become merely a creature of our fancy. As Samuel Johnson observed, “Many things which are false are transmitted from book to book, and gain credit in the world” (Boswell 1986, 215). This is particularly true in Hawthorne’s case, since his elegant prose, drenched in irony, is slippery, elusive, eminently
ambiguous, and encourages all manner of speculation (itself of some biographical interest).

As if goading the reader, Hawthorne cloaks himself in the kind of demurrall that provokes conjecture, his writing a performance of a decidedly self-conscious sort. Carefully selecting what to keep and what to give away, what to show and what to hide, he often concealed his identity with pseudonyms, at least in his early stories, as if he wanted to wrap himself in a fiction; and then he concocted stories—fictions—in which he takes a demonstrable part, as himself. He shunned publicity. Or said he did, declaring in his preface to Mosses from an Old Manse that he was not, “nor have ever been, one of those supremely hospitable people, who serve up their own hearts delicately fried, with brain-sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public” (X 33). More famously, in “The Custom-House” essay that introduces The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne writes, “it is scarcely decorous, however, to speak all, even where we speak impersonally,” but he then also admits he will lift the veil, just a little, declaring that “it may be pardonable to imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness, we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil” (I 4).

Playing hide-and-seek with the reader, Hawthorne wrote ambivalence into his most prominent symbols, like the minister’s creepy black veil, or the scarlet letter, which announces Hester Prynne’s disgrace even as it disguises her inner life, to say nothing of the father of her child. Hawthorne refused, or so he said, to write unabashed autobiography—it’s indecent exhibitionism, he suggests. But he was also willing to adopt a persona where he himself is the first-person narrator, as in his several sketches or in famous tales like “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” the story about a woman locked in a garden, in the prologue to which Hawthorne identifies himself as a voluminous though neglected French writer who “occupies an unfortunate position between the Transcendentalists (who, under one name or another, have their share in all the current literature of the world), and the great body of pen-and-ink men who address the intellect and sympathies of the multitude.” High and low brow. And Hawthorne? A nowhere man who writes tales, he continues, “sometimes historical, sometimes of the present day, and sometimes, so far as can be discovered, that have little or no reference either to time or space” (X 92). So once again he catapults himself above and beyond us all.

But in the everyday life of his own milieu, which is where, in the final analysis, a biographer looks for him, Hawthorne contemplates, as do we all,
the superficial and journalistic aberrations of the moment, his moment, from the vantage point of his own needs, economic and social, his past, his present preoccupations and anxieties; his friends, travel, city of origin, and his political party; his failures, successes, and metaphors. And so in “The Custom-House,” when he impersonates himself, Hawthorne adds an elaborate though typical conceit: pretending to be Custom-House surveyor, which he in fact was from 1847–49, he one day stumbles on an artifact, a red cloth embroidered as the letter A, among the personal effects of a former surveyor in the dusty attic of his workplace. Intrigued, he happens to place the letter on his chest, but it’s so hot it burns him and he drops it to the floor. Thus Hawthorne becomes one more character in his own tale—and, by implication, the wearer of a scarlet symbol. Why? Because he’s a writer. “What is he?” he imagines one of his Puritan forefathers scorning him. “A writer of story-books? What kind of business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!” (I 10).

Though Hawthorne respected, even venerated, the writer’s calling, the feminine and elitist sensibility he associated with writing placed him in a discomfiting and untenable position: taking pleasure in his growing reputation as eminent author, he could not sell enough of his work to support himself and his family. For much as he loved what he did and needed to do it, literature was an idler’s sport—so say those imagined ancestors. Moreover, to be successful, Hawthorne had to be a kind of aristocratic huckster, like the shopkeeper Hepzibah Pyncheon in The House of the Seven Gables, proud woman of a pretentious family so far down on its luck that she must open a cent-shop to earn her keep like ordinary folk. Hawthorne preferred the narcotic of civil service. Government jobs allowed him to eat, to be sure, and to feed his family; but the very positions Hawthorne sought and accepted also reveal something of who he was and perceived himself to be. The world of politics—a man’s world of dockworkers, lawyers, and old salts—was an asylum from literature and an affirmation of manhood.

This means, in his case, that the well-buckled Puritans still tenanting Hawthorne’s inner world were able to join forces with the Jacksonians peopling his outer one, each reinforcing the other with the notion Hawthorne shrank from and half-believed: his profession, that of writing fiction, had no quantifiable social value. A pastime more than a vocation, it seemed a form of domestic work, underpaid, if paid at all, like woman’s work; or, if paid well, polluted, like the work of that “damn’d mob of scribbling women,” as he so memorably called them, who were, like pen and ink men, not beyond the reach of filthy lucre or popularity, and, like the annoying
Mrs. Stowe (XVII 304). But then that made writing, for him, a rich dilettante’s hobby. “N. Hawthorn’s reputation as a writer is a very pleasing fact,” Emerson equivocated in his own journals, “because his writing is not good for anything, and this is a tribute to the man” (Emerson 1982, 288).

Forced to vacate the Custom-House (with the Democrats voted out of office), Hawthorne writes his departure as a tale of vengeful liberation, a fortunate fallout of the grind of civil service (“The Custom-House” essay). This too is part of an inveterate Hawthorne legend, concocted by himself and well-meaning relatives like Elizabeth Peabody, who announced as early as 1838 (eleven years earlier) that no Pegasus should be tethered to a dray-cart. Writers should live only on ambrosia and air.

Hence Hawthorne’s conflict: “No Man can be a Poet & a Book-Keeper at the same time,” Hawthorne postured to his sister when a boy of sixteen (XV 132). This did not mean he wished to give up bookkeeping or the cash—and the autonomy—associated with it any more than he wished to chuck writing poetry. Rather, he inhabited the world of poet and the world of bookkeeper in a culture that rewards only the latter. A place like the experimental commune Brook Farm might offer temporary refuge where he could live apart from the competitive world of Boston, defining himself as artist while at the same time expressing manliness in feats of hard, physical labor. By contrast, writing is unmuscular, dreamlike, invisible, womanly—and Hawthorne couldn’t write, anyway, at Brook Farm.

That Hawthorne went to Brook Farm has seemed odd to readers who associate him more with grammars of sin—unpardonable ones—than pie-eyed utopia. But it makes sense. Among other reasons, Hawthorne went to Brook Farm expressly hoping to heal the rift between poet and bookkeeper, which the West Roxbury community purported to do. The commune, as might be expected, could do no such thing, and Hawthorne realized it in a matter of months. Civil service, once the Democrats returned to office in 1846, suited him better.

“The little power you might once have possessed over the tribe of unreali ties is gone!” Hawthorne later told his tale of liberation; too long a stint in the Custom-House has stolen valuable writing time. “It was not merely during the three hours and a half which Uncle Sam claimed as his share of my daily life, that this wretched numbness held possession of me” (I 34; 35). The image of Hawthorne bartering his self-respect for Uncle Sam’s gold is worth examining, for Hawthorne had chafed under the parental yoke of two uncles, Robert and Richard Manning, who served as surrogate fathers during his youth. Though attention has been given to Robert by biographers, Richard is perhaps the more important figure. Injured in a carriage accident, he exercised a considerable power over young Nathaniel
who, for a few years, was stricken by a mysterious lameness—much like Richard’s—that kept him housebound. No medical causes were found for Hawthorne’s infirmity, but whatever the reason, one can assume this period of infirmity garnered much attention from the women in his life while at the same time it sheltered him from competitive interaction with other boys.

Figuratively, the lameness that Hawthorne experienced as a child returned in later life in his conceit of himself as a semi-invalid author. Refusing to compete with other males on their turf, he cast himself as the recluse in the attic to woo Sophia Peabody. In his well-known letter to her, he portrayed himself as sequestered, neglected, and in need of love’s redemption: “Here sits thy husband in his old accustomed chamber,” Hawthorne wrote from Salem to his fiancée,

where he used to sit in years gone by. . . . Here I have written many tales—many that have been burned to ashes—. . . . If ever I should have a biographer, he ought to make great mention of this chamber in my memoirs, because so much of my lonely youth was wasted here, and here my mind and character were formed; and here I have been glad and hopeful, and here I have been despondent; and here I sat a long, long time, waiting patiently for the world to know me, . . . and sometimes wondering why it did not know me sooner, or whether it would ever know me at all—at least, till I were in my grave. (XV 494)

Although Poe called Hawthorne—in 1847—the example, par excellence, in this country, of the privately admired and publicly unappreciated man of genius, this passage is often quoted to give biographical heft to Hawthorne’s sense of alienation or his pervasive, almost primitive, sense of isolation; but the graceful passage also speaks of overwhelming ambition, masked as humility; and it’s the very ambition Henry James assured his audience that Hawthorne did not possess. Yet hypothesizing “if ever I should have a biographer,” Hawthorne operated in the meantime as his own most consistent, most influential and deft chronicler, leaving something of himself—sometimes hidden, sometimes not—in his sketches, stories, essays, and correspondence.

In an early letter to Longfellow, to give another instance, Hawthorne characterized himself as dwelling in a dismal owl’s nest, seldom venturing out till after dusk. For, protestations to the contrary, Hawthorne was no ingénue. Savvy enough to re-introduce himself to the well-established poet (Hawthorne’s first collection of stories was soon to appear), he received, as he had hoped, the decisive review of Twice-Told Tales from Longfellow that
helped to launch his career. Yet by the time Hawthorne was firmly entrenched in what we now regard as the literary pantheon, he was deemed a shy, quiet man, chary of public appearances, whose fame was thrust upon him by a literary meritocracy. In other words, Hawthorne’s public (and biographers) fell for the ruse. This is one of the reasons Hawthorne now is the dead white male we love to hate. After Jane Tompkins launched her sharp, funny, and overstated investigation into the historical conditions—and machinery—that helped retail Hawthorne as a classic writer, scholars seem ready to construe both the man and his work as merchandise, which makes it easy to disparage one or the other.

Hawthorne, however, somewhat resented the image he’d helped to create, and in 1851 vented his irritation in the “Preface” to the second edition of Twice-told Tales, dryly and sardonically commenting that he,

on the internal evidence of his sketches, came to be regarded as a mild, shy, gentle, melancholic, exceedingly sensitive, and not very forcible man, hiding his blushes under an assumed name, the quaintness of which was supposed, somehow or other, to symbolize his personal and literary traits. He is by no means certain, that some of his subsequent productions have not been influenced and modified by a natural desire to fill up so amiable an outline, and to act in consonance with the character assigned to him; nor, even now, could he forfeit it without a few tears of tender sensibility. (IX 7)

The multiple personae Hawthorne manufactured become him; a creature of his own making, he acknowledges that it forms as much a part of his biography as the external truths it may or may not represent. Significantly, Hawthorne contrives a narrative form that joins the personal essay with the ironic narrator, the sketch with the tale, history with fiction, the real world and faery-land in ways not easy to separate. In the sketch “A Book of Autographs,” Hawthorne’s narrator chances on a folio of letters supposedly written to a General Palmer, who just happens to be Sophia Hawthorne’s grandfather. Were these letters real? Did Sophia Hawthorne or her mother or anyone in the Peabody family show them to her husband? I could not find them but believed in their existence enough to look.

I also believe Hawthorne wanted it both ways: actual and imaginary. The letters exist because they exist for the writer, who gives them meaning. An incipient postmodernist, Hawthorne blurs distinctions among genres, delighting in the myriad forms of representation available to him: history, satire, portraiture, sketch, story, essay, epistle, autobiography, even, eventually, daguerreotype and photography. But there he is: “He always put
himself in his books,” declared his sister-in-law Mary Mann; “he cannot help it” (Wineapple 2003, 59).

From this perspective and taken together, Hawthorne’s work reads as a meditation on writing: the joy and sorrow of it, the pain, the loneliness, the uncertainty, and the great if fleeting sense of accomplishment. Early and late, Hawthorne countenances the difficulty of writing and quarters no excuse, though he provides his editors with many. Beset by a job in the Boston Custom-House, beset by requests for work, beset by distractions, he just can’t get it right: “When we see how little we can express, it is a wonder that any man ever takes up a pen a second time” (VIII 250), he confided to his journals in 1844. Almost twenty years later, he sounded the same note in his last manuscript, “The Elixir of Life”: “Various interruptions kept him from further examination of the manuscript, during the day,” Hawthorne wrote of his title character, “for it may be observed, that a man no sooner sets his heart on any object, great or small, be it the lengthening out of his life interminably, or merely writing a romance about it, than his fellow beings, and fate and circumstance to back them, seem to conspire to hinder, to prevent, to throw in each his obstacle, great or small according to his power” (XIII 293).

Procrastination leads to doubt; doubt to dread: the writer whose work comes to nothing or, worse yet, the writer who fails himself. The plaint is a leitmotif in Hawthorne’s work from the early storyteller series through his novels. “I am possessed, also, with the thought that I have never yet discovered the real secret of my powers,” moans the narrator of “Journal of a Solitary Man” (XII 27); and in The Marble Faun, the copyist Hilda offers cold comfort to the artist Kenyon, telling him that “this final despair, and sense of shortcoming, must always be the reward and punishment of those who try to grapple with a great and beautiful idea.... The idea leaves you an imperfect image of itself, which you at first mistake for the real reality, but soon find that the latter has escaped out of your closest embrace” (VI 431).

Yet against all odds, and almost heroically, Hawthorne chose to write. And Emily Dickinson perhaps excepted, writers write in order to be published; the writer is not an introvert insofar as writing itself is, as Hawthorne knew, a form of exhibitionism even for the profoundly lonely man. Indeed, perhaps the lonely man, above everyone else, writes to an implied but almost palpable reader. “My theory is, that there is less indelicacy in speaking out your highest, deepest, tenderest emotions to the world at large, than to almost any individual,” Hawthorne observed. “You may be mistaken in the individual; but you cannot be mistaken in thinking that, somewhere among your fellow-creatures, there is a heart that will receive yours into itself” (VI 324).
As Gertrude Stein would say, “I write for myself and strangers” (Stein 1971, 101).

Such contradictions need not be separated into two different Hawthornes: the isolato, in one instance, and the public man—writer or politician, or both—in another. “May not one man have several voices, Robin, as well as two complexions?” (XI 226). Hawthorne was sociable and reclusive—a man of intense privacy that he himself breached, over and over, by writing. This was never easy.

To me, then, Hawthorne’s life is meaningful in the terms it was meaningful to him: a writer living in time, subject to its vicissitudes. “The biographer seeks what the subject’s life meant to the subject, how the subject’s experience registered on his or her consciousness, the satisfactions it supplied, dilemmas it produced,” comments Kenneth Silverman (2003, 1; emphasis in original). A life of Hawthorne discovers Hawthorne in all that he wrote, he touched, he made, he left; it traces the patterns in the carpet, wondering all the while what it meant for him to be him: how, in other words, he came to see himself as he did; what, in other words, it meant to be a man, a writer, a descendant of illustrious forbears in a new country that touts democracy and equality; an artist and a politician, even at the same time; a Democrat among the Concord supporters of John Brown or in ever-fractious Salem.

His inner life inseparable from his outer life, they come together, perhaps, in his stories and tales and letters, but if he perceived inner or outer in conflict, or if others did, then that, too, is part of the story. So are his political views, for better or worse; the biographer is not a moralist. Imperfection is hot within us as well as the complications of being human, in history and of it. These are the stuff of biography, not canonization nor rectitude nor a prayer over the dead man’s bones.

Nor is any biography complete. It can’t be. “Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied,” Emily Dickinson wrote to Thomas Higginson (Dickinson 1986, 318). Hawthorne wrote the canonical novels of the nineteenth century, whose most striking characters—including himself—cast a very long shadow, even two hundred years after his birth. And along with everything that controls, confounds, and conditions them, they are all Nathaniel Hawthorne, the dead white Custom-House surveyor we love to hate, bookkeeper and poet, the man in the garret who loitered at the wharves. His vision was unremitting and, to be sure, often unsavory, as well as of his time and out of step with it and, in many ways, with ours. He saw the worst that we can do, not the best, which made him passive, ambitious, conservative, progressive, conflicted, compassionate, and cruel. And it gave force to his balanced, beautiful writing, which is not
the writing of a languishing dilettante, as he feared, or of just another pen-and-ink hack marking time, and making money, on the Democratic payroll, but that of an unusual, not a simple man, dead and white to be sure and not easy even for himself to know—all at the very same time.

Notes

1. During this discussion, Melville biographer Hershel Parker did note that he thought “that the friendship has been overemphasized,” particularly in relation to the composition of Moby-Dick.
2. Elizabeth Peabody to HB, June 4, 1887; Ronda 1984, 445.